



Research paper

Famine, remittances, and global justice

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ABSTRACT

Famine is not on the global justice theory agenda. Two plausible reasons explain why. First, that global justice theory has moved toward a concern with international justice and reforming existing international organizations and away from what was considered to be a question of global ethics. And second, that famine was influentially identified by Amartya Sen as question of the domestic political economy and thus indeed a domestic justice concern. However, the political economy of famine has changed: it has transnationalised. I argue that famine should be on the global justice theory agenda, but that to do so requires that global justice theory reform itself first. The argument unfolds in three steps. Initially, I diagnose the benefits and constraints of methodological nationalism in famine studies and global justice theorization. I then set out an exploratory case study of the transnationalisation of famine, focusing on Somalia and taking note of the role of remittances, transnational social and economic networks, the consequences of de-risking, and the emergence of cash-transfers programs. Finally, I consider in more normative depth the transnational entitlement map of famine including: (i) *transnational remittance networks (not national safety nets)*; (ii) *global financial regulation (beyond international law)*; and (iii) *diaspora politics (not democracy)*, where the parenthetic juxtapositions signal dissimilarities with current thinking about famine and global justice.

1. Introduction

In the 1970s, many of the theorists and philosophers of what would become global justice theory were very much interested in the problem of famine (O'Neill, 2016, chap. 1 [1975] & 2 [1987]; Sen, 1981; Singer, 1972).¹ Although famine was quickly pushed to the periphery, these early works proved to be generative of powerful analyses of famine, while also sowing the seeds of significant discussions in global justice theory, including the capabilities approach, the effective altruism movement, and discussions of obligation and agency more broadly. Four decades later, famine is off the global justice agenda, for instance going unmentioned in the *Oxford Handbook of Global Justice* (Brooks 2020). At best, famine is characterized as an extreme example of poverty (Miller, 2007, chap. 9; Pogge 2002; 2007; 2010). But more typically, it is ignored. Perhaps for good reason, as by the late 2000s it seemed to many that famine may be a solved problem (de Waal, 2018).

For their own part, famine scholars have developed Sen's analytical insights by bolstering analyses of the domestic and international political and military contexts of famine, and qualifying Sen's claims

regarding democracy (Devereux, 2007; Keen, 2008; de Waal, 2018). The question of justice has, however, been left primarily to international lawyers (Marcus, 2003; Rubin, 2019; Jordash, Murdoch, & Holmes, 2019; D'Alessandra & Gillett, 2019; Akande & Gillard, 2019; Zappalà, 2019), none of whom appear to have taken any heed of contemporary global justice theorization.

That global justice theory does not address famine is worth considering in general, but two recent developments lend some urgency to the matter. First, famines are back. Famine may have been declining until the late 2000s, however since 2010 that trend has reversed. In 2011, upwards of 250,000 people died of famine-related causes in Somalia, half of whom were children (News, 2013). The Sahel drought of 2012 brought nearly 15 million people to the brink of famine, including 1.5 million children (News, 2012). In 2017, some 20 million people in Yemen, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Somalia were on the brink of starvation (United Nations Meeting Coverage, 2017, 2017). In April 2021, the World Food Program (WFP) reported that 34 million people were on the brink of famine globally (Hengel, 2021). In late June 2021, nearly 1 million people were on the brink of starvation in Tigray. In late August

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2021—only days after the sanctioning of Taliban transformed into sanctions against all of Afghanistan and closed off the country to the global remittance markets—some 1 million children were quickly brought to the brink of famine. Second, the nature of famine has changed. The political economy of food availability, famine, and famine relief are increasingly transnational, involving a mesh of informal institutional practices of family remittances, robustly governed global regulatory apparatuses, and a complex collage of social forces. In a word, famine is now transnational. Which brings me to the puzzle: it is not simply that contemporary global justice theorists have stopped thinking about famine. It is that those theories appear unable to analyze famine, and thus generate partial and potentially harmful normative critiques.

My argument is that the political economy of famine is now transnational, and accounting for this is foreclosed by a widely shared methodological nationalism in the global justice literature. The argument unfolds in three steps. The first is diagnostic, focusing on the benefits of methodological nationalism in famine studies and global justice theorization. The second step is an exploratory case study of Somalia, focusing on how Somalis have transnationalised their entitlement map (Sen's term), and how it has been simultaneously captured by global regulators. The third step generalizes from the case study and argues for a new transnational entitlement map of famine that includes: (i) *transnational remittance networks (not national safety nets)*; (ii) *global financial regulation (beyond international law)*; and (iii) *diaspora politics (not democracy)*, where the parenthetical juxtapositions signal dissimilarities with current thinking about famine and global justice.

Somalia is the exploratory case study used to develop the theoretical critique.² I focus on the political economy of famine since the collapse of the Barre Said regime in 1991. This period includes two famines, recurrent food emergencies, recurrent failures and some successes by the international community, the terror of Al Shabaab, and rampant corruption of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). It also includes the growth of migration and remittances as a long-term family investment strategy for famine avoidance and relief. Somalia is evidently an extreme case. However, in other regards Somalia is typical of recent global trends towards high migration rates, very high remittance receipts, worsening governance, and active diasporas.

This article straddles global justice theorization and famine studies, but its focus is on the former. One point of global justice theory, as Gillian Brock notes, is “identifying what should count as important problems of global justice” (Brock, 2022). Brock's approach gets to the imperative at hand: today, global justice theory silently declares that famine is either a solved problem irrelevant to global justice. Or, it is simply unimportant; it does not count. That, it seems to me, speaks to the problem of today's global justice theorization more than anything else. Global justice could contribute again (as it did before), but that will require as much introspection as it does investigation. Hence, the challenge at hand: to diagnose the theoretical root causes of the theoretical impediment, to describe the new transnational political economy of famine, then to analyze the limitations and potentialities for a renewed global justice critique of famine.

The article is organized as follows. Part 2 describes the place of famine in early global justice theorization, focusing on the initial utility of methodological nationalism. Part 3 sets out the case study. Part 4 sets out the rudiments of the transnational entitlement map of famine. Part 5 concludes with brief summative remarks.

2. Famine, global justice, and methodological nationalism

Methodological nationalism is a critique of the theoretical and epistemic constraints that follow from the assumption of the state as the primary unit of political analysis. The critique emerged in migration

studies (Beck, 2007; Genova, 2013; Sager 2016; 2018; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002), and has spread beyond including global justice theory (Sager, 2021). The criticism is that methodological nationalism skews analyses, interpolates value, and corrupts normative considerations all while feigning neutrality and realism. There is much to recommend this critique. However, to understand methodological nationalism in famine studies and global justice theory, we must observe that it was in the first place an engine of real analytical and normative insights.

Consider first the debates about famine and global ethics from the 1970s. In 1972, Singer argued that small sacrifices by the affluent can reduce the suffering of the world's worst off, and there is therefore a duty for the global affluent to give (Singer, 1972, 231). Two positions follow. The strong position holds that the affluent should give until the point of marginal utility. The moderate position holds that one should give until there are any significant negative moral consequences for the giver (Singer, 1972, 241). Meeting these basic moral duties, Singer claims, would change the world. The most salient criticism of Singer's argument is that it is descriptively and analytically unrealistic, primarily because it is overly demanding on the individual, under-demanding on the state, and was thus normatively untenable. Singer parried the analytical and normative criticisms by gesturing towards existing altruistic practices (Singer, 1972, 229). No matter, both famine and later global justice theorists found little utility in Singer's argument (but see Rubin, 2019).

Far more important for famine research and policy was Sen's contribution to famine studies (1981, 2000, chap. 7). Sen wrote against Malthus (2015) critique of famine as being a natural result of overpopulation (a point shared by Singer) and the mid-nineteenth century “food availability approach” (Rubin, 2009, 622). Instead, Sen argued that famines were functions of power expressed by one's capacity to make claims to entitlements. Entitlements—economic, legal, and political—amount to a ledger of one's capacity to withstand famine. As Sen writes, “a person's ability to avoid starvation will depend both on his ownership and on the exchange entitlement mapping that he faces” (1981, 4). Hence for Sen, caloric deprivation is primarily a function of one's ability to lay claim to food.

Political entitlements condition economic entitlements (1981, 4–6). For Sen, famines happen in non-democratic regimes when substantial portions of the population do not have the power (political and economic) to lay claim to food. At times, Sen emphasizes how famines embody the power politics of “divide-and-rule” (Sen, 2000, 167). Elsewhere, he notes that the question is really one of the alienation of rulers from the ruled (Sen, 2000, 170) resulting in disenfranchisement, which then invites famine. Hence, for Sen, democracy is part of the “solution” to the problem of famine. Democracies—pluralistic governance, regular elections, independent media systems—will solve the problem of famine by collapsing the political alienation problem (Sen, 1999, 9–10).

For Sen, the primary unit of famine analysis was the state, because the entitlement structures he observed were bound by the state. That includes the simple exchange of goods that happen within its territory, the legal system that regulates those exchanges, and the political institutions that order the distribution of power (the entitlement thesis). The nation state is the prism for diagnosing both the preconditions for famine (the political alienation thesis) and the solution (the democracy thesis). Sen recognizes other potential modes of short-term famine relief that could come from outside of the state, but they are described as charity, perhaps appropriate to short term relief but not prevention. It is sometimes said that Sen's was not a normative critique of famine (Rubin, 2009), but that is somewhat misleading. The *priority* was the analytics, but the normative critique followed therefrom.

Scholars have challenged and advanced Sen's critique, notably in ways that loosen the statist constraints. The most important advancement was to develop the political critique of “new famines”, which included both internecine conflict, international war, and the emergence of various global considerations ranging from diseases to colonialism to market liberalization (Devereux, 2007; Keen, 2008). Although

² On exploratory case studies, see Gerring (2004).

acknowledging the analytical utility of Sen's entitlement approach, these new studies of famine are critical of the limitations of that approach, especially insofar as its mono-causal account cannot capture the complexities at hand. Indeed, the "new famines" critique is also a critique of famines historically, showing that they too were often outputs of international relations, not national political economics systems. Alex de Waal argues that the "humanitarian international"—including many expressly independent NGOs—were (and could be again) a potent force in reducing famine occurrence and intensity (de Waal, 2018).

If contemporary famine scholarship has moved beyond methodological nationalism for analytical reasons, contemporary global justice theorization has only sharpened its focus on methodological nationalism, but primarily for normative reasons. Starting with John Rawls—and defended by among others Thomas Nagel (2005), Andrea Sangiovanni (2007), Mathias Risse (2012), David Miller (2007), and many others—the field has developed quite conscientiously against aspirational cosmopolitanism and impossibly demanding ethical individualism (like Singer's). Each theorist develops a unique account of what it is that constitutes the grounds of justice (solidarity, culture, the nation, etc.), but whatever they are the vessel is the state. Notably, that includes Sen's capability approach—which built on the logics of the entitlement theory of famine—although contending with Rawls's critique of justice agrees and lent significant support to the idea that whatever global justice was, it was to follow from justice within the state.

The strength of methodological nationalism—a strength often too quickly dismissed by its critics—is that what it presumes in theory can often be identified in fact; it can be realistic. The world is made up of states, and they are evidently the most important units of power. In the global justice literature, Miller has made this point most clearly, arguing (against purely ethical positions like Singer's and aspirational cosmopolitanism) that although global justice theory has to do more than describe the world as it is—the point is to help steer citizens and policy makers towards a more just world, after all—the ideal of justice defended needs to cleave to political realism if global justice is to be the stuff of practice, rather than literary fiction, which means cleaving to the state (Miller, 2007, 18–21). Risse makes the claim even stronger still: methodological nationalism is not simply a function of the fact that the world is made up of states. It is so dominant as to be an epistemic fact: "We cannot theorize alternatives well enough to find them action guiding" (Risse, 2020, 315).

In sum, for many global justice theorists today, historical forces make the ontological presumption of the state the *necessary* condition for non-utopian theorization. However, as the new famine scholars have observed, and as the exploratory case study below will develop in detail, the worlds of famine and famine relief have changed. The problem of global justice theory today is not that there is nothing to theorize beyond the state. It is that it cannot theorize beyond the state. Consequently, while famine scholars have been trying to put famine on the global justice agenda, global justice scholars have only deepened their conviction that famine is not a question of global justice.

3. The transnationalisation of the political economy of famine in Somalia

Since the overthrow of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia has suffered unceasing internecine civil wars, interstate conflict, and recurrent failures to build a federal government. In this same period, it has suffered two major famines (1992 and 2011) and recurrent food emergencies. To understand the political economy of famine in Somalia, we must start by understanding the disutility of the Hobbesian casting of so much Somali commentary. Somalia is not an anarchic "failed state", nor is it a Leviathan. Somali politics are a conjunction of local, regional, and global concerns, as are Somali famine avoidance and relief politics (Galipo, 2019, chap. 3).

The Barre regime was a predatory state marked by awe-inspiring

corruption and violent repression of "its people." For most Somalis, life following the collapse of the Barre regime improved. Statelessness saw improvements on many levels (economic, social, and political), driven by layers of local governance providing not just security, but some measure of law, order, welfare, and development (Mubarak, 1997; Leeson, 2007; Menkhaus 2007; 2014). The story of state failure in Somalia is in important respects a success story. As Menkhaus notes:

Commercial enterprises have adapted well to state collapse, evolving into a vibrant—though sometimes destructive—private sector involved in cell phone service, global remittance (or *hawala*) companies, cross-border trade, importation of foodstuffs and basic consumer goods, utilities, health and education services, livestock exports, and many other businesses. (Menkhaus, 2012, 30).

The imperative for the localization of Somali politics and the reason this would prove beneficial are clear in retrospect. State predation meant engaging with the states in a negative sum game for all save, of course, the state elite. By contrast, local and transnational politics favoured positive sum games of beneficial distribution for businesspeople, politicians, clans, and citizens and to some extent IOs (Menkhaus, 2014, 166). To understand the politics of famine (aversion, affliction, relief), we need to start there.

Somali entrepreneurialism generated a rapid spread of telephone and then internet communication, followed closely by the spread of telephone and internet banking services, and thereby remittances. Rapid decentralization and modernization transformed the Somali economy. The data is unreliable, but it is estimated that \$1.2 billion was remitted to Somalia in 2011 (Haan, Devereux, & Maxwell, 2012, 76). By 2016, remittance revenues had increased further (reportedly to \$1.4 billion) (Majid, Abdirahman, & Hassan, 2017). As of 2020, perhaps \$2 billion was received, amounting to 24–45 % of Somali GDP.³ Scholars often assume that actual figures are much higher than official reports, and in light of the informality of the *hawala* system and unreliability of official figures, it is fair to assume the real level of remittance receipts are indeed higher. Guesswork abounds, but the consensus among all involved—senders, receivers, banks, money transfer operators (MTOs), the TFG, Al Shabaab, IOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—is that remittances are important for the economy and a lifeline for perhaps 40% of Somalis (Majid et al., 2017, 6).

The cumulative picture reveals an informal banking network built on decentralized telephony networks and MTOs, which is sometimes in advance of and sometimes following a robust and growing global social network of remitters and receivers. This network developed first in the urban centres, but has spread throughout rural areas. It is the political economic backbone of the Somali people (war-making industries and criminality make up a large portion of the GDP of the elite). Since the early 2000s, it was clear that Somali society—including Somali adaptation and response to famine, but also society more generally—was transnational.⁴

Parallel to the growth of the Somali familial remittance networks was the steady expansion and development of the global state-led network of anti-terrorism financing politics. These efforts began shortly after September 11, 2001 (Gouvin, 2003; For broad overviews of this period, see Levi, 2010). On November 7, 2001, the Bush administration shut down al-Barakaat, a Somali bank accused of facilitating Al-Qaeda. Unmentioned was that "al-Barakaat was the only bank, the largest employer, and the only Internet provider in war-torn Somalia" and that closing down al-Barakaat meant cutting off perhaps 50% of the Somali population from remittances, their foremost source of income (de Goede, 2003, 521). In 2008, the US Office of Foreign Assets Control

³ On the 2011 figures, see World Bank Group. 2018 (2018, 18). The 2020 figure appears in many reports, but without accompanying citation.

⁴ For an overview of transnationalism and Somali society during this time, see Hammond (2011).

(OFAC) added Al Shabaab to its list of terrorist organizations, thereby making it illegal for any funds from the American government to go to organizations in any way connected to Al Shabaab. Because of the endemic graft and corruption inherent in operating in Somalia—and the difficulty of establishing robust verification regimes in the rare cases not marked by corruption—the OFAC listing initiated cascading derisking by the banks, IOs, and NGOs directly or indirectly involved with famine relief operations in Somalia. In 2011—when the famine was declared, to which I will turn shortly—the Sunrise Community Bank in Minneapolis (Minneapolis is home to the largest Somali diaspora community in the US) stopped facilitating money transfers to Somali MTOs (Orozco & Yansura, 2013, 22). One Somali community leader called it a “blockade” (Orozco & Yansura, 2013, 22).⁵ In every case, the reduction of remittances was significant and lasting (“Statement of Scott T. Paul, 2017”).

On July 20, 2011, the UN declared a famine in Somalia. Few evaluations of the famine in mid-2011 mentioned remittances. Indeed, the first response paid little heed to the challenges already facing the remittances and focused on the traditional imperatives for the international community to act and for Al-Shabaab to stop exacerbating harms and to allow aid to flow. For instance, in July 2011, Oxfam (2011) declared the causes to be natural, then economic, then a political failure of Somali and international political actors. Like most famines, the causes were complex and not simply reducible to food supply (Maxwell & Fitzpatrick, 2012).

What were the political causes? One was the Al-Shabaab terror campaign against remitters. Although slow, when the international community finally got to work addressing the famine, it was pre-empted by Al-Shabaab, which both stopped locals from leaving drought-stricken areas and barred IOs from entering. Al Shabaab declared international famine relief mechanisms—including the receipt of remittances—as proxies for Western influence and thus delineated friends who did not receive from enemies who did. None of this would have been unexpected (at least to Somalis), since as early as October 18, 2010—before the famine had been declared but as the food crisis was becoming more acute—Al Shabaab had proclaimed that remittances “encouraged Western influence” (Hammond, 2011, 39). There is no evidence that spectral Western powers were using remittances to achieve political ends—as we have seen, those powers acted in ways that greatly reduced remittances—but it is surely significant that those on the ground who had the intent of using famine as a political weapon believed that receivers of remittances were also receptive to critical attitudes towards Al Shabaab. There is evidence showing that Al Shabaab had good reason to worry. The Somali diaspora is often supportive of peace, safety, good governance (Hammond, 2011) and access to remittances means access to information systems uncontrolled by Al Shabaab. No matter the exact reason, the point is that for Al Shabaab, the famine was an opportunity and controlling remittances was a force-multiplier. Food is power in Somalia, and starving people of access to remittances is a way of using starvation to one’s advantage.

The TFG offered no relief from the transactional politicization of food and famine. Notoriously corrupt, officials withheld food aid shipments as leverage for bribes and camps for displaced people were used as “bait” for fleecing IOs, NGOs, and the international community in general (Menkhaus, 2014, 159). Aid agencies had long been aware of these problems, and had sometimes tried to avoid them (Menkhaus, 2014, 158). However, foreign states and the UN were (and are) invested in the TFG already, while the international community was willing to pay the bribes and bear the graft to get some food through (Menkhaus, 2014, 159). The famine put the dependency of the international community on the TFG in stark relief, and the message to locals was clear: the

international community supports the active predation of the TFG on Somalis.

The international community joined the Somalis in their estimation of the TFG, but in 2010 a leaked report revealed the WFP was itself marred by internal corruption and willingness to collude with local warlords to line each other’s pockets in the name of humanitarian aid (Gettleman & MacFarquhar, 2010). As one study (commissioned by the UN) found:

Many interviewees were highly distrustful of international aid agencies and the UN. Somalis in the diaspora and inside the country voiced serious concerns about corruption, money spent in Nairobi instead of Somalia, and recruitment of foreigners rather than Somalis for relief and development jobs. (Hammond, 2011, 97).

By most measures then, Somalis were not only left to their own devices, but—as in the aftermath of the Barre regime’s collapse—arguable better off that way.

Diverse strategies were deployed to brace and respond to famine, but a crucial one for many was migrating to remit. For evident reasons migration is often, if not always associated with famine (and impeding migration with famine crimes). However, migrating to remit is different. The idea here is to support one’s family and clan at home by diversifying that family’s economic footprint. It is often described as a last-resort coping mechanism, and it was one that Somalis have turned to often (Maxwell & Majid, 2016, chap. 6). However famine is a recurrent problem and ex-post crisis responses have proven to have significant ex-ante benefits in the fact of recurrent food emergencies (Mohapatra, Joseph, & Ratha, 2012). The evidence is all qualitative, but the findings across the scholarship strongly indicate that access to remittances was a crucial lifeline for receivers and, unsurprisingly, a stark line of socio-economic differentiation between those who received and those who did not (Hammond et al., 2013; Hammond, 2011; Majid et al., 2017; Maxwell & Majid, 2016; Orozco & Yansura, 2013).

Migrating to remit proved crucial for families and clans, but it likewise established the basis for a transformation of how international aid works. In the political uncertainty of mid-2011, IOs and NGOs quickly turned away from the TFG and looked for any potentially effective way of distributing aid. Foreign donors, IOs, NGOs, the UN, the WFP, and others needed a solution. The nature of the solution was known; but the means was not yet self-evident. It would have to circumvent entrenched predatory powers, to direct money to people on the ground, to have some certainty that the people on the ground received the money (but not too much certainty, as will be seen shortly), to enable donors to claim success, all while also making sure that IOs could continue to profit. The humanitarian international (de Waal’s term 2018a, 113–35) needed a new ideological frame to mediate the irreconcilable demands placed upon it.

The search for a means of distributing aid that was efficient, relatively immune to corruption, and in place led IOs and NGOs to MTOs. Everyone realised that remitters, receivers, and Somali MTOs had already cobbled together a viable solution to moving aid to people in need while avoiding the usual graft. In turn, the question became how IOs and NGOs could mimic remittances in form and content. The answer was: cash transfers. Cash transfers, it was believed, could use the same backend created by the Somali diaspora abroad and entrepreneurs at home to achieve their own famine avoidance and alleviation goals. If remittances could get through, cash transfers could too. Essentially, the infrastructure that had been built around remittances over the last decade was recognized the international humanitarian organizations as a plausible means of delivery. With direct aid criminalized, dangerous, and likely to be siphoned-off before reaching those in need, donors recognized an opportunity for using the remittance infrastructure to circumvent bottlenecks and more directly send aid. So, cash transfers became the go-to medium for distributing aid.

Cash transfer programs proved to be relatively effective (Jaspars, Adan, & Majid, 2020). The appeal of cash transfer programs is that they

⁵ In 2013 Barclay’s stopped servicing and thereby effectively closed some 140 remittance companies for similar reasons (Malakoutikhah, 2020, 672). On the politics of de-risking see Malakoutikhah (2020).

can piggyback on remittance networks and thereby deliver aid in a way that achieves what remittances do by other means. The foremost political economic problem with food aid was that it was easily captured (politically and materially). As a result, direct food aid necessarily promoted oligarchic warlordism (the political logics are like those of the resources curse). Because the remittance infrastructure in Somalia was already relatively dispersed—and because of the immateriality of cash transfers—cash transfer programs seem to have been less prone to supporting oligarchy. It was not perfectly decentralized—the remittance network is one of hubs and spokes—so there was an increase in the power of the MTOs (Jaspars et al., 2020). Consequently, cash transfer enthusiasm also had the unintended effect of incentivizing the development of the MTOs and technological systems (both communication and identification). That turned out to be an important development. Somali MTOs and Somalis have always been subject to the arbitrary powers of the foreign governments and large banks which regulate and operate global financial networks. They remain so, but with NGO and IOs supporting the cash transfer business, Somalis had new allies in protecting and augmenting these financial channels.

Whatever their benefit, cash transfer programs are not substitutes for remittances, and recent enthusiasm for cash transfers by normative political theorists is likely misguided (e.g. Oberman, 2015; cf. Hoye, 2021). For one, cash transfer systems are comparatively inefficient. They require large administrative structures to implement, verify, regulate, administer, and audit.⁶ Cash transfer systems are also relatively unresponsive. Unlike remittances, which respond to individuated need, cash transfers respond to group needs set by distant agencies. Perhaps most importantly, there is an informational dissymmetry at play which is quite unlike that which defines the remittances economy. Cash transfer programs run by major IOs and NGOs impute local need from an array of non-local sources. They are not dialogical; they interpolate sometimes in the extreme. As one study of Somalia remarked,

There has rarely [...] been a crisis and response that was so apparently rich in data, while so lacking in any human sense of what was happening on the ground among the affected population groups due to lack of humanitarian access. (Haan et al., 2012, 74).

One can only surmise, but this asymmetry is likely a major attractor for IOs and NGOs, because that very informational and geographic distance partly resolves most of the major liability issues. Know Your Customer (KYC), but not too well, so to speak.

4. Famine and the transnational entitlement map

In this section, I step back from the case study to consider its general implications for understanding the contemporary famine entitlement map. In what follows, I sketch the rudiments of a transnational entitlement map. I propose three considerations which are juxtaposed against typical features of the national entitlement map: (i) *transnational remittance networks (not national safety nets)*; (ii) *global financial regulation (beyond international law)*; and (iii) *diaspora politics (not democracy)*. This list is incomplete, but an apt analytical framework for thinking about global justice, remittances, and famine would include these considerations. I begin each section by signalling the strengths of the position most clearly juxtaposed by the one I will develop, both to signal the stakes but also to more clearly stylize the differences pertinent to normative theorization.

4.1. Transnational networks (beyond national social safety nets)

Contemporary global justice theories generally concur that whatever we take “justice” to mean it is something mediated by institutions, and that the primary institutions are bound by states. Consequently, global

justice is relegated to interstate relations and reformative critiques of existing international institutions. As noted in the section on methodological nationalism, there are self-evidently strong reasons for making such claims.

The most important development in the political economy of famine avoidance and relief in the last 20 years is the widespread use of migration and remittances as a long-term familial investment strategy for famine avoidance and relief. The Somali case is an extreme example of how families suffering from local deprivations (whatever the cause) migrate in order to remit and thereby transnationalise their family’s economic entitlement map both in advance of likely future famines and in response to recent occurrences (Mohapatra et al., 2012). Migration is a long-term familial investment and remittances are the foremost return on that investment (Carling, 2014; Clemens & Ogden, 2014; de Haas, 2007). The investment is informed by recent history, geopolitics, environmental conditions, and is weighed against other opportunities. Migration and remittances are crucial parts of the entitlement map (Clemens & Ogden, 2014; Sadiwala, 2021; see also Sadiwala & de Waal, 2018).

The economic incentives related to migration and remittances are enormous. As Michael Clemens and Ogden (2014) have observed, this kind of long-term economic investment is an unparalleled opportunity:

Migration is also the most profitable investment, by far, available to many of the world’s poor. Moving to cities causes very large income gains for rural workers. Workers who move from a poor country to a rich country can experience immediate, lasting, and very likely increases in earnings of hundreds of percent, even for exactly the same tasks. Having a member overseas typically causes large increases in the living standards of the origin household. (Clemens & Ogden, 2014, 3 [citations omitted]).

Clemens and Ogden are making a general point about migration, but the dynamic seems to be even stronger in terms of questions of food security in particular (in general: Ebadi et al., n.d.; Ogunniyi, 2020; Szabo, Adger, & Matthews, 2018; in Somalia: Majid et al., 2017; Maxwell, 2016). But the benefits of migration do not go only to the migrant. The point for many—and quite strongly so in the Somali case—is that it flows back by way of remittances to the receiving family and clan.

Migrating to remit is a strategic socio-economic investment informed by the recurrent and endemic failures of state systems and IOs (Mohapatra et al., 2012). In Sen’s terms, migrating to remit is an attempt to create new entitlement structures in light of the failures of national entitlements. Remitters see few allies in IOs, states, or the banking sector, and have built their own global transnational institution of famine avoidance and relief. For its own part, global justice theorization and famine scholarship that focuses only on national entitlement maps is unable to see these transnational connections, and so will not appear in global justice and famine scholarship as topics of significant concern re famine. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the institutions that espouse high ideals of global justice are seen as purveyors of injustice by remitters and receivers (see the Somali case above, see also Guermond (2020)). Families transnationalise in part because it avoids the predation of states, IOs, and terror organizations alike. Remittances are the material manifestation of a transnational entitlement network for the global redistribution of wealth *against* state and IO predation, in the service of famine avoidance and relief, and for the flourishing of receivers. To recall Miller’s discussion global justice and the imperative of realistic deference to statism, the problem, from the perspective of the Somali case, is that statism is the idealistic position, while the realistic one is that of transnational migrant networked entitlement structures.

Conceding that remittances are a kind of institution, it could nevertheless be asserted that they are an undependable one and therefore, again, an inadequate foundation for any critique of global justice. That criticism fails on two grounds. The first is comparative and pragmatic. It is clear that, indeed, uncertainty abounds, and the endeavour to

⁶ For a recent review of cash transfer programs, see Boniface Owino (2020).

migrate to remit can often be met with failure, deportation, or death. That potential source of unreliability (and harm) must be weighed against possible alternatives. On that count, the alternatives seem worse. Evidently, the state has already failed to provide anything like the semblance of dependable or adequate social and economic protections to the population. Just the opposite, it has proven predatory. Relatedly, so too has the “humanitarian international” proven to be *relatively* less dependable than existing or prospective remitters. Finally, the global rich—Singer’s affluent—have proven least dependable of all. There is a long debate in global justice theorization regarding agency (e.g. [Deveaux, 2015](#); [Dryzek, 2015](#); [O’Neill, 2001](#)), but it overlooks one striking fact: that it is the migrant—in our case, the Somali migrant—who is the most dependable agent of famine relief. The second point is aggregate and empirical, namely that if we look at remittances at the global level, they are in fact remarkably dependable over time and counter-cyclical both in Somalia ([Orozco & Yansura, 2013](#)) and globally (for a recent review of this literature see [Hoye, 2021](#)).

This brings us back again to the conceptual problems that follow from methodological nationalism, in this case *vis-à-vis* how remitters and receivers are conceptualized. One reason why global justice scholars have resisted incorporating remittances into their analysis of supranational institutions is because they assume that remittances are simply a form of charity—“discretionary” spending—and as such undependable ([Stilz, 2016](#)). This is a typical conceptual move by economists and political theorists alike. The language of charity generates misunderstanding of what remittances are by winnowing them off to the realm of pure individual ethics, not institutionally mediated questions of justice. For the sender, it necessitates the critique of unreliability because, by its nature, charity is grounded in a promise to abide by one’s own ideals, a promise that is routinely broken. By extension, receivers of charity are entirely dependent upon the arbitrary will of the giver. Note, once again, that that critique is entirely the output of paradigmatic valuation, irrespective of evidence ([Hoye, 2021](#)). The evidence points in a different direction altogether: that remittances are outputs of long-term investments and family planning, braced by deep social and economic networks.

Methodological nationalism is quite right to assert—on both analytical and normative grounds—that a robust and responsive social safety net (entitlements) are the foremost means of realizing social justice and avoiding famine. Nothing in the case study of the observations above deny as much. The problem regards the analytical limitations of methodological nationalism, which forecloses realistic accounts of the new modes of transnational entitlements created by migrant communities. Because of the categorical distinction in the global justice debates between social justice within states and global justice between states, it becomes impossible to analytically capture the transnational institutions of *ex-ante* and *ex-post* famine avoidances and relief. Consequently, potentially generative normative considerations are not broached.

4.2. Global financial regulation (beyond international law)

Global justice theorists and famine scholars have rarely attended to the global regulatory structures undergirding the transnational economic entitlements wrought by migration and remittances, focusing instead on international law. Before considering why global regulations should be a matter of concern, it is worth noting why the international law efforts should be continued. First, the efforts reflect important advances in the empirical understanding of famine. Where Sen argued that famine was an output of unresponsive non-democratic regimes, scholars have shown that both the history and contemporary practice of famine is one of political will—including democratic will—of agents choosing famine ([Conley & de Waal, 2019](#); [Devereux, 2007](#); [Keen, 2008](#); [de Waal, 2018](#)). For that reason, many scholars have pushed to have famine crimes recognized as a crime against humanity ([Akande & Gillard, 2019](#); [Aloyo, 2013](#); [D’Alessandra & Gillett, 2019](#); [Hutter, 2019](#); [Jordash et al.,](#)

[2019](#); [Lander & Richards, 2019](#); [Marcus, 2003](#); [Rubin 2019](#); [2019](#); [de Waal, 2018](#); [Zappalà, 2019](#)). Actual prosecutions remain aspirations, but there have been advances in both the recognition of famine crimes and a willingness by international lawyers to take them seriously.⁷ These questions have not been taken up by statist global justice theorists, but there are no reasons to think they would oppose such measures.

However, the Somali case simultaneously reveals the analytical inadequacy of framing the contemporary political economy of famine entirely within the framework of international law. There are other institutions in play, the foremost being the overlapping regulatory structures making up the global regulation of remittances. As we have seen, assaults upon remitters and remittance networks—by terror, state predation, regulation, and derisking—are contributory causes of famine and food emergencies. But because remittances and global financial regulations are off the research agenda, they are also, in turn, off the public agenda. These and other concerns are vaguely known, but are now so routine they have been normalized not as the stuff of global justice, but as the cost of doing business, unintended consequences, or simply regulatory hurdles to be dealt with.

There are reasons why these accepted norms should be reconsidered. To explain why, let me reconstruct that regulatory order. The first point of clarification is to note that remittances are governed by global financial regulations which were meant only to address terrorism financing. This regulatory order was established in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001 and thus is fundamentally geared towards hindering or stopping terrorism financing. The regulations have both a global breadth and—as the Somali case highlights very well—a local depth of application. As such, it is an order grounded in the negative imperatives to surveil, restrict, police, and reduce wealth transfers to terrorists, not regulate familial money transfers. Nevertheless, the regulatory power of derisking and KYC regulations are globally practised and deeply entrenched. They amount to the constitutional framework of transnational famine politics, on the inside of which are “formal” remittances (legal, regulated, trackable), and on the outside of which are “informal” remittances (primarily trust based hawala networks).

The alien nature of remittances governance takes us far in understanding what kind of governance it is. In the language of political theory, it is a form of political and social domination ([Forst, 2017](#), 150; [Pettit, 2012](#)), where those subject to rule have no power to steer it. But classical theories of governance only get us so far. Although regulators set the standards, the actual governance structures in place are largely privatized—banks and MTOs are charged with monitoring their own compliance, and at enormous costs ([Lee, 2014](#); [2014](#))—but nevertheless quite robust. These regulations reach the smallest rural MTOs in Somalia and are presupposed bases of existence for the entire global financial apparatus connecting that MTO to banks globally. These regulations define what risks matrixes banks must function within, and thus how the politics of de-risking unfold. The cumulative picture is of a global public/private regulatory apparatus that, although born of anti-terrorism finance concerns, effectively comes to control the (formal) remittance market by proxy. This regulatory regime is omnipresent and entirely uncontrolled by remitters. In Sen’s language, there is a form of radical political alienation between the transnational subjects of the regime and the regulators controlling it.

The effects of changing this regulatory structure depend on the changes made, but they may range from inconvenient expenses to existential threats, both of which are on their face weighty justice considerations. Consider first the simple matter of costs. The costs of the regulations for remitters are significant, though presently impossible to

⁷ On the recognition of international famine crimes see Resolution 2417 ([United Nations Security Council, 2018, 2018](#)).

ascertain with any precision (in large measure because nobody cares to ask⁸). We have already seen in the Somali case study an extreme example of these costs. There are many points at which this regulatory global order disrupts remittances. One is simply raising the costs of transaction. KYC regulations are expensive to implement, and its costs are passed on to senders and receivers. There are also unknown costs related to the expenses of having to use other channels when KYC regulations cannot be met or are avoided. These individual nuisances are at the aggregate and contextualized in famine conditions sources of significant harms.

But let me focus on famine and the existential problem of remittances receipts. When governments stop remittances through regulation, they stop resources from flowing to people who need it to survive, avoid, or recover from harms, of which famine is an extreme example. That was what happened in Somalia in 2011, when banks around the world stopped facilitating money transfers at the height of the famine. What was for banks a necessary derisking in response to regulatory signals was felt on the ground as a “blockade”. Clearly these are not acts of interstate conflict, nor are they domestic social justice considerations. Instead, they are something different: transnational institutions networks of famine relief subject to the presently arbitrary rule.

That same regulatory regime has also transformed how NGOs and IOs carry out the work of famine relief. As we have seen, these regulations constrain the scope of viable action of IOs, NGOs, and individuals to engage in famine relief, in any situation where any actor could conceivably be linked, even by proxy, to a terrorist organization. In Somalia, that has meant a general overhaul of how aid is conceived and delivered, moving from food shipments and other forms of relief to cash transfers, a technology that both follows upon the work of remitters and is defined by the same regulatory structure that governs remittances. The contemporary “humanitarian international” works under the auspices of this regulatory order. Again, there is a parable here for the entire argument whereby it could be said that the “humanitarian international” (de Waal, 2018)—itself an expression of twentieth century liberal internationalism—is now mediated or filtered through a remittance regulatory structure that is far from liberal, in such a way as to transform international aid in its image.

Steven Ratner recently noted that “scholarship on global justice remains characterized by a high degree of mutual ignorance and suspicion between international law and philosophical ethics” (Ratner, 2020, 363); the disparities between global justice theory and global regulations are even more extreme in two regards. First, there is a theoretical chasm between how global justice theorists envision the global order, and the functioning and facts of global regulations. As we have seen, global justice theorists and international lawyers interested in famine theory seem to pay little attention to each other, perhaps for the same reasons noted by Ratner. However, they are at least compatible. By contrast, global justice theory and the scholarship on the global regulation of remittances appear to be parsed in incommensurable understandings of how the world is or could be governed. Second, unlike international law, where high ideals are fundamentally limited by anemic institutional realities, the governance of remittance is robust and omnipresent. Combined, the implication for global justice theory is that a world of ethical and justice-related questions are simply not broached, and so real injustices go unregistered while real opportunities are not seized. This is unfortunate, as this is the kind of work that global justice theory often excels at by steering the categories of analysis and opening up new lines of debate. Until the institutions that govern remittances are brought into the debate, they will remain ontologically and epistemologically off the agenda. That gap could be bridged, but normative theorists cannot brute-force the solution; it will remain unalterably off the agenda until the analytical impediments of methodological

nationalism are addressed.

4.3. *Diasporas (not democracy)*

Recall Sen’s democracy thesis. Democracies are said to solve the problem of famines by collapsing relations of alienation, and therefore institutionalizing redistribution of resources. This thesis has been chiselled away, and certainly it can no longer be said to hold universally and across time. But the core principle appears to hold more or less. Which brings me to the significant juxtaposition, if not fundamental problem raised by the transnational entitlement map sketched so far: neither transnational familial entitlement structures nor the regulatory order that governs remittances seem conceptually or practically conducive to democratic steering. The transnational entitlement map is not democratic in any institutional sense, and there are no obvious ways to democratize remittances. There is no *demos* or *kratos* directing remittances, and remittances are not collectively guided or deliberately steered, no matter how those terms are construed. Furthermore, there is no conceivable way in which remittances could be collectively steered, and even concerted and very small-scale efforts to realize even minimal collective action in the world of remittances have routinely failed.

A full critique of this point is not warranted here, but a list of the challenges may suffice to characterize the depth of the normative dilemma. Remitters have no forum to steer the regulatory or technological apparatuses that govern remittances. Organized responses to threats to remittances (like those of the Somali community in Minneapolis) are rare. Repeated efforts to organize remittances—a long-standing goal of IOs and migrant groups—have all failed or survived only with enormous exogenous support (e.g. Orozco & Lapointe, 2004; Smyth, 2017; Sørensen, 2016). Remitters are always only a small minority of the receiving state population, and it is more likely that a *demos* would choose to constrain capital outflows than support them. Finally, remittances are facilitated through private entities, which are generally unresponsive to democratic direction. Again, whatever it is that remittances do, there are no obvious ways to construe it democratically and many reasons why it cannot be done. If remittances are institutional responses to global injustice, which I believe they are, there is still no conceivable realistic way whereby that response could be democratic in any meaningful sense.

There are some positive *quasi*-democratic outputs worth signalling. Despite a lack of group agency, there is a sense in which attendant informational connections mimic democratic media. The global network of remittances is at its core an information network first, and a financial network second. Remitters remit norms which tend towards socially and politically emancipatory politics (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013; Hammond, 2011; Horst, 2008; Levitt, 1998; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Furthermore, remittances provide crucial and dependable insurance functions (Yang & Choi, 2007). Agglomerated, remittances generate their own political economy and normative order, while effectively avoiding genocidaires, bureaucrats, state predation, local warlords, and aid workers. We know that this is true, as far as some sort of informational mechanism needs to be assumed to explain the pro-cyclicality of remittances. Remittances respond to increases in individual needs, augmented by readily accessible global news updates.

Similarly, the Somali case speaks strongly to social remittances travelling alongside monetary remittances (Carmen & Calleja, 2018; Hammond, 2011; Horst, 2008; Sinatti & Horst, 2015). That picture is positively corroborated in the social remittance literature (Levitt, 1998; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011), and negative in Al Shabaab’s worry that remittances brought not only money, but quasi-liberal democratic values. In this regard, there are some similarities with Sen’s theory of media and famine avoidance. But again, to see that similarity we need to abandon the image of the national media system (Sen) and focus instead on the transactional telecommunications networks (increasingly, social media networks) that mediate sender and receiver.

However, alongside the ademocratic and quasi-democratic traits are

⁸ On the challenges of studying the economics of remittances, see Clemens and McKenzie (2019) and Clemens and Ogdén (2014).

anti-democratic traits. The political remittance literature focuses on how remittances (usually monetary) affect national governments. The findings are mixed, with some scholars arguing that remittances undermine autocracies, some that remittances support them, some that remittances bolster democracy (Ahmed, 2012; Carment & Calleja, 2018; Doyle, 2015; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright 2015; 2018; Garriga & Meseguer, 2019; Lum, Nikolko, Samy, & Carment, 2013). No matter, the case study of Somalia shows no evidence that remittances have generated a vibrant national liberal democracy. Indeed, it is plausible that the localization of politics which many praised as an improvement over the predatory Barre regime also short-circuits the development of national liberal democracy. At an extreme, the theoretical choice is between democracy (national entitlements) or diaspora (transnational entitlements), but not both, and the choice of one may hinder the realization of the other. Theoretical puzzles aside, in practice Somali's have found that democracy is not on offer, but diaspora is.

The takeaway of these various democratic considerations of the nature of remittances is deeply problematic for both famine and global justice theory, insofar as they converge on the importance of democracy. The case study—and the remittance scholarship more broadly—speaks against any robust democratic construal of remittances and, again, against practically significant contradiction between any plausible form of democratically steered mode of social justice and the kind of relief that remittances provide against famine. Sen argued that famines are a solved problem, and that democracy is the solution. That still appears to be an analytical powerful explanation for why famine does not happen. However, that is a different question than what to do about famine in recalcitrantly non-democratic regimes. At best, it means Sen's democratic critique of famine avoidance cannot be readily transnationalised. At worst, that those politics are potentially at cross-purposes with diaspora politics. Dryzek (2015) has argued that democracy is essential for global justice, because it is the forum wherein "formative" agency is manifest and thus can steer global institutions. Again, that appears to be correct in theory but incompatible with the practices of diaspora-driven global harm relief. Instead, there is increasing evidence that part of the solution to famine in practice is diaspora-driven remittances. In sum, not only does contemporary global justice theorization of famine not generate apt analyses of famine, but it may also generate impediments to thinking clearly about and responding to famine.

5. Conclusion

Famine is not on the global justice agenda because of two overriding assumptions. First, that social justice is an attribute of states and global justice is therefore a field concerned with the study of just interstate relations and the reforms to existing global institutions (themselves constituted by states) to make them more just. Second, at just the moment that global justice was developing as a field, Sen argued very persuasively that famine is a mono-causal output of the political economy of a state. In both cases, methodological nationalism proved an initially productive analytical framework. Combined, these assumptions functioned to push famine off the global justice agenda. However, famine has changed. And famine scholars have increasingly recognized both the extra-state nature of famine and its many connections to transnational institutions and practices. The new political economy of famine is transnational. Global justice scholarship has developed in just the opposite direction, refining and deepening its core commitments to methodological nationalism.

I have argued that the political economy of famine has transnationalised, and now includes: (i) *transnational remittance networks (not national safety nets)*; (ii) *global financial regulation (beyond international law)*; and (iii) *diaspora politics (not democracy)*. On a normative register, the parenthetic juxtapositions signal evident contrast with contemporary global justice theory. On an analytical register, the parenthetic remarks signal the complexity at hand. I have not argued that national entitlements are analytically unimportant (for either famine studies or

global justice); both clearly are. Instead, I have set out to clarify the normative challenges at hand, as puzzles abound. Thinking through those kinds of puzzles was once an engine of novel and constructive insights into general questions of global justice. Global justice theory could do so again, but it needs to engage with empirical evidence, rethink its theoretical commitments, and be open to new lines of inquiry.

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