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Harvest Failures and Famines in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Finland, Iceland, and Ireland: Cross-Country Comparison of Socio-economic and Environmental Margins

While we are at the early phase of the acceleration of climate change, we tend to ponder what forthcoming changes in the climate and weather may mean in our every-day lives. History provides numerous examples on variations in the climate as well as irregularities in the weather and their societal consequences. The experiences of Finland, Iceland, and Ireland during the Little Ice Age (1350 – 1870) indicate that fairly moderate disturbances can lead to a nationwide calamity.

On the morning of 3 September 1866, at first glance the gardens, grain, and vegetable fields in Finland looked quite normal—at least if observed from some distance. Nevertheless, something fatal had happened during the previous night, which was soon classified as one of the most severe harvest failures in Finnish history, and was followed by a famine referred to as the "last peacetime subsistence crisis in Western Europe." A temperature drop of only some degrees under the freezing point in the late summer was followed by the loss of all major crops and a massive hunger crisis. Exceptionally wet weather conditions, which were connected to the spread of an unusually active plant disease, had similarly fatal consequences in Ireland and Iceland in the mid-nineteenth century; the potato blight caused famine, a steep rise of death rate, enormous emigration, and a huge fall in population.

By comparing the major harvest failures and consequent famines in the three agrarian countries, I attempt to find explanations why natural disturbances, which might have looked moderate in some other countries, caused mass starvation and major population decline in these three peripheral countries. The central question in my research project is whether the subsistence crises of Ireland, Iceland, and Finland were natural disasters or socio-economic collapses of extremely fragile and vulnerable societies as a result of an external natural shock. One might claim that relatively minor natural disturbances caused disproportionate calamities in these countries. However, drawbacks experienced by Finland, Iceland, or Ireland were not only a single frosty summer night or a wet week, but a series of adversities during several years. Nevertheless, an interesting research question is what made these three countries so vulnerable to natural disturbances?

While searching for the causes of these countries' vulnerability, I focus on the economic, social, and environmental margins as well as spaces for maneuvering. My hypothesis is that political and socio-economic development had led to such serious structural rigidities in the countries under study that they lacked the material, organizational, and mental resources to overcome the consequences of natural disasters. The project also aims to compare citizens' experiences of famines, their survival strategies, immigration patterns, central and local governments' reactions, and relief operation as well as the recovery from the calamities and new development paths in the post-famine period in these three countries.

The comparison of the mentioned countries is related to a larger project, Famine in context, for which we applied for funding from the Academy of Finland. Both of these projects intend to produce new information on causes of famines in preindustrial societies as they also examine and compare the significance of famines in national histories.