The poor eat their homes

"The poor eat their homes," 59 and typhus broke out and in the cold weather 400-600 died each night. Their plight was all the more pitiful because so many thousands of them were virtually naked, having sold their clothes long before for food.60 This epidemic phase of the famine had a microbiological momentum that extended mortality far beyond the spatial or social boundaries of starvation per se. Thus the typhus brought by famine refugees killed Europeans and Qing nobles as well as tens of thousands of plebeian city-dwellers in Beijing and Tianjin.61 Likewise, cholera, incubated in the flood-stricken districts of Fujian in 1876, worked its way north through China's coastal cities until it finally arrived in southern Japan.62

Although the monsoon had finally returned to Shantung in summer 1878, the resumption of normal agriculture, as in the Deccan, was incredibly difficult. Writing to the British ambassador, Timothy Richard explained that "in hundreds, or even thousands, of villages seven-tenths of the population are already dead," and that only 30 percent of the normal amount of grain had been sown.63 Some peasants were afraid of the violence that might result if they revealed seed corn that they had secretly hidden; while others were simply too sick or weak to work. Those who did manage to sow a crop then faced the challenge of guarding it against their famine-torn neighbors. And when crops were finally harvested again in 1879, "a new horror then claimed more victims. Among those who had survived to enjoy eating again, a pestilence of dysentery beat out typhus as soon as the harvest was gathered, and the stomachs of the people were inflamed by too great indulgence in unaccustomed foods." Fields of millet would unharvested, sagged and decayed. In this way famine and its allied diseases continued to decimate parts of north China until the beginning of 1880 or even later.64

II. Brazil

Meanwhile, half a globe away, the interior of Brazil's Nordeste baked under a relentless sun and cloudless sky. The serrão is a high, rolling plain broken by smooth-top tablelands and rocky monadnocks of decomposing granite. Rainfall is dramatically orchestrated by El Niño and few landscapes change their aspect radically between seasons or wet and dry years. "Nature here rejoices," wrote the 18th-century writer Vieugues da Cunha in his epic Os Sertões, "in a play of antitheses."65 When, after an arduous ride from the coastal city of Fortaleza, the famed Harvard
geologist Louis Agassiz and his wife first glimpsed the rainsoaked sertão in April 1868, they were flabbergasted by its loathness. Expecting a wasteland, they instead beheld a “verdant prairie ... beautifully green.” Yet when Herbert Smith, the “special famine correspondent” for Scribner’s Magazine, looked down upon the Ceará interior a decade later, it was all anathema: “a dry, cheerless desert, scorched with heat.” As many as 500,000 sertanejos had just perished from hunger and smallpox. (Da Cunha noted gloomily that “under such conditions the bodies of dead men and horses were exquisitely mummified by the extreme aridity without any unseemly decomposition.”)

The drought in the Nordeste began six months after the failure of the summer monsoon in India. Indian droughts, as we shall see, tend to “lead” El Niño warmings of the tropical eastern Pacific by a season, while Brazilian seas “lag” by one, sometimes two seasons.) “Vague rumors of a drought,” according to Smith, had first reached the coast in February 1877. The unease was greatest in Ceará, where the previous year’s harvest after scanty winter rains had been meager, but there was also concern about agricultural conditions in the high sertão of Paraíba, Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Norte. By March, the dreaded “drought winds” – the steady, desiccating northeasterlies – controlled the weather, and worried bishops ordered prayers ad praesens pluvione in all the churches. “Most sertanejos,” writes historian Roger Curnow, “crossed the narrow line between hope for a belated winter and total despair during the first two weeks of April. Having already lost two plantings in the false winters of January and March, they fearfully refrained from casting what remained of their dwindling supplies when light rains appeared, lest they have nothing at all for the long treks which were already beginning, or to sustain themselves for the long months of drought most were now sure were upon them.”

Later, some savants would claim that the drought had been “due to the extreme deforestation which had been provoked by the increasing cultivation of cotton.” Certainly the collapse of the cotton boom had immobilized much of the backland population, and they now began to wander in search of work or subsistence of any kind. Some huddled around the handful of marginally prosperous market towns in the river valleys that drain the high sertão, while others, often in extended-family groups, migrated hundreds of kilometers. The fazendeiros (ranchers), for their part, ordered their supervisors to take part of the cattle
to the more humid serras or across the sertão to Piauí, where the rains hadn’t failed, while slaughtering the rest for hides and tallow. In some places, they shared this windfall of beef with the poor; in others, the poor simply took what they needed without permission. São got, “the most honest men in the world,” began to rustle cattle, even pilleage fazendas. In Quixeramobim, the poor briefly seized power, warning that “they do not have to die of hunger knowing that in the houses of the rich are money and food.”

THE SCOURGED ONES
But charity and riot only postponed starvation until mid-summer. Then, according to Smith, “good men turned away and cried in their hearts to God.” Even fording the Parnaíba, the poor were forced to forage for food. They died of starvation, and the few who survived were left to fend for themselves. In July and August, corpses began to appear by roadides and abandoned homesteads; by September and October, dozens were dying daily and beriberi was rampant in the field refugee camps on the outskirts of towns like Acaracu, Ico and Telh. If the population of the sertão, especially in Ceará, were to survive in place until the winter, food had to be imported in massive quantities.

The commercial grain trade was as hopelessly unequal to this task as in India or China. A handful of opportunistic merchants gouged spectacular profits without relieving any of the hunger of the interior. “Small supplies of provision came in from other provinces and were sent to the interior towns on the backs of horses; but often the animals died on the way, or the caravans were robbed. In some places, where they had no horses, provisions were brought in on men’s shoulders. The few baskets of mangoes, guava, obtained in this way, were resold by the merchants at fabulous prices — frequently eight or ten times above the normal — so that only the rich could buy.” Since most local governments, apart from the wealthy port of Recife, were already bankrupt before the onset of drought, responsibility for the emergency passed to the provincial presidents, some of whom, like the recently appointed president of Ceará, Caetano Estellita, were utterly unfamiliar with conditions in the backlands. Although the constitution of 1824 guaranteed subsistence as a right to every Brazilian citizen, the sertão was the land with few advocates. British utilitarianism and social Darwinism (above all, Herbert Spencer) had made rampant intrusos in Liberal thinking, while the Conservatives followed a church hierarchy that preached that the drought “was God’s punishment to Brazil for accepting the materialistic ways of the nineteenth century.” (“Against God,” thundered a Conservative leader during a legislative debate on famine relief, “there is no virtuous instruction.”)

Precious months, as a result, were lost in abstract philosophical debates before the Conservative Estelita — shocked by the horde of indigent families fanned sertão suddenly descending on Fortaleza — began to send aid into the interior. By this point, there was virtually no pasture or water left for cattle — or horse — horses which had become impractical to ship food directly from the coast. (The Congrès reported cases of all of the animals in relief pack trains dying in futile attempts to deliver food to Tua and other interior municipalities.) The president instead sent money, much of it raised by Ceará migrants in the rest of Brazil, to the besieged sertão municipalities. It made depressingly little impact on the massive subsistence crisis.

The last hope of preventing a fatal stampede toward the coast was truly heroic action by the minister for imperial affairs, Antonio de Costa Pinto. Since the imperial government was also laboring under a heavy deficit, Costa Pinto instead chose to play the role of Sir Richard Temple, turning mere disaster into catastrophe. He authorized limited food shipments to the Nordeste but otherwise took control of relief expenditure away from the formerly autonomous provincial presidents. Meanwhile, as legislators in Rio wasted June and early July debating farfetched schemes for developing the sertão, drought refugees were spilling out of the desertified interiors of Ceará and Pernambuco towards sites like the Cari Valley in southeastern Ceará, Triunfo in Pernambuco and Acu in Rio Grande do Norte. Far from mitigating the crisis, Cunha's points out, this simply generalized the immmiserization to areas where the rains had not failed:

The masses of hungry people and cattle carried the destruction of the drought into regions that had escaped the meteorological effects. Triunfo complained that it had been converted into a “cattle ranch for the abuse of the poor by the rich.” The dying cattle moved into the agreste regions “smashing the cane, manioc and
other crops, and reducing to the last degree of misery and despair the class that lives exclusively from agricultural labor." Human refugees as well consumed and destroyed crops, quickly rendering the traditional agricultural mills and brevi nearly as desperate for food as the drought regions.66

In the Inhamuns serrião in southwestern Ceará, the leading oligarchs, the Petronis, had temporarily quieted panic with food imports from unaffected Piauí, while the provincial government provided some relief work for the poor. By June, however, even the well-to-do were ready to flee. "A prominent citizen of Sabeiro, Captain Salustio Ferrer, wrote on June 12 that migration was about the only course left open to most of the inhabitants of that municipio, since it was becoming increasingly difficult to find water. Many leaders of the community, he added, were forming a caravan to depart for Piauí in the following month. 'Grave must have been our sins,' Captain Ferrer wrote of the sea, 'to have deserved such horrible punishment.' By mid-summer the region was almost deserted: only an estimated 10 percent of the population — some of them now cangaceiros — grimly attempted to wait out the drought on their ruined farms and fazendas. A large number," writes Billy Jaynes Chandles, "went to Piauí, particularly those who had some resources, while others sought refuge in Ipu, the Cariri and Fortaleza.67

As the population of the serrião now drew closer to the humid zona da mata, the sugar planters and urban merchants were forced to weigh difficult alternatives. The frightened elites vacillated over whether to divert the retirantes ("more wild beasts than rational human beings") to the labor-hungry Amazon, and thereby risk losing part of their surplus workforce, or allow them into the cities where, mixing with slaves and poor artisans, they might pose an insurrectionary threat. In Fortaleza, the pharmacist Rodolfo Theolfo kept a famous diary that chronicled the growing presence of desperate backlanders. "The sad procession," he wrote, "paraded along the streets of the capital at all hours... Real animated skeletons, with skin blackened by the dust from the roads and stuck to their bones, held out their hands begging from everyone they met." A wave of looting and theft by the refugees was countered by bourgeois vigilantism and lynching that "went unpunished because the retirante was considered a leprous dog who was going to stain the land."68

Frightened by the strange army of ghostlike serriões, the Liberal opposition

in Ceará reluctantly agreed to support a Conservative plan to ship the retirantes at imperial expense to the provinces of Amazonas and Para. Others were sent off to Recife, where they were loaded together with slaves on packets for transshipment to Rio and the labor-hungry southeast. Large landowners, however, expressed misgivings about such a massive exodus of workers, and Costa Pinto in Rio dragged his feet in remitting the promised subsidies. Grasping at an alternative policy to control an invasion that would eventually swell Fortaleza's population from 25,000 to 130,000, President Estelita "ordered rough shelters constructed for the hordes investing (the city) and a dole of both money and food allotted to those unable to work." Costa Pinto and his Conservative allies in Fortaleza, however, denounced this as a waste of money. Estelita, as a result, was replaced by a new, more conservative appointee, João Aquino, who promptly discontinued the dole and public works. With Costa Pinto's support, he returned instead to the strategy of deporting the serriões to the rainforests. Although thousands were debarked, usually in overcrowded and squalid conditions, there was not enough coastal shipping to keep up with the influx of refugees into For...
tunes and Recife. Meanwhile, on the rim of the serrão, a human dam was about to burst."

**THE EXODUS TO THE COAST**

By New Year’s Day 1878 perhaps 50,000 had died in Ceará, several tens of thousands more in other provinces of the Northeast. For a long, terrible year, the thousands who had clung to the land, hoping for the winter rains and the harvests, were reduced to scavenging for food. Whole villages starved to death, the mothers and children eaten by their husbands and fathers. In the midst of these scenes, a group of survivors found refuge on the coast. Here they found some semblance of order, and began to rebuild their lives.

First of March, and no rains. Government aid almost withdrawn. No food left in the villages. The people went mad. They ransacked the mountains, killing wild animals, drinking their milk, eating their meat. Whole villages were engulfed by the hungry tide. Some died of exposure, others of disease, many of hunger and thirst. In total, perhaps 200,000 people died in the famine. The survivors were forced to flee, some to distant parts of Brazil, others to neighboring countries such as Venezuela and Colombia. The famine was one of the worst in Brazilian history, and its impact was felt for decades to come.

The survivors were aided by the government, which established a series of food distribution centers. However, the response was slow and inadequate, and many continued to suffer. The government was criticized for its slow response, and some accused it of negligence. The famine was a turning point in Brazilian history, and it led to significant changes in government policy and social welfare programs.
Temple wage, the living conditions were fully as deplorable as in the Deccan. 16
"The refugees," reported Smith, "were huddled together about Portaleza and
Aracaty, barely sheltered from the sun in huts of boughs or palm leaves. The
 camps were filthy to the last degree; no attempt was made to enforce sanitary
rules." 17

Before the famine, smallpox outbreaks had been confined to small scattered
pockets of the sertão, and most of the population had lost the community
resistance that comes from surviving regular exposure. Equally, for reasons that
remain unclear, vaccination was uncommon in the rural Novoeste. As a result,
the splendid work camps provided "virgin soil" for smallpox in the same way that
the Indian camps had given full scope to murderous cholera outbreaks. "The
greatest horror of the drought," smallpox reached Ceará in the middle of 1878
after having ravaged the Paranah capital of João Pessoa. Smith estimated that
one-third of the population of Portaleza died in the months of November and
December 1878 alone; while Albuquerque testified that 100,600 had perished in
Ceará by the end of 1879, including his own wife. "The Imperial government's
only response to the emergency," says Cunliff, "was to send limited quantities of
weak vaccine." Cearanese refugees subsequently carried the epidemic as far afield
as Belém and Rio de Janeiro. 18 A popular poet wrote of the despair of the retirantes
trapped between starvation and disease:

Let us march on and face
Thirty thousand epidemics
Cold, Drought,
Which no one can escape.
Those who go to the lowlands
Die of the epidemic,
Those who stay in the sertão
Go hungry every day. 19

Although the government ordered a cessation of all relief in June 1879 and
thousands of retirantes were forcibly expelled from Recife, the great drought did
not actually end until the beginning of March 1880, when the rains turned the
sertão green for the first time in more than three years. With 80 percent of
the herds destroyed, even fazendeiros were temporarily forced to scratch at the
earth for their subsistence. Much of the sertão never completely recovered. Surveys by Cearanese officials
over the next decade revealed the profundity of the seca's impact. In
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Figure 2.9: Retirantes: Ceará, 1877

Inhabitants, there are many who believe that area never fully recovered from the
drought of 1877-79, a result of the havoc wrought on fortunes and herds and the
general feeling of demoralization which ensued. The Great Drought, it is said,
cast a long shadow. 20

Indeed, Gilberto Freire explains, the "apocalyptic double sevens [1877]"
because the "dramatic syntheses" in Brazilian memory of the conjoined tragedies
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reservoir for its long-suffering population.  

The "double sevens," however, did spell the beginning of the end to slavery in Brazil. Land, cattle and free labor in the sertão became almost valueless commodities during the drought, leaving slaves, in keen demand by Paulista coffee planters, as the major fungible asset of the fazendeiros. Selling slaves to the south, like exporting free labor to the Amazon, generated obscene prosperity amid general catastrophe. "The Baron Ibiapaba, Joaquim da Cunha Freire, for example, profited greatly being the principal exporter of human cargo from both Fortaleza and Mossoro. From Fortaleza alone, he was reputed to have sold at least fifteen thousand slaves south." This sudden revival on a grand scale of the slave trade, with all the brutal public spectacles that accompanied it, provoked enormous public resentment, particularly in Ceará where emancipation societies formed in virtually every town. Within six years, popular agitation had not only ended slavery in Ceará, the first province to do so, but sparked similar crusades across the Northeast. Four years later, in the final twilight of the old empire, slavery was abolished throughout Brazil.  

Three

Gunboats and Messiahs

Previously one laughed at the state of one's heart; now nothing at all elicits joy or laughter. It is said that people live on hope. I have no hope even of living.

— Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib

India, China and Brazil accounted for the most massive mortality, but the world drought of the 1870s had profound and deadly impacts in at least a dozen other lands. Peasant producers, as we have seen, were already reeling from the impact of the trade depression, which deepened abruptly in 1877. Drought and famine gave foreign creditors, allied with indigenous moneylenders and compadres, new opportunities to tighten control over local rural economies through debt or outright expropriation. Pauperized countrysides likewise provided rich harvests of cheap plantation labor as well as missionary converts and orphans to be raised in the faith. And where native states retained their independence, the widespread subsistence crises in Asia and Africa invited a new wave of colonial expansion that was resisted in many cases by indigenous millenarianism. El Niño was thus followed by gunboats and messiahs as well as by famine and disease. In the Korean case, the opportunist power was Japan. In a familiar pattern, the drought in north China extended latitudinally across the Yellow Sea into Korea’s breadbasket Cholla region. The ensuing famine and peasant unrest coincided with the implementation of the "open door" treaty that Meiji Japan had extracted...