Potato

Elizabeth Shove

I gazed down on the ochre mountains and the crinkled surface of the earth far below. A fug of broken sleep engulfed me. Sometime after dawn, the lights came on and I knew I'd have to wake up for real. The plane landed just after 10am and once I'd been through passport control and customs I found the driver waiting to take me up to La Colina, high in the Andean mountains.

Juliana and her colleagues had recently completed a trial of their new genetically engineered 'protato'. The potato is already the third most important crop, and with a bit of jiggling around, levels of iron, amino acid and protein could be increased. At La Colina they are convinced that the world's growing population could live on a diet of 'protato' alone.

The irony of the situation spurred me on. My great grandfather, James Collins, was born in 1830 in Skibereen, a small town in County Cork. He was the only one of his family to survive what is known as the Irish potato famine of 1845-47. The blight was real enough, but the famine, which reduced the population by a third, was the result of an unholy combination of political and economic conditions and of dispossession, eviction and overcrowding. British rule led to a concerted effort first to control the poor, and then to abandon them. At the end of the day, the political ideology of the market won through, and there was hunger on scale that Western Europe had never seen before.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying previous diets were good, but they were certainly mixed: medieval populations lived on skirret, welsh onions and food foraged from forests and hedgerows. By comparison, the potato – and little else – kept Irish families alive on miniscule plots of land. There was no scope for rotation and reliance on this one crop was a disaster waiting to happen. My ancestors had to pawn their fishing gear, they had no animals, they had no work and with nothing left to eat they starved to death.

But what of today? Is it really that different? Industrial agricultural systems produce a tiny fraction of the many varieties of fruits and vegetables that could be grown, and if Juliana and her team succeeded, this range would be narrower still. I'm sure the research at La Colina was scientifically sound, but there were no two ways about it: pursuit of the 'protato' went against the principles of healthy living and ecological diversity. My plan was to stop it in its tracks.

I'd met Juliana a few years earlier at the annual World Potato Congress in Dublin. She spoke about the lab at La Colina and I'd followed her career ever since. My visit came at a critical moment: if the 'protato' took off, the sponsors would be delighted, and profits would roll in across the globe. There was a lot at stake.

Juliana met me in the lobby: smart, brisk, and fully in control. The slogan at the entrance was direct. ‘Where potatoes grow, livelihoods flourish’. We put on our white coats and hair nets, and she ushered me into the spotless laboratory.

The promised ‘protato’ used less water than other varieties, it was resistant to all known diseases and once approved it would bring food shortages to an end. I pretended to be impressed by the promotional talk.



But I was not. Why would anyone want another monocrop with all the risks that entailed? Surely history had some lessons for the future. I was convinced the ‘protato’ was another catastrophe in the making. Next time round it wouldn’t just be Irish families that suffered - the entire population would be at risk, state control would be tighter with who knows what political and military consequences. It was time to nip this project in the bud.

Half-way through our tour, Juliana slipped out to speak to a colleague. In an instant – a milisecond of industrial and political sabotage - I pulled the modified diabetic pen out of my pocket and injected an unsuspecting plant.

In a few days a deadly virus would spread through the lab and beyond, and no one, but no one, would trace it to me, Orla Collins, potato activist, taking revenge for the Irish famine and helping to avert a similar calamity in the future.

Looking back, my intervention changed the course of history. Capitalism is still with us, but in a different form. Farms are much reduced in size, and new – for which read old – crops are grown around the world. Supermarket chains are a thing of the past, and vegetables are almost always bought and sold in local markets.



https://www.fao.org/international-potato-day/en

At La Colina, Juliana remains in charge, but her laboratory has a new mission. The remote research station is now famed for its work in developing and promoting 4,000 varieties of potato, each suited to different soils and climatic conditions.