

Le gaspi alimentaire, la faim et l'évolution de la politique des banques alimentaires aux États-Unis

Issu de la décentralisation des services publics vers des acteurs privés sous l'administration Reagan, les banques alimentaires aux États-Unis constituent désormais une industrie value à plusieurs milliards de dollars par an. Les mouvements sociaux et politiques qui ont institutionnalisés ces réseaux caritatifs sont divers et souvent contradictoires, offrant une fenêtre sur la politique d'un système alimentaire qui est depuis longtemps soumis à de graves contradictions entre le gaspillage alimentaire et la faim. Cet article analyse l'économie morale de la lutte contre la faim au sein d'un mouvement social diversifié qui négocie un ensemble de codes et de normes sociaux ambigus. Je soutiens que les réseaux alimentaires caritatifs offrent une fenêtre sur la lutte politique plus large qui se déroule actuellement sur l'avenir du système alimentaire américain. Les débats au sein de ces espaces sont donc essentiels pour tous ceux qui voudraient comprendre la trajectoire de l'approvisionnement alimentaire aux États-Unis.

Food waste, hunger, and the shifting politics of food banking in the United States

Rising out of the devolution of public services to private actors during the Reagan administration, the food banking economy in the United States is now a multi-billion-dollar industry. The social and political movements that institutionalized charitable food networks are diverse and oft contradictory, offering a window into the politics and competing interests of a U.S. food system that has long grappled with glaring contradictions between food waste and hunger. In this paper, I analyze shifting moral economies of hunger relief within a diverse social movement (re)negotiating a set of ambiguous social codes and norms. I argue that charitable food networks offer a window into the political contest currently unfolding over the future of the U.S. food system. As such the debates within these spaces are critical to understanding the biopolitics of food provisioning in the United States.

Introduction

A mother compelled to rummage through grocery store dumpsters to provide enough food for her ten children recounted her struggles to John Van Hengel, a soup kitchen volunteer in Phoenix, AZ. As the story goes, the conversation between them planted the seeds of an idea that would resonate across time, space and scale. In 1967 John opened St. Mary's Food Bank to recover and redistribute food to the poor, the first institution of its kind. Gleaning produce from farms and backyard orchards around Phoenix, the organization eventually convinced local supermarket managers to donate their food waste to feed the hungry rather than filling their trash bins with it. A decade later, Van Hengel founded Second Harvest (now Feeding America, the third largest charitable organization in the country) to expand the food banking idea across Arizona and to other states. In 1982 he took the model abroad to Canada, France and Belgium supporting the emergence of international food banking networks now expanding across the world (Riches, 2018). On his 80th birthday, the United States Congress took time to commend John's humanitarian career (U.S. Senate, 2003) and when he died two years later obituaries hailed him as the founding father of an industry that had "discovered how to tie the public and private sectors in a common, aligned battle against hunger" (Sullivan, 2005). We do not know the name of the woman who first shared her story.

Hidden behind this food banking origin account is the fact that the number of food insecure households in the United States has significantly *increased* since food banks emerged over four decades ago. Also hidden are the dynamics driving the overproduction of food and food waste now reaching worrisome ecological proportions¹. The profits along this humanitarian food supply chain, that depend on the production of hunger to be fully realized, are also not highlighted in these foundational food banking narratives². In 2020, as the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated emergency food needs for households across the country, Feeding America processed \$3.2 billion dollars in tax deductible receipts for some of the most profitable food corporations in the world³. That same year, the federal government spent \$6 billion dollars to

¹ Spring, C., et al. 2020. *Food waste: an introduction to contemporary food waste studies*. In Routledge Handbook of Food Waste, ed. Reynolds, C. et al., 1–19. New York, NY: Routledge

² Lohnes, J.D., 2021. Regulating surplus: charity and the legal geographies of food waste enclosure. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38(2), pp.351-363.

³ https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/FA_2021AnnReport_FULL_d7_final.pdf

offload food industry surplus into emergency food networks^{4 5}. Satiating the hungry body has become an accumulation strategy in the deepest sense.

Since the federal government began subsidizing the growth of food banks in the early 1980s, these organizations have grown into critical appendages of agri-food supply chains and are now a prominent feature of the nutrition assistance landscape in the United States. Rising out of a politics of neoliberal austerity and the devolution of public services to private actors during the Reagan administration, the food banking economy today is a multi-billion-dollar industry. It regulates the distribution of emergency food on behalf of the state, private firms, philanthropies, in partnership with local community-based organizations. The social and political movements that institutionalized food banking in American society over the past forty years are diverse and oft contradictory, offering a window into the politics and competing interests of a U.S. food system that has long grappled with histories of colonization and racial violence alongside glaring contradictions between overproduction and poverty, food waste and hunger.

In this paper, I situate the rise and growth of food banks in the U.S. in historical context. I then turn to an analysis of the shifting economy of hunger relief within a diverse social movement (re)negotiating a set of ambiguous moral principles around addressing household food insecurity. The social and political power of food banks is expanding alongside its feeding lines. As such these organizations are increasingly involved in shaping nationwide food and public health policy. Most are now enrolling alternative food movements into their food sourcing strategies. They are engaged in anti-obesity and diabetes interventions through local farm to food bank initiatives that challenge the corporatized commodity supply chains that have traditionally dominated the network⁶. Some have even begun organizing around concepts of food justice, racial equality, fair trade, land reform and the right to food. Food banking networks in the United States cannot be understood as a monolithic political block. Their ideological and organizational diversity offers a window into the political contest currently unfolding over the future of the U.S. food system writ large. The debates currently unfolding in charitable food spaces are critical to understanding the broader biopolitics of food provisioning in the United States and beyond.

⁴ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>

⁵ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/fy-2021-funding>

⁶ Alanna K. Higgins (2021) *Produce prescription programs, bodily norms, and federal nutrition policy*. *Fat Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/21604851.2021.1985837](https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2021.1985837)

Study site

My analysis comes out of a seven-year multi-sited and multi-scalar institutional ethnography (IE) of food banking networks in West Virginia. The state is ranked as one of the most distressed in the country by socio-economic studies tracking well-being including health, income, education and quality of lived environments⁷. West Virginia has historically had one of the highest food insecurity rates in the country and been a place where political leaders have showcased their anti-hunger agendas. John F. Kennedy first proposed to reinstate the food stamp program during a 1959 campaign stop in West Virginia. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson's highly publicized tour through the state was a political rallying cry for the federal war on poverty in the 1960s. More recently, Jamie Oliver's controversial reality TV show "Food Revolution" centered the fight against unhealthy eating and obesity in Huntington, WV, placing the burden of poor food choices on residents of the "fattest city in America" rather than the obesogenic environments produced by inequalities in the wider food system.⁸

Interventions by government programs and food activists have not resolved the structural issues contributing to food insecurity in the state. Today, a long investment decline in the coal, chemical and manufacturing sectors is exacerbating food insecurity problems. Jobs in these sectors have been replaced by low wage and oft seasonal service work. The latter follow the whims of a sporadic tourism trade meant to stave off the state's dependence on extractive industries. The energy jobs that remain are intermittent and tend to reinforce uneven development and social contests over resource ownership and claims⁹. As my ethnography was unfolding West Virginia was the only state with negative job growth with only 53% of civilians 16 years or older currently employed or actively seeking employment. The latest census data reports West Virginia as the only state with population loss over the past decade, and nearly one sixth of those remaining are living below the federal poverty line¹⁰.

In this context, charity is a critical food sourcing strategy for 20% of the state's population each month. The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this phenomenon and food charities have had to contend with a 30% increase in demand for emergency food assistance. Two regional food

⁷ Sharecare Community Well Being Index. 2020.

⁸ Slocum et. al. (2011). "Properly, with love, from scratch": Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution. *Radical History*. 110: 178-191.

⁹ Schwartzman, G., 2021. *POWER and the Future of Appalachia: Discursive Framings of an Economic Transition*. *Southeastern Geographer*, 61(4), pp.343-356.

¹⁰ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WV/POP060210>

banks in the state deliver product to 550 local food charities (LFCs) spread across a 24,000 square mile territory. Following the national trend, WV food banks more than doubled the amount of food distributed over the past two decades from 7.3 million in 2002, to 18 million in 2016. The last 5 years have seen an extremely sharp rise. Mountaineer Food Bank, who distributes food to LFCs in 48 of the state's 55 counties increased its food distributions from 19 to 30 million pounds between 2018 and 2020, a 60% increase in just 3 years.

Both food banks are Feeding America (FA) members, an affiliation that provides them with access to large retail and manufacturing food donors, along with competitive grant opportunities from FA corporate partners. The terms of FA membership delimit each food banks' service area boundary and measures programmatic success across it largely on the overall pounds of food delivered across their territories. Both food banks also contract with the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) to distribute commodities provided to the state through the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Most recently the USDA also implemented an ad hoc Farmers to Families Food Box Program (FFFBP) to redirect food service production gluts forced by restaurant and institutional dining closures during the pandemic into emergency food networks. Other emergent USDA programs funded through the Families First Coronavirus Act, Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) act and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in response to the pandemic are leading to further explosive growth of food banking and emergency feeding infrastructure across the country. The private sector has also invested heavily in this network in the last two years. Mountaineer Food Bank for example recently received a \$9 million "transformational" grant from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott, an effective tripling of their 2016 operating budget through a single gift.¹¹

Methodology

Institutional ethnography is a methodology that seeks "to more fully understand the many structures, effects and identities working through institutions as territorial forces"¹². This type of inquiry relies on a long-term commitment to people and places, the cultivation of relationships of

¹¹ https://www.wvnews.com/news/wvnews/mountaineer-food-bank-receives-transformational-9m-donation-from-philanthropist-mackenzie-scott/article_e3c8e75f-004c-5bf5-b5b2-93677d1d3486.html

¹² Billo, E. and Mountz, A., 2016. For institutional ethnography: Geographical approaches to institutions and the everyday. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(2), p.200.

trust and mutual obligation through a willingness to enter the social relations under investigation rather than observing them as an outsider looking in. I approached this work as a Food Justice scholar-activist¹³, a posture that revealed the processes, meanings and discourses that motivate different groups of people to maintain or contest the social order, starting from the abstract messiness of relationships and power dynamics, and working toward concrete concepts to explain historical and geographical complexity¹⁴.

Facilitated in conjunction with the ongoing development of WV FOODLINK, a public geography project that fosters food access planning dialogues across West Virginia¹⁵, I conducted a community food security assessment alongside 12 local food charities (LFCs) organized under the umbrella of the Monongalia County Food and Hunger Committee. I attended their monthly meetings to observe the work of organizing food donation drives, pooling material resources, and communicating with their financial donors. I interviewed agency directors to understand the motivations and challenges of operating their hunger relief programs and to learn about different perceptions of the root causes of food insecurity in the county. Following this county-level work, I developed a working partnership with the state's two food banks, who were enthusiastic at the prospect of enhancing the visibility of their network. Since 2014, I have surveyed and geocoded the 550 LFCs affiliated with these two food banks four different times. An average response rate of 95% provides regular data points on the evolution of this state-wide network supplemented by internal food bank datasets that include the source, types and amount of food distributed to their agencies. I also engaged with LFCs participating in anti-hunger organizing in Cabell, Fayette, Kanawha, Mingo, Preston, Ohio, Taylor, Wayne and Wood counties.

Because access to food bank resources extends well beyond state borders, research was also conducted outside of West Virginia. Semi-structured interviews with federal and state bureaucrats working on USDA commodity procurement, food industry representatives selling food to the US government and FA employees engaged in corporate food sourcing partnerships were important to understand the dynamics governing the network at the national level. I also attended conferences that drew charitable food actors from across the country together to collaborate on both service

¹³ Reynolds, K., Block, D. and Bradley, K., 2018. Food justice scholar-activism and activist-scholarship. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 17(4), pp.988-998..

¹⁴ Hart, G., 2004. Geography and development: critical ethnographies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(1), pp.91-100.

¹⁵ <http://foodlink.wvu.edu>

and policy-oriented strategies. Participant observation and interview opportunities at these meetings, along with archival data collected over the course of the research process provided insights into the wider institutional dynamics facing the politics of food charity in the United States in general and West Virginia in particular. The public engagement inherent to the WV FOODLINK project opened spaces and conversations with various funders and advocacy groups and legislators at different political scales.

The findings in this paper are also informed by my direct involvement with WV Food for All. This coalition represents 250 organizations in West Virginia working to advance community food security through federal and state policies that ensure adequate access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food, while promoting the long-term viability and resilience of our regional food system. Key stakeholders include Mountaineer and Facing Hunger Food Banks and many of their LFCs partners, the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition, the Turnrow Appalachian Farm Collective, and their network of 250 local food producers. I also regularly engage with national level anti-hunger advocacy efforts through the Food Research Action Council (FRAC), Closing the Hunger Gap and more recently the Global Solidarity Alliance for Food Health and Social Justice.

In sum, I began my institutional ethnography of food banking networks in the United States at the local scale of emergency food providers and moved the inquiry up through regional and national institutions, seeking answers to new questions as they arose. Rather than focusing on a single organization, I studied the two food banks in West Virginia and their sister organizations across the country relationally in conjunction with the many parties involved in charitable food transactions. These include LFCs working to distribute free food at the community level, state and federal bureaucracies regulating the transfer of surplus agricultural commodities, and FA certification at the national level.

The rise, institutionalization, and political tensions of food banking in the United States

The dramatic expansion of food banking over the past forty years in the U.S. has raised alarm bells amongst scholars and food system activists concerned with the growing reliance of our social safety net on short term emergency food relief. These concerns are tied to the broader politics of food provisioning for low-income households, and questions over whom has the power

to shape food policy in the United States more broadly. Janet Poppendieck¹⁶ framed the growth and social acceptance of food charity as a “moral safety valve” for a society coming to grips with the fallout of dismantling the welfare state on the altar of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, food charity produces a set of values that depoliticize hunger and poverty through an overt focus on food waste recovery¹⁷. Beyond providing temporary and oft-inadequate emergency food relief, charitable food networks in the U.S. also reinforce class and racial divides¹⁸, discipline labor¹⁹, revalue and enclose food waste on behalf of profit-driven agro-food interest²⁰. All the while, these organizations also remain vulnerable to external shocks and food supply chain reorganizations²¹.

The institutionalization of US food banks did not happen in a vacuum. The rise of the food banking economy as a social phenomenon can be traced back to food policies established amid a much longer-term contest over agricultural and nutrition policy in the American food system. Existing scholarship on food charity has been helpful to explain its limitations in responding to hunger, and its role in reinforcing the dynamics of the privatization of care in a supposedly receding state. Yet scholars of food charity, and those seeking to understand broader food system dynamics in the U.S., must remain attentive to the bundles of power and politics of compassion that structure spaces of vulnerability, and the economies of care that have come to intervene in the process. We must begin to recognize that the depoliticization of hunger through the food banking economy is in fact a political strategy. The ongoing expansion of food charity in the U.S. is not merely a response to the roll-back of public welfare, it is a humanitarian technique used to countervail the pressures of the competitive polity organizing the capitalist food system writ large.

The state is the dominant power structuring the roll-out of the food banking economy. As Poppendieck pointed out two decades ago, it intentionally committed itself as a “silent partner” in this endeavor. A historical overview of TEFAP and its relationship to federal supply management concerns clearly reveals the role and function of the program (including its recent explosive growth) within a broader national food policy strategy as laid out in each iteration of the farm bill,

¹⁶ Poppendieck, J. 1998. *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. Penguin Books: New York

¹⁷ Henderson, G. 2004. *Free food the local production of worth, and the circuit of decommodification*. *Environment and Planning D*. (22):485-512

¹⁸ De Souza, R.T., 2019. *Feeding the other: Whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries*. MIT Press.

¹⁹ Dickinson, M., 2019. *Feeding the Crisis: Care and Abandonment in America's Food Safety Net* (Vol. 71). University of California Press.

²⁰ Lindenbaum, J., 2016. Countermovement, neoliberal platoon, or re-gifting depot? Understanding decommodification in US food banks. *Antipode*, 48(2), pp.375-392.

²¹ Lohnes, J. and Wilson, B., 2018. Bailing out the food banks? Hunger relief, food waste, and crisis in Central Appalachia. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50(2), pp.350-369.

its amendments, supplements and attendant executive orders²². Since TEFAP was first established in the early 1980s the program has anchored food banks in federal food assistance policy as one of the many USDA programs that staves off endemic crises of overproduction for US farmers and food precarity for low-income households.

It is important to note here that the federal government works in direct partnership with the 50 U.S. states and its territories, not directly with emergency feeding organizations (e.g., food banks and LFCs). These are instead regulated by their respective state agencies, who are tasked with implementing federal rules and procedures at the local level. This relationship between the federal government and its states is of key importance to the differentiated politics of food banking across the country²³ and the potential for food banks to participate in the social contest over food system futures in the United States.

Feeding America (FA) is the other dominant power broker contributing to the institutionalization of charitable food networks across the country. With 200 affiliate food bank members and hundreds of institutional partnerships with food enterprises and philanthropists, FA has built the strongest anti-hunger brand in the country. The centralization and corporatization of the FA label has seen the food recovery broker grow into the third largest non-profit in the country. Its food and funding partners include powerful agro-industrial actors who are now directly influencing the framing of hunger relief causes, zero-waste initiatives, nutrition education programs and infrastructure improvements throughout the network. In the process, these companies save on reduced disposal fees, boost their image as good corporate citizens and collectively claimed over \$3 billion in tax credits last year.²⁴

Regional food banks in the United States thus sit at the center of a network of public-private co-dependencies. Those laboring within this vast system work to resolve problems borne out of the commodification of food in the capitalist system. With each new phase of growth, the power relations in this food banking economy are re-organized and usually re-concentrated²⁵. food banks anchor charitable food supply chains in place by centralizing funding for the logistical

²² Cabili, C., Eslami, E., & Briefel, R. (2013). *White Paper on the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)* (No. 0ab44a5553204796a9f2f0cc69c42c98). Mathematica Policy Research.

²³ Washington Department of Agriculture. 2015. *National TEAFP Survey*.

²⁴ Warshawsky, D.N., 2016. Food waste, sustainability, and the corporate sector: Case study of a US food company. *The Geographical Journal*, 182(4), pp.384-394.

²⁵ Warshawsky, D. 2010. *New power relations served here: The growth of food banking in Chicago*. Geoforum. 41:763-775

infrastructure necessary to move donated surplus from the public and private sectors to local charities serving people in need. Food Banks anchor hunger relief networks in place, yet their institutional instability¹ is also a problem for a food regime²⁶ that is doubling down on food banking to address overproduction in the context of food access failure. Food banks are thus both a solution and a dilemma for the state and corporations leveraging LFCs to maintain the legitimacy of a profit-driven food system that simultaneously produces food waste and hunger.

Stress on low-paid staff, volunteers, and donors, particularly in poor rural states with high food insecurity rates like West Virginia, is palpable. Placing the costs of revaluing food waste on the voluntary labor and philanthropic capital provided by civil society produces a high degree of freneticism and tension throughout the network. The underfunded mandate to feed the poor leads to a fiscal and managerial order that comes to disrupts moral and material values that drive people to engage in hunger relief work. Like the regional food bank, LFCs are also a portal and a barrier to food waste revaluation in the food banking economy due to their differing institutional capacities in terms of labor, funding, physical infrastructure, and political ideologies. Indeed geography, uneven development and place significantly affects an LFC's capacity to procure and distribute emergency food resources. The politics of food banking in the United States must then also account for both material and ideological differences among LFCs and the social and institutional contexts in which each operates their independent feeding programs²⁷. The spatial strategies used by the state and FA to overcome local barriers to food waste revaluation include top-down metrics such as FA's Meals Per Person in Need (MPIN) algorithm, or distribution equity formulas developed by the USDA based on US Census poverty statistics and Bureau of Labor unemployment Statistics.

Reviewing these tensions and contradictions provides an opportunity to think about ways in which LFCs and their food banks might take advantage of slippages and pressure points within this broader institutional framework as the basis for strengthening food justice and food sovereignty coalitions working to confront the corporate capture of the food system²⁸. Some are already engaging on these fronts, while others are wary of politicizing the production of hunger

²⁶ McMichael, P. 2009. *A food regime genealogy*. Journal of Peasant Studies. 36(1) 139-169

²⁷ Pine, A. 2016. *Confronting Hunger in the USA: Searching for Community Empowerment and Food Security in Food Access Programs*. Routledge

²⁸ Clapp, J., 2018. *Mega-mergers on the menu: corporate concentration and the politics of sustainability in the global food system*. Global Environmental Politics, 18(2), pp.12-33.

for fear of losing access to resources essential to the smooth execution of their work. Food banks in the United States are thus at a crossroads. They are subordinate to dominant relations of power in the food system, yet they are also capable of meaningfully confronting that power because they now occupy such a central role in the now essential food waste-qua-hunger relief supply chain. As independent organizations, they can choose to engage as key contributors to the food justice and food sovereignty movements in the United States²⁹. Their resistance cannot be an individualized response however, and a project that rewrites the call to charity toward justice³⁰ must build solidarities between food banks and their LFCs to push back against the monopolistic dynamics that currently limit their ability to enact transformative food system change in their communities.

Feeding Lines. Surplus, Hunger and Social Movements in the U.S. Food System.

Off the national mall in Washington D.C. five men encased in bronze forever wait for their portion of food in front of a closed door. The sculpture is part of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial commemorating the Great Depression that suddenly left millions of people out of work and dependent on food charity to survive. Juxtaposed with this feeding line, two disheveled farmers stare blankly into the distance. The sculptures represent the production gluts and commodity price collapse that shattered the lives of agrarian families during the same period.

The fallout from the 1929 financial crash led to seemingly irrational decisions on the part of food producers trying to cope with falling prices. Milk poured down sewage drains, oranges soaked in kerosene, corn burned for fuel and arbitrary livestock slaughters did not bode well with the millions struggling to access food in newly industrialized cities. The paradox of malnutrition amidst food surplus provoked a sense of moral outrage that forced the federal government to respond to “breadlines’ knee deep in wheat”³¹

When Abraham Lincoln authorized the creation of the US Department of Agriculture in 1862 he called it the “people’s department” because he envisioned it significantly affecting the lives of every American. At the time, the country was still mostly agrarian with 50% of the population dependent on farming for their livelihood. The department evolved alongside the

²⁹Holt-Giménez, E. and Wang, Y., 2011. *Reform or transformation? The pivotal role of food justice in the US food movement*. *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 5(1), pp.83-102.

³⁰ Dixon, B. 2015. *Rewriting the call to charity: From food shelf volunteer to food justice advocate*. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*. 5(2):71-19

³¹ Poppendieck, J. 2014. *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat. Food Assistance in the Great Depression*. UC Press: Berkeley

industrialization of agriculture, the urbanization of society and that nation's multiple social and economic crises. The largest of these remains the 1929 financial crash, whose ensuing bankruptcies left the United States economy in severe economic depression. As recently proletarianized millions were laid off and no longer able to source food by exchanging wages, farmers faced devalued assets and markets awash in surplus product.

The USDA grew in power and stature during this time through expanded agricultural price supports and nutrition assistance programs. Alongside the immediate demands of interventionist food policymaking under a state of emergency, were longer term considerations linked to Western expansionism, environmental mismanagement, and white supremacy.³² This was a time when the country was transitioning from a decentralized settler state into the capitalist empire that reshaped the global political landscape in the 20th century. Drawing on the Great Cowboy Strike of 1883, Patel and Goodman sum up the ecological, industrial and labor transformations underway in the US food economy that formed the political backdrop of the "Long New Deal".

"A thorough history of the New Deal would set north American worker militancy in the long history of rebellion and resistance to colonial contact, and the imperatives of capitalist expansion through frontiers. The history would certainly trace this militancy to the racial compromises at the end of the Civil War, and the tensions between white settler farmer militancy and predominantly black farmworker organizing, the rise of agricultural monopoly power centered in Chicago, the political ecology of Indigenous activism, the resentments around deflationary monetary policy and the rise of Bellamy's Nationalist Clubs"³³

New Deal food policies worked to reconcile the dilemma of violence amidst abundance, want amidst plenty, of hunger amidst food waste. The Roosevelt administration empowered the USDA to raise farm gate prices by purchasing excess commodities to stave off the immediate agricultural crisis. It then redistributed these foods to the poor as hunger relief. The State's intervention relieved social discontent and rescued the capitalist food system from its internal contradictions. The 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act drafted amid this crisis, remains the basis for the quadrennial farm bill that still structures farm and nutrition policy in the United States today. The legislation's evolution has not resolved the underlying problems of overproduction and hunger endemic to a profit driven food system, rather it continues to set into motion a series of

³² Glenn, E.N., 2015. Settler colonialism as structure: A framework for comparative studies of US race and gender formation. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 1(1), pp.52-72.

³³ Patel, R. and Goodman, J., 2020. The long new deal. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(3), p.433.

fixes through which food production and nutrition entitlement have developed into the 21st century. The food bank is one such fix.

The federal government provides massive public capital inputs to nutrition programs to address its historical mandate to subsidize and maintain the viability of an agricultural sector, balance overproduction and mitigate household food insecurity. Nutrition programs have evolved as an entitlement patchwork that reflects the fractured response to food access failures at different historical moments and the variable political will to respond to social demands for the right to food over the past 90 years. Roosevelt's feeding line memorial thus reverberates into the present. Last year 6.2 billion pounds of excess food was diverted through a network of 200 FA food banks, a sixfold increase in the past 25 years. The 60,000 LFCs integrated into this network raise money and mobilize volunteers to receive, process and serve this industrial food waste to 50 million people lining up each month to receive their portion of the excess³⁴. As the amount of food increases, the lines forming to access the surplus are expanding as well. As one food bank director in West Virginia stated "we're just feeding the line, not shortening the line. Even though we want to, the reality is we're a short-term fix to a long-term problem".

Unlike the 1930s, feeding lines in the context of food gluts no longer provoke a sense of moral outrage. Today these tend to exist largely as sites of moral performance, blunting the injustices of a highly unequal society and normalizing a food system that segments eaters along lines of disposable income. Food charity produces a set of values that depoliticize structural inequalities and poverty through an overt focus on solving hunger through food waste recovery. As part of an "anti-hunger industrial complex"³⁵ their work benefits entrenched interests in the capitalist food economy. They remain however a politically fraught phenomenon with latent tensions between profit and compassion driven supply chains.

What is important to note here, is that nutrition programs structuring feeding lines across the United States have evolved alongside the state as part of a long and uneven history of consensus achieved within the imperfect and fraught democratic process of modern statecraft³⁶. The School Breakfast Program (SBP) offers one of the most explicit examples. SBP emerged out of a

³⁴ Feeding America. 2020. *Annual Report*. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/FA_2020AnnReport_FINAL_updated0309_v2.pdf

³⁵ Fisher. A. 2017. *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

³⁶ Vernon. J. 2007. *Hunger: A modern history*. Harvard University Press

hegemonic contest between Black activists and a federal government keen to respond to perceived threats posed by the Black Panther Party's free breakfast for children program in inner city communities across the country during a period of heightened racial tensions in the 1960s and 1970s³⁷. Similarly, TEFAP, CSFP, the tax laws written to facilitate the transfer of food waste and the most recent FFFBP were all responses to socio-ecological and political tensions at the heart of food system contradictions.

We must think then think of food banks and the many other public nutrition programs they come to compliment (including SNAP, WIC, School Nutrition etc.) as part of the “ensemble of socially embedded, socially regularized and strategically selective institutions, organizations, social forces and activities organized around (or at least actively involved in) making collectively binding decisions for an imagined political community”³⁸. This imagined charitable food community is not fixed, it evolves splinters and reconfigures alongside the discourses, social struggles, economic crises, and shifting political winds of the broader body politic that makes up the United States. To these, I now turn.

For whom does the food bank toil?

Food banks are presumably designed to address food insecurity for low-income households. Since their institutionalization in the early 1980s however, these organizations have grown into critical appendages of agro-industrial supply chains. Food banks fix supply-side problems within a capitalist food economy through a set of institutional relationships that bring the state, the shadow state³⁹, food corporations, local charities, and philanthropic donors together through humanitarian reason⁴⁰. Emergency food networks in the United States are now the necessary ends of a food system that reinforces both legal and social codes by leveraging and reinforcing the idea that feeding the hungry with industrial food waste is an unquestionable moral imperative.

Although food banks and their LFCs are largely perceived as organizations whose *raison-d'être* is to feed the poor, my institutional ethnography of charitable food networks complicates

³⁷ Heynen, N. 2009. *Bending the bars of empire from every ghetto for survival: The Black Panther party's radical anti-hunger politics of social reproduction and scale*. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 99(2), 406-422

³⁸ Jessop, B. 2022. *The Future of the Capitalist State*. Polity. p.6

³⁹ Wolch, J. 1990. *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition*. New York: Foundation Center.

⁴⁰ Fassin, D. 2011. *Humanitarian Reason : A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press: Berkeley

this idea. The roll-out of the food bank fix is in fact a fraught and contested part of food provisioning strategies and the evolving moral contract between producers and consumers, now negotiated through agro-industrial capital its complex global financial arrangements. The overt discourse on hunger centered and reinforced by the food banking economy obscures much of the actual work that these organizations perform in and for the food system beyond feeding the poor. It also conceals the oppositional tensions that those involved in these networks confront. Food banking then cannot merely be understood as a response to hunger in situ, these organizations must also be placed within a geopolitical, ecological and nutritional governance project that tends to serve and reinforce the hegemony of the capitalist food system under the banner of humanitarianism.

Public support for the food banking economy finds its origins in response to two distinct crises linked to the transition toward a post-fordist accumulation regime⁴¹. The first was a period of deep economic contraction following the 1973 and 79 oil shock. The second was linked to a crisis of overproduction in the agricultural sector, particularly a massive liquid milk and cheese glut. Rather than responding to declining consumer purchasing power with an expansion of food entitlement programs as had historically been the case since the 1930s, the Reagan administration tightened eligibility standards for food, housing and cash entitlements. Social welfare cuts compelled many poor households to shift limited resources to cover new housing, heating and transportation costs, creating endemic household food access shortfalls. High unemployment and inflationary pressures led to many relying on soup kitchens and food pantries for the first time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the federal government purchased and stockpiled over 500 million pounds of cheese and butter in state food warehouses across the country to stabilize milk markets and protect dairy farmers from bankruptcy. The state's capacity to intervene in this way was enabled by the institutional scaffolding built under New Deal Era food policy, namely the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), a state enterprise created in 1933 "for the purpose of stabilizing, supporting and protecting farm income and prices"⁴²

The paradox of mountains of cheese rotting in government storehouses in a context of rising homelessness and food insecurity rates was picked up by the national press and became a rallying cry for anti-hunger groups exposing contradiction in federal food policy. Political pressure on the

⁴¹ Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Post-Modernity*. Blackwell: Oxford

⁴² Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act (62 Stat.1070; 15 U.S.C. 714).

new Reagan administration to act led to the release of “government cheese” for distribution to the poor through non-state charitable actors, setting in motion a decentralizing logic made particularly apparent in Reagan’s statement accompanying the authorization of the Special Dairy Distribution Program:

“At a time when American families are under increasing financial pressure, their government cannot sit by and watch millions of pounds of food turn to waste. I am authorizing today the immediate release of 30 million pounds from CCC inventory. The cheese will be delivered to the states that request it and will be distributed free to the needy by non-profit organizations”⁴³

The program has come to include a wide variety of products beyond dairy including grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and meat proteins regularly distributed to participating nonprofits across the country. Figure 1 highlights the growth of the TEFAP program since its formalization by an act of Congress in 1983 to the first year of the Trump administration.

[FIGURE 1 – TEFAP funding]

Federal support for food banking networks began even prior to the release of CCC stores. From 1976 to 1982 grants from the Community Services Administrationⁱⁱ to private non-profit groups strengthened a coalition of food banks under the Second Harvest (now Feeding America) banner. Beginning with a federation of 13 food banks, Second Harvest quickly grew to 44 members by 1982. In 1984, shortly after the USDA formalized material food and financial support for charities through TEFAP, Second Harvest moved its headquarters from Phoenix to Chicago to be closer to key food industry headquarters. Private donations grew rapidly in tandem with the release of public food commodities, as did the number of food banking organizations that paid membership dues to access institutional benefits afforded by the coalition. By 1985, the number of Second Harvest food bank affiliates reached 203.

Private sector lobbying efforts to reform the tax code led to the construction of a state and federal legal framework to incentivize food businesses to donate their obsolete inventories to charity and take advantage of fair market valuations permissible under the federal tax code⁴⁴. In

⁴³ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-about-distribution-the-cheese-inventory-the-commodity-credit-corporation>

⁴⁴ Van Zuiden, S. 2012. *The good food fight for good Samaritans: The history of alleviating liability and equalizing tax incentives for food donors*. Drake Journal of Agricultural Law 17(1): 237-262

2000, Second Harvest merged with the national food rescue group Foodchain to capture efficiencies the latter had developed along perishable food supply chainsⁱⁱⁱ. The two entities combined under the new name America's Second Harvest. The merger came at the behest of Second Harvest board members and funders wary of redundancies that would limit the food industry's regulatory integration with non-profit feeding networks. ConAgra CEO Bruce Rhode who strongly supported the merger for example explained the agro-food industry rationale in these terms:

“Increased food industry efficiency is mandating increased efficiency for hunger-relief organizations. To be most effective and to feed as many people as possible, organizations like America's Second Harvest have to be ready and able to capture food quickly and move it quickly.”⁴⁵

In 2008 America's Second Harvest changed its name again to Feeding America (FA), moving away from the idea of providing scraps or seconds to “more fully engage the public in the fight against hunger”⁴⁶. The rebranding effort successfully engaged more corporate partners in cause-marketing campaigns at a time when millions of households turned to food charity in the wake of the fall out of the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession that followed it. Monetary donations jumped by 33% and food donations increased by 15% in the first year of the new marketing strategy⁴⁷. 2008 was also the year that food bank supply chains went through a major shift from manufacturing driven toward retail driven food waste sources.

Geopolitical factors play a role in the availability of emergency foods as well. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 for example, export restrictions to that country led to a rise in frozen chicken purchased through the TEFAP program and then circulating through the food banking economy. In July of 2018, an executive order by the Trump administration released \$12 billion dollars in federal aid^{iv} to bail out US farmers caught up in retaliatory tariffs of an escalating trade war with China⁴⁸. In August a portion of the bailout funds were allocated toward the purchase of \$50 million worth of fresh milk from struggling dairy farmers. In West Virginia, this translated

⁴⁵ PR Newswire. April 18,2000. *ConAgra Partners with America's Second Harvest as it Merges with Foodchain to Rescue Hundreds of Millions of Pounds of Food; Just-In-Time Technology at the Heart of Largest Nonprofit Merger Ever*. Retrieved from Nexis Uni June 30th, 2018.

⁴⁶ Feeding America. 2008. *Press Release*. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press-room/americas-second-harvest-changes-name-to-feeding-america>

⁴⁷ Bryson York, E. 2010. *How Feeding America Became the Go-To Cause for Marketers*. Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/news/feeding-america-marketers/143647/>: Accessed June 30th, 2017

⁴⁸ Paleta D. and Dewey C. 2018. *White House readies plan for \$12 billion in emergency aid to farmers caught up in Trump's escalating trade war*. Washington Post: July 25th, 2018.

to 145,000 gallons of fluid milk that had to suddenly be pushed out by the food banks to a network of agencies ill equipped to accept such a massive amount of perishable product in a matter of days. In total trade mitigation accounted for an additional \$2.27 billion of food and administrative funding for food banks in the United States.

The COVID-19 crisis has also led to a massive increase in agricultural surplus removal through charitable food programs. New Appropriations for TEFAP since March 2020 currently total \$2.25 billion. FFFBP, an ad hoc intervention intended to remove surplus from the food service sector, disbursed another \$5.5 billion worth of fresh foods into emergency food networks, over 173 million boxes of food between May 2020 and May 2021⁴⁹. In West Virginia food bank directors have jointly petitioned state government for funding increases for infrastructure improvements to accommodate this massive expansion. Concurrently there is a renewed urgency to invest in LFC capacity in terms of storage, refrigeration, transportation, staffing and operating hours, and the governor recently announced a \$7 million investment in that effort.

The complimentary relationship between federal agricultural surplus removal and FA's enrollment of corporate funders and food industry partners has resulted in a top-down food banking governance structure that is largely beholden to the interests of entrenched agro-industrial food system actors. By focusing on the institutions regulating food waste donations across anti-hunger networks in the United States, I explained how the food banking fix maintains the hegemony of a moral economy of hunger relief that legitimizes misplaced charity and increases the social distance between givers and receivers. Those with an economic and political interest in regulating surplus in such a manner benefit from the deployment of discourses that reinforce both scarcity and charity. They feed off the sacrifices and compassion of anti-hunger groups to consolidate power and accumulate more wealth. Laying bare these institutional dynamics, the question that begs to be asked is the following. To what extent does the current food regime need hunger and the food bank's response to it to function?

Reclaiming charitable food supply chains

Countless labor hours, resources and systems have been committed to food waste redistribution as hunger relief over the past four decades, yet millions of food insecure households

⁴⁹ USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. 2021. Farm to Families Food Box Program. <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>

in the United States continue to remain dependent on short term emergency food relief due to deep seated social inequality that remains as entrenched as ever. Over the past decade however, several food banking networks have begun to take stock of their role in reinforcing perverse power dynamics in the food system that contribute to hunger. Some are beginning to meaningfully engage in the difficult work of aligning with grassroots movements and working toward policies that foster a more ecologically and socially just food system. Though the institutional constraints they are operating under make it very difficult, some food banks are beginning to forge alliances with food justice, food sovereignty and right to food activists to cultivate and tend to the urgent struggle to rewrite the policies that shape the institutions governing the U.S. food system⁵⁰.

Closing the Hunger Gap (CTHG) is a national movement whose stated mission is to “expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote social justice and address the root causes of hunger”⁵¹. Since 2013, CTHG conferences have fostered conversations about institutionalized racism and structural inequalities, alongside workshops on the right to food, strategy sessions for civic engagement on issues such as affordable housing, minimum wage increases and immigrant labor rights. The organizers’ aim is to both challenge and encourage food banks and their LFCs to tackle the intersectionality of hunger and build political power with those that they serve, elevating their voices and their political agency in the process.

The movement explicitly challenges the dominant hunger relief narratives coming from FA and their corporate sponsors, who continue to measure their programmatic success from a distance in pounds of food distributed. Building alliances among food banks and LFCs, many of whom are interested in tackling root cause issues, has come as an encouragement and motivation for many who often feel isolated in their individual efforts. Yet there also remains a significant amount of institutional tension for those attempting to move their charitable food organizations toward social justice work. One of the leaders of CTHG recounted the trials he faced working from within the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona to organize for change: “I’ve been told I’d be fired a few times, I’ve said I’d quit a few times. There have been moments of incredible highs and incredible lows. As an organization we’ve accomplished some great things though.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Sbicca. 2018. *Food Justice Now*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁵¹ <https://thehungergap.org/>

⁵² Interview August 5th, 2020

Half of their 150 food bank staff now work on root cause issues and the organization commits has committed an \$8 million budget to support grassroots food justice oriented organizing across their service area. They recently seeded a successful campaign to increase minimum wage in the city of Tucson. In Washington State, Northwest Harvest is driving a campaign for a constitutional amendment for the Right to Food, empowering people that are experiencing food insecurity and rely on their services to become leaders of that movement. Coming out of the national racial justice reckoning in 2020, many food banks are compelling their boards and staff to engage in racial equity trainings which has led to conversations about cultivating food bank leadership that reflects the diversity of the communities they serve.

In West Virginia the two food banks have historically had few resources to commit to work beyond food distribution. Over the past few years however, Mountaineer and Facing Hunger food banks have both engaged in building political power with other food system allies as founding members of the WV Food for All Coalition. The group has advocated for nutrition assistance and food system policy changes at the state and federal level and recently organized a 5-day summit attended by 250 stakeholders from across the state. Leaders in the food justice movement were invited as keynote speakers. On one of the preparatory planning calls preparing for that summit one of the food bank directors stated: “We need broader food system education to place the food bank and hunger in the context of all of these recurring crises that we are experiencing. We are working amid this ongoing emergency all the time. We’re cut, bruised and bleeding. Now with this pandemic the band-aid got ripped off right away”⁵³.

As food banks begin to wield their growing social power to engage in pedagogy and policy activism with their LFCs and the people they serve, what will the effects of this mobilization be on the broader politics of the US food system? Some of the results of their activism are already beginning to show their effects. Many food banks joined sustainable agriculture coalitions to demand changes to FFFBP during a public comment period reviewing the USDA’s emergency food COVID response. A few months later, the administration announced it was directing TEFAP funding toward “purchases that will expand local and regional markets and place an emphasis on purchasing from historically underserved farmers and ranchers”. These are encouraging signs, that the food banking economy might yet begin to work itself out of existence by fostering community food security networks in its stead.

⁵³ WV Food for All Meeting – August 2020

Conclusion

The rise and evolution of the food banking phenomenon offers a mirror to the broader political contest over the food system in the United States. As feeding lines have expanded over the past forty years, the social power of charitable food organizations has also increased. Situating the food banking phenomenon in its historical context, I analyzed the shifting biopolitics of food provisioning within this diverse network of actors and the various social movements (both progressive and conservative) that have contributed to it. Charitable food networks are complex, made up of many different types of non-profit organizations each independent of one another, but connected through the food surplus and food insecure households that bind them together. Each organization is made up of people with differing ideologies and various political and ethical claims to action, coordinated under a private-public governance assemblage that has its own set of interests.

As central nodes of this network however, food banks have the capacity to exercise power and demand institutional changes to both private sector business practices and public sector rules, regulations, and funding streams. The billions of dollars spent on charitable food infrastructure to maintain the legitimacy of the capitalist food system positions these organizations as key players in global food supply chains. Their power stems from the essential function that food banks now play in both the accumulation strategy and moral economy of the corporate food regime. Food banks are thus at a crossroads. Their organizations can choose to either reinforce the status quo of an exploitative, environmentally destructive, and racist food system, or begin to shift the expanding social power of their institutions to contribute to food justice and food sovereignty coalitions that envision a more resilient, liberatory and ecologically vibrant food future.

NOTES

ⁱ Food banks tend to go through recurrent periods of growing pains and instability. These organizations are not always in a position of financial fragility, the past few years in fact have seen a period of capital investments into the expansion of the network. Many of the local partners do remain at risk of shutting their doors due to financial difficulties, labor shortages or other concerns. Some FA food banks remain extremely under resourced in comparison to their network peers, particularly those in large US cities whose financial clout and material imprint on food and logistics networks in their service areas continues to expand.

ⁱⁱ CSA was the Nixon administration's successor to the Office of Economic Opportunity administering the Johnson era "war on poverty". Grants were provided through 1982 when the agency became restructured into the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

ⁱⁱⁱ Foodchain operated 150 programs across the country that recovered hot, prepared foods from catered events and restaurants for redistribution to charities. Up to that point, Second Harvest concentrated almost exclusively on securing non-perishable goods for its food bank networks and benefited from the institutional expertise and infrastructure that accompanied the merger.

^{iv} Funding for TEFAP bonus commodity purchases are made possible through section 32 of the Agricultural Adjustment Act which mandates that 30% of all import duties collected from customs receipts are made available to the Secretary of Agriculture for surplus removal and the encouragement of domestic food consumption. When tariffs on steel and aluminum (or any other goods) increase, the pot of money to rescue farmers from food waste crises also increases.