

Food Policy

Martin Caraher
John Coveney *Editors*

Food Poverty and Insecurity: International Food Inequalities

 Springer

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Food Poverty and Insecurity: International Food Inequalities

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This book was borne out of a long distance collaboration separated by 10,000 miles, with John in Adelaide and Martin in London. This meant early mornings for one and late evening for the other. Occasional meetings in London and Adelaide helped this impasse.

We of course wish to thank all the contributors for their patience with the process and their expertise which flowed from the pages. Their writing often made us gasp with astonishment at the research they have been involved in and the breadth of their knowledge. Thank you all.

To our respective wives and life partners we express undying gratitude and love. Martin to Maggie and John to Melanie and of course vice versa for sharing their spouses at odd hours of the day and night.

Preface

At a time of financial restraint while those most at risk are suffering from the ravages of the global economic meltdown, the notion of ‘austerity’ has become a *leitmotif* for modern government and is believed to be a necessity for the responsible management of jurisdictions. The effect of this is to ask those already suffering from food insecurity and poverty to further make sacrifices, for situations not of their making.

While the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 brought austerity to the fore as an antidote to the fiscal problems endured by some countries, it would be a mistake to believe that austerity in government started with this crisis. The UK, for example, experienced severe austerity measures under the Thatcher years, and of course the immediate post-World War Two years saw similar measures in other high-income economies. What is different now is the scale of austerity and the link globally in the financial and food systems so that changes in one part of the globe have impacts elsewhere.

Austerity is usually justified by the need to ‘pay one’s way’ and ‘live within one’s means.’ In principle, it is hard to take issue with these economic imperatives; however, the way austerity plays out in actual practice on particular groups in populations has become of interest to academics, policy makers, and community advocates.

This book explores the way austerity measures have impacted on food security and poverty. It examines how in different jurisdictions austerity has been adopted and adapted to fit with local conditions to influence the availability, affordability, and accessibility of food. The variety of jurisdictions examined in the book, from advanced economies such as USA and France, to emerging economies such as Brazil, and to developing economies such as Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, allows a rich understanding of the effects of ‘belt tightening’ on urban and rural communities. The book’s chapter authors—all experts in their respective fields—provide in-depth insights that allow austerity to be compared and contracted at levels of policy and practice. The book will be indispensable for academics, policy makers, and practitioners in a variety of settings.

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Chapter 1

Food Poverty and Insecurity: The Poor in a World of Global Austerity

Martin Caraher and John Coveney

Introduction

During times of austerity a constantly used phrase is ‘tightening of the belt’. This *leitmotif* has been a constant refrain as part of the most recent examples of voluntary or enforced austerity measures introduced after the Global Financial Crisis from 2007 to the present. Countries involved have taken it upon themselves, or have been forced, to introduce measure to rein-in public expenditure, introduce austere economic measures and to... tighten belts. Yet few have had the opportunity to use this to address public health nutrition; the belt tightening has been done to address issues of financial austerity and economic stability often with huge implications for nutrition and health outcomes. Nutrition and diet-related outcomes have been a casualty of the economic crisis. Although belt tightening is a convenient and easy to use shorthand for strategies required during austere conditions, it could be argued that pulling belts a few notches tighter is, actually, a consequence rather than a strategy during hard economic terms. For many countries and regions belt tightening is a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with the hard times. In other words, as austerity measures take hold, the effects are to decrease the circumference or girth of individuals or the collective population (Egger and Swinburn 2010; Caballero and Popkin 2002). Of course, this is usually the result of limits placed on food intake, and the overall effects seen as the body starts to react to lower levels of energy and other nutrition substrates.

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Here in this volume, we have examples from India, Brazil, and SE Asia where steps have been taken to safeguard the health and nutritional status of the populace. It must be said that these initiatives are often taken and operate in the face of huge barriers and a lack of policy support.

Creating Pressure Points and Even Greater Inequalities

From OECD data (2011) we know countries such as Australia, the UK, and the USA have widened inequalities and increased levels of poverty, while others with increased levels of poverty have narrowed the inequality gap. So for some the belt has been tightened involuntarily and left them without much choice. The image of belt tightening is usually marketed as one where the more corpulent members of the population are in need of girth correction. However, an inevitable consequence of austerity is that it is the most vulnerable who end up having to tighten belts by virtue of going without the necessary food for health and wellbeing. The distinction here is often one of choice; while the well off adopt a lifestyle based on austerity they do so to improve their health or to save the planet; the poor on the other hand are driven by a lack of choice and the imposition of austere choices.

It is these ideas that provide a backdrop for this book. We are interested in exploring the ways in which austerity measure have been invoked in different countries, cultures, and contexts so that various population groups have had different access to the necessities of living, including basic food supplies. We deliberately sought contributions from a range of authors who could write about the ways that austerity can ‘bite’ and thus impact on belt tightening. But, any account of belt tightening under austerity measures requires an understanding of and the reactions to such measure in an historical setting, to look to modern approaches and solutions and why some countries have addressed the problem. Chapters in this book show a range of solutions to food poverty. These range from food intervention projects that consider food as a right, to approaches involving state or charity or individuals, or indeed all three. Several chapters in this volume also show the various levels at which governance occurs from the regional (as in global and SE Asia), through nation states (Australia, South Africa, and Brazil) to city (New York) and local initiatives (France).

Food Protest and the Underlying Moral Economy

Thompson (1993) in his review of the ‘moral economy’ of the English crowd in the eighteenth century noted that food riots were often a flash point for the anger of the populace. They were aimed at a more fundamental truth, which was the erosion of traditional liberties and privileges, and food offered a convenient focus for dissent

and social protest as opposed to merely a protest against food or hunger. The riots coincided with the demise of the medieval economy, its social order and the growth of the pre-industrial and early industrial economy. Riots were social calamities and engaged the energies of the ‘mob’, and the response of the civic authorities was muted. For some this was seen as collusion with the mob, for others it was a way of absorbing the energies and attention of the mob so that structurally nothing much changed. Seeking solutions in local projects could be said to ignore the structural influences of the global food system and ‘Big Food’ (George 2010; Moodie et al. 2013; Caraher 2003), it also medicalises and creates what Crawford (1977, 1980, 1984) calls a form of healthism in that it locates the solution at the individual or community level. Similarly to Crawford’s arguments about self-help and alternative healthcare movements, food austerity as a lifestyle choice also runs the danger of depoliticising food and the food system. Food which is conceptualized as individual is highly dangerous; you can be responsible and change the world! For many, austerity has become a lifestyle issue and this is to be welcomed, but what needs to be acknowledged is that such choices require resources, resources that the poor do not always have. Such dangers are pointed out in the chapter on food banks where charity becomes the default option and we end up with ‘*successful failures*’. On the other hand, the New York City and Brazilian examples given in the book demonstrate how food poverty can be tackled by combining community activism with state support.

The chapter from France shows how agricultural and social policy can be linked to deliver and shape a new and politically aware food system. The danger as Belasco (2007) points out is that dissatisfaction with the food system often becomes diverted into individual action and people opting out of the dominant food system, leaving an already inadequate and dysfunctional system to those who are most disadvantaged. They do not have the resources or social capitals necessary to put into action such choices. Belasco (2007) noted that many of the original US alternative food networks were, by the 1970s, torn apart by disputes over the issue of meeting consumer choice and the extent to which these undermined the original values of ‘oppositional’ politics. We can see such approaches outlined in the chapters on France and Brazil while the chapter on food banks in developed nations shows regression to a position of philanthropy and communities helping themselves, devoid of a political stance and no support from government.

The economic dogma espoused by Adam Smith (The Wealth of Nations), in the eighteenth century, promoted that free-trade and a self-regulating economy would result in social progress. He advocated that government needed only to preserve law and order, justice, defend the nation, and provide for a few social needs that could not be met through the market. This philosophy of free trade was used for non-intervention in the Irish famine of 1845–47 and the great Bengal famine of 1943 (Sen 1981, 1997; O’Gráda 2015) and more recently in the Ethiopian famines of the 1970/80s. Yet food is one of the goods that as well as being necessary for physical development and the maintenance of health also fulfills a social need. This can be seen in the development of public health policy related to food in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hamlin 1998; Davis 2001) a point recently

reiterated by Sen (2015) in his criticism of modern economic austerity. Today, we see a re-emergence of that economic dogma in the global economy in the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and global regulatory bodies, such as the World Trade Organization, through the doctrine of neo-liberal economics (Hertz 2001; George 2010; Hossain et al. 2014; Colombo and Onorati 2013).

Thompson's (1993) analysis was that direct protest (in his case food riots), if not actually encouraged by those in power, were tolerated as ways of distracting attention from the real forces of change (i.e., changes in the political and economic order). Historically, Fernández-Armesto (2001, 2003) contends that food was the basis of the 'first class system.' Yet the focus of food historians has been on the gargantuan appetite and the development of surplus, which for many is seen as socially functional. The scraps from the tables of the rich were seen as feeding the poor—and grateful they should be! Yet food as an element of protest is a fact of life. This protest takes two forms which are not mutually exclusive but sit at opposite ends of a continuum of protest (Albritton 2009). The first is where there is a huge disparity in food intake between the rich and the poor, the second where food is a metaphor for other ills that are occurring in the world. The latter use of food as a metaphor and target for protest represents wider issues such as globalization. While some protestors may not understand the intricacies of global trade agreements, food stands as a useful metaphor for the ills that the agreements represent and their impact on poverty within countries.

An overlooked fact in the light of the recent and current global unrest, riots, and the fall of nation states has been the role of food and the tightening of the belt policies which led to food prices increases, food riots which then morphed into wider protest against repressive regimes. For example, in Sidi Bouzid, a small town 200 miles from Tunis Mohammed Bouazizi, 26, was a high school graduate, working as a vegetable merchant. On Dec. 17, 2010 his cart and its contents were seized by a policewoman after he failed to produce a permit. The policewoman apparently struck Bouazizi, insulted him and refused his offer to pay the fine. Bouazizi immolated himself, whether as a protest or out of despair is not clear. The country's January food shortage and the act of one man caused the pot to boil over. The town's citizens took to the streets in protest. The protests became the feedstuff of TV and social media, and before long several cities in the once quiet, stable nation were in the throes of a people's revolution. In London, the riots in 2011 started in an area of London known for its deprivation and food deserts (Caraher et al. 2013). In both instances food is not the focus of the protest but a symbol of what is wrong and representative of people's expectations to a healthy and affordable diet.

Protest around food can be channeled into actions which while useful and beneficial to those undertaking them may make little change to the overall food system (Guthman 2011). This form of distraction of the 'gaze' from structure to individual (Coveney 2006) or local action is sometimes called 'pilotitis', where, in the place of large-scale social change, another pilot project with a focus on behavior change is launched.