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(RE)IMAGINING FOOD SYSTEMS

From Charity to Solidarity

SURF Conference Panel Session 10

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Mentor: Dr. Clare Talwalker, International and Area Studies

In 1966, the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California. Through fundraising and community organizing, the Black Panthers gave birth to a series of community programs to meet the material needs of people in neighborhoods marginalized by political oppression and poverty. By the end of 1969, the most successful of these programs, *Free Breakfast for Children*, was feeding ten thousand children across the United States daily.¹ The Black Panther’s “Survival Programs” (as they were formally called) were distinct from the dominant ideological and economic practices of the time because they were based on cooperation instead of competition, interdependency instead of individualism, and empowerment instead of charity. The Black Panthers sought to challenge the structural causes of poverty through the solidarity and social organizing of their own communities.

This summer, I conducted ethnographic research in the birthplace of *Free Breakfast for Children*—the food deserts of Oakland, where many residents without physical or financial access to grocery stores and farmer’s markets cannot get enough calories or nutrients to sustain a healthy life.² Because of the dire state of food access, many nonprofit and charity organizations are located in these neighborhoods. However, unlike the Survival Programs that challenged poverty through community engagement, most of these organizations conduct independent, charity-based operations. As an examination of community empowerment, my research question asks: how can we use the charity spaces in today’s communities—a vast network of food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters—to transform the local food system through an approach based on solidarity? I define solidarity as an interdependent relationship that extends beyond the economic relations of charity; solidarity is an intimate community undertaking based on shared struggles and shared purpose.

¹ George N Katsiaficas and Kathleen Cleaver. *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Their Legacy*. Routledge. pp. 87–89. (2001)

² Serena Unger and Heather Wooten. *A Food Systems Assessment for Oakland, CA: Towards A Sustainable Food Plan*. Oakland Mayor’s Office of Sustainability. (2006)

In response to growing hunger rates in the U.S. in the past two decades, nonprofit organizations have become major actors in hunger alleviation and food security.³ At the end of the last decade, the nonprofit sector was growing faster than all other areas in the U.S. economy.^{4,5} Despite the alleged good intentions of charity work, I argue that this nonprofit trend, as civil society's primary tool in addressing poverty and the failures of the free market, needs to be analyzed critically.

As nonprofit organizations and their charity practices become part of the formal economy, we are seeing an influx of private capital and young professionals hoping to make a career out of poverty.⁶ However, the social practice of poverty alleviation has become institutionalized, subsumed into a state-capitalist rationale of IRS tax oversight and private foundation funding. Consequently, organizations emulate capitalist ideology, supporting practices that may be in conflict with the greater mission of an organization. During my fieldwork, I observed nonprofits competing ruthlessly with other nonprofits for recognition and resources. I encountered Chief Executive Officers hoping to make personal financial fortunes from poverty alleviation in food insecure communities. These trends are problematic. Spaces that were intended to free people from the failures of a free market are being colonized by the very ideology that made them necessary in the first place. We have to wonder: how can we end hunger through nonprofit charity if we do nothing to challenge the structural causes of poverty and suffering? How can the institution of nonprofits create real change if it does nothing to challenge the fundamental ideology of capitalism, if instead it engages in competition and profit accumulation at the expense of meaningful community engagement?

In the summer of 2013, I started exploring these questions by studying nonprofits in East Oakland. I wondered if today's small nonprofit organizations were comparable in practice to the Black Panther's Survival Programs—that is, if they intimately engaged with their communities in order to create spaces where economic and social realities could be re-imagined. Despite my initial prejudice against contemporary poverty alleviation, a vision for compromise emerged from my two months of fieldwork: a space where charity and ideological transformation could exist simultaneously.

I argue that an alternative approach to traditional charity should be considered—one that encourages community networks and social exchanges that are difficult to realize in the strict hierarchical spaces of charity. Through my research, I explore the feasibility of this alternative. I conducted interviews and participant observation, mediated two focus groups, and completed volunteer work at the Feed My Sheep Food Pantry, a young organization applying for nonprofit status. In this paper, I discuss the challenges of fostering solidarity among the various actors who interact in nonprofit charity spaces.

As of today, one in six people in the United States are food insecure.⁷ This amounts to 50 million people who are, “at times, unable to acquire adequate food for one or more household

3 Marilyn Gardner. “Welfare Reform Has the Potential to Increase Hunger,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 29th, 1998. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/1998/0429/042998.feaf.feaf.3.html>>

4 Kevin D. Hall, Juen Guo, Michael Dore, and Carson C. Chow. *The Progressive Increase of Food Waste in America and Its Environmental Impact*. (2009) <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2775916/pdf/pone.0007940.pdf>>

5 National Center for Charitable Statistics. *Number of Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1998–2008*. (2010)

6 Andrea Smith, “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded,” INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Cambridge: South End Press. (2007)

7 Eric Holt-Gimenez and Yi Wang. “Reform or Transformation? The Pivotal Role of Food Justice in the U.S. Food Movement,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Indiana University Press. (2011)

members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food.”⁸ During my fieldwork, I saw people react to charity food with a wide range of emotions. Most relevant to my question were displays of anger, shame, and reluctance because these antisocial behaviors hinder the building of solidarity. Jo Ferlatte, an administrator of the Berkeley Food and Housing Project, often witnesses the reality of angry charity recipients. He explained that: “The sad part is that the anger is acted out against the people that are giving to them...It’s a misguided projection of these feelings that they have.”⁹ I witnessed this kind of anger first-hand while helping incoming clients at the Feed My Sheep Food Pantry in Oakland. As a way of preventing over-use by a single household, the pantry requires official identification documents to verify addresses—one household, one client, to guarantee that all households get a fair share. On the fourth Friday of the month, a man who did not, for the second time, provide proper identification, was not allowed to collect food. Outside, the man began yelling, “I’m hungry, I need food!” and—referring to a woman in the waiting room—“You help this Mexican, but not me!” Inside, clients overhearing his outburst shook their heads. The director of the pantry, Faye Gabriel, calmly told the man to leave, not before directing him towards another organization in the neighborhood that did not ask for ID.

“Misguided projections,” as Ferlatte called them, is an accurate description. A study published in 2009 found that while 50 million people go hungry every day in the United States, *nearly half of all consumable food goes to landfills*.¹⁰ Certainly, the people operating charities have not failed at their mission to alleviate hunger—their work is vital to the survival of millions. However, there is something obscene about charity being necessary in an affluent political economy that can, but does not, feed everyone due to its rampant inequalities.

Because it is difficult for one to project concrete anger towards an abstract “political economy,” I speculate that shame and hostility are likely to be directed towards charity spaces where clients do not intimately associate with the organization. In these spaces, the charity workers may be perceived of as paternalistic “saviors” that deny recipients the opportunity or autonomy to remedy their own situation. A lack of meaningful engagement results in clients leaving the space feeling just as powerless as when they entered.

In addition to anger, sometimes humiliation discourages a person from visiting the charity space—a response which results in isolation, fragmenting community-wide food security efforts. In early July, I spoke to a 56-year-old woman who worked standing on her feet fulltime. Despite experiencing periods of chronic food insecurity since 2008, she refused to receive charity food. In a phone interview in early July, she told me: “I just can’t go there, to stand in line. You feel like, I don’t know, kind of embarrassed? You think, maybe someone I know will see me standing in the line.”¹¹ This woman’s feelings are certainly well grounded. A drive around East Oakland on a Friday afternoon reveals a series of sidewalk lines, of people standing in the hot sun in silent anticipation, for bread, strawberries, and canned goods. Everybody reading this paper has experienced the frustration and alienation of standing in line, but nothing in the voluntary consumer experience is comparable to standing in line for bread in the hot summer or bitter winter. In this type of line, one stands utterly vulnerable: in both a literal and figurative sense, nobody stands beside the waiting people in solidarity, understanding, or compassion for the struggle that brought them there. The peripheral vision of a person in line may catch the

8 Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al. *Household Food Insecurity in the United States in 2011*. USDA, Economic Research Report Number 141. (2012)

9 Jo Ferlatte, July 2013.

10 Hall, Guo, Dore, and Chow. (2009)

11 Anonymous, July 2013.

passing of traffic on the boulevard, of eyes looking in pity at those who cannot feed themselves. This sense of being “exposed” may exacerbate feelings of humiliation and shame which can then transform into misguided projections of anger.

If traditional charity is the medicine for a broken system, then these visceral responses are its side effects. The woman’s testimony—that she would rather experience food insecurity than subject herself to the embarrassment inherent in standing in line—is reason to critically examine how nonprofits operate. So I ask my question: how can we adopt a solidarity-based approach within existing charity spaces, in order to make them less psychologically problematic in the short run and more structurally transformative in the long run? In other words, how do we transition from a symptom-based medicine into a system-wide cure?

During my days volunteering at the Feed My Sheep food pantry, I was happy to see a different kind of charity space than the usual distribution center. After checking in at the office, people sit and wait in the common room with chairs arranged in a half circle. They eat cookies, drink coffee, and chat until their assigned number is called. Then a volunteer (usually from the same community) walks through the pantry with the client to give them guidance and compassion for their personal struggles. Instead of a pre-determined brown bag of food—the norm among similar programs—clients are able to pick items that best suit their needs and preferences. During one of my volunteer shifts, Gabriel explained to me that: “We take the stigma out of [charity] by making [clients] feel like people. To do this kind of work, you need to have it in here [*Gabriel points to her heart*]...It’s more than just giving out food. You have to have a listening ear. You have to be there for [them].”¹²

Gabriel explained that the Feed My Sheep model has gotten attention from the Alameda County Food Bank. She hopes that other pantries adopt this approach that gives clients the power to choose and be heard. This therapeutic communal space may reduce the alienation that arises from a political economy that overly emphasizes individualism and competition. More importantly, by engaging with people beyond the charity transaction, the Feed My Sheep Pantry also enables vital social transactions, namely, the sharing of stories, of shared struggles, and of shared purpose. These are the *very basis of solidarity*—they form the preconditions needed for fostering a community space that challenges poverty through new social relations and a different means of economic survival.

Two feminist scholars, Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, extend this line of thought in their book titled *A Postcapitalist Politics*. They write, “The cultivation of the Self offers a potential to enable participation in creative and innovative forms of collective action.”¹³ I argue that small things—like an assistant having a genuine conversation with a client—reaffirm the self-worth and human dignity that traditional charity practices degrade. This solidarity-based practice that incorporates social transactions allows people *to start a discourse* that is unheard of in silent breadlines. It gets people talking, which is the first step in producing a new ideology and “forms of collective action” that may finally start challenging the causes of hunger.

The nature and nuances of the post-capitalist space are still unclear, and I cannot yet articulate, with confidence, what an alternative inner city food system would look like. Over the summer, I aimed to explore the possible sites, or rather, investigate the soil, where the roots of a new system may be planted. Huey P. Newton, the founder and chief theoretician of the Black

12 Faye Gabriel, July 2013.

13 Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (2006)

Panther Party, thought extensively about this very question. In his political memoirs collected in *To Die for the People*, Newton writes:

Survival Programs were designed to help the people survive until their consciousness is raised...During a flood the raft is a life-saving device, but it is only a means of getting to higher ground. So, too, with survival programs. In themselves they do not change social conditions, but they are life-saving vehicles until conditions change.¹⁴

Newton understood the necessity of short-term action to challenge suffering in his community. He calls them emergency services because their response must be swift and powerful, but ultimately, only a means to an end. What would Newton say of today's nonprofit organizations, which have made charity the end goal, of programs that serve no transformative purpose, that reproduce capitalist ideology and lack revolutionary horizons? There are ways to re-imagine hunger alleviation practices by learning from organizational methods that respect dignity, as seen in the Feed My Sheep Pantry. Adopting these methods may help to counter the negative emotional side-effects that come from the disempowerment of paternalistic charity. Finally, by fostering a discourse of shared struggle and shared purpose, nonprofits may become a reflection of the community's will to organize, survive, and challenge the causes of hunger.

But most importantly, as we engage with poverty, we must be critical of how our thoughts and actions contribute to a nonprofit world that values the very competition and individualism that undermine community engagement. While it is important to find innovative and effective ways to end hunger, certain strategies are incompatible with the post-capitalist politics needed to end poverty and inequality. These embedded economic values are the biggest obstacle of contemporary charity efforts. But if we truly wish to end hunger, we must consider the alternative ideological system of cooperation and solidarity waiting on the horizon.

14 Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People*, City Light Publishers. (2009)

Appendix



Figure 1. Children gathered around a table during the Free Breakfast for Children program. (Original source unknown)



Figure 2. A Black Panther Party member and a young child at an unidentified event. (Original source unknown)



Figure 3. An intersection in East Oakland, where corner stores sell predominantly nutrition-poor food or liquor.



Figure 4. The outside of the Elmhurst Church on 83rd and Plymouth, the location of the Feed My Sheep Pantry.



Figure 5. Staff inside the waiting room of the Feed My Sheep Food Pantry after a day of work on a Wednesday afternoon.



Figure 6. The Free Breakfast for Children Program during a busy morning. (Original source unknown)

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