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WANT AMID PLENTY: FROM HUNGER TO INEQUALITY

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"Scouting has some unacceptables," the Executive Director of the Jersey Shore Council of the Boy Scouts of America told me, "and one of them is hunger." We were talking in the entrance to the Ciba Geigy company cafeteria in Toms River, New Jersey, where several hundred Boy Scouts, their parents, grandparents, siblings, and neighbors were sorting and packing the 280,000 pounds of canned goods that the scouts of this Council had netted in their 1994 Scouting For Food drive. The food would be stored on the Ciba Geigy corporate campus, where downsizing had left a number of buildings empty, and redistributed to local food pantries to be passed along to the hungry. The scouting executive was one of several hundred people I interviewed as part of a study of charitable food programs -- so called "emergency food" -- in the United States. In the years since the early 1980s, literally millions of Americans have been drawn into such projects: soup kitchens and food pantries on the front lines, and canned goods drives, food banks, and "food rescue" projects that supply them.

[Hunger Has a "Cure"](#)

What makes hunger in America unacceptable, to Boy Scouts and to the rest of us, is the extraordinary abundance produced by American agriculture. There is no shortage of food here, and everybody knows it. In fact, for much of this century, national agricultural policy has been preoccupied with surplus, and individual Americans have been preoccupied with avoiding, losing, or hiding the corporeal effects of overeating. Collectively, and for the most part individually, we have too much food, not too little. To make matters worse, we waste food in spectacular quantities. A study recently released by USDA estimates that between production and end use, more than a quarter of the food produced in the U.S. goes to waste, from fields planted but not harvested to the bread molding on top of my refrigerator or the lettuce wilting at the back of the vegetable bin. Farm waste, transport waste, processor waste, wholesaler waste, supermarket waste, institutional waste, household waste, plate waste; together in 1995 they totaled a startling 96 billion pounds, or 365 pounds-a pound a day -- for every person in the nation.

The connection between abundant production and food waste on the one hand, and hunger on the other, is not merely abstract and philosophical. Both public and private food assistance efforts in this country have been shaped by efforts to find acceptable outlets for food that would otherwise go to waste. These include the wheat surpluses stockpiled by Herbert Hoover's Federal Farm Board and belatedly given to the Red Cross for distribution to the unemployed, the martyred piglets of New Deal agricultural adjustment (which led to the establishment of federal surplus commodity distribution), and the cheese that Ronald Reagan finally donated to the needy to quell the criticism of mounting storage costs. Accumulation of large supplies of food in public hands, especially in times of economic distress and privation, has repeatedly resulted in the creation of public programs to distribute the surplus to the hungry. And in the

private sphere as well, a great deal of the food that supplies today's soup kitchens and food pantries is food that would otherwise end up as waste: corporate over-production or labeling errors donated to the food bank, farm and orchard extras gleaned by volunteers after the commercial harvest, and the vast quantities of leftovers generated by hospital, school, government and corporate cafeterias, and caterers and restaurants. All of this is food that is now rescued and recycled through the type of food recovery programs urged by Vice President Al Gore and Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman at their 1997 National Summit on Food Recovery and Gleaning. "There is simply no excuse for hunger in the most agriculturally abundant country in the world," said Glickman, who urged a 33 percent increase in food recovery by the year 2000 that would enable social service agencies to feed an additional 450,000 Americans each day.

For Americans reared as members of the "clean plate club" and socialized to associate our own uneaten food with hunger in faraway places, such programs have enormous appeal. They provide a sort of moral relief from the discomfort that ensues when we are confronted with images of hunger in our midst, or when we are reminded of the excesses of consumption that characterize our culture. They offer what appear to be old-fashioned moral absolutes in a sea of shifting values and ethical uncertainties. Many of the volunteers I interviewed for my study told me that they felt that their work at the soup kitchen or food pantry was the one unequivocally good thing in their lives, the one point in the week in which they felt sure they were on the side of the angels. Furthermore, they perceive hunger as one problem that is solvable --precisely because of the abundant production -- one problem about which they can do something concrete and meaningful. "Hunger has a cure," is the new slogan developed by the Ad Council for Second Harvest, the National Network of Foodbanks. It is not surprising, then, that hunger in America has demonstrated an enormous capacity to mobilize both public and private action. There are fourteen separate federal food assistance programs, numerous state and local programs, and thousands upon thousands of local, private charitable feeding projects which elicit millions of hours of volunteer time as well as enormous quantities of donated funds and food. In one random survey in the early 1990s, nearly four fifths of respondents indicated that they, personally, had done something to alleviate hunger in their communities in the previous year.

[The Seductions of Hunger](#)

Progressives have not been immune to the lure of hunger-as-the-problem. We have been drawn into the anti-hunger crusade for several reasons. First, hunger in America shows with great clarity the absurdity of our distribution system, of capitalism's approach to meeting basic human needs. Poor people routinely suffer for want of things that are produced in abundance in this country, things that gather dust in warehouses and inventories, but the bicycles and personal computers that people desire and could use are not perishable and hence are not rotting in front of their eyes in defiance of their bellies. The Great Depression of the 1930s, with its startling contrasts of agricultural surpluses and widespread hunger, made this terrible irony excruciatingly clear, and many people were able to perceive the underlying economic madness: "A breadline knee-deep in wheat," observed commentator James Crowther, "is surely the handiwork of foolish men." Progressives are attracted to hunger as an issue because it reveals in so powerful a way the fundamental shortcomings of unbridled reliance on markets.

Second, progressives are drawn to hunger as a cause by its emotional salience, its capacity to arouse sympathy and mobilize action. Hunger is, as George McGovern once pointed out, "the cutting edge of poverty," the form of privation that is at once the easiest to imagine, the most immediately painful, and the most far-reaching in its damaging consequences. McGovern was writing in the aftermath of the dramatic rediscovery of hunger in America that occurred in the late 1960s when a Senate subcommittee, holding hearings on anti-poverty programs in Mississippi, encountered the harsh realities of economic and political deprivation in the form of empty cupboards and malnourished children in the Mississippi Delta.

Hunger was in the news, and journalist Nick Kotz reports that a coalition of civil rights and anti-poverty activists made a conscious decision to keep it there. They perceived in hunger "the one problem to which the public might respond. They reasoned that 'hunger' made a higher moral claim than any of the other problems of poverty." The anti-hunger movement -- or "hunger lobby" that they initiated -- was successful in enlisting Congressional support for a major expansion of food assistance and the gradual creation of a food entitlement through food stamps, the closest thing to a guaranteed income that we have ever had in this country.

The broad appeal of the hunger issue and its ability to evoke action are also visible in the more recent proliferation of emergency food programs. "I think the reason ... that you get the whole spectrum of people involved in this is because it's something that is real basic for people to relate to. You know, you're busy, you skip lunch, you feel hungry. On certain levels, everyone has experienced feeling hungry at some point in the day or the year," explained Ellen Teller, an attorney with the Food Research and Action Center whose work brings her into frequent contact with both emergency food providers and anti-hunger policy advocates. The food program staff and volunteers I interviewed recognized the difference between their own, essentially voluntary and temporary hunger and hunger that is externally imposed and of unpredictable duration, but the reservoir of common human experience is there. Hunger is not exotic and hard to imagine; it stems from the failure to meet a basic and incontrovertible need that we all share.

Furthermore, the failure to eliminate hunger has enormous consequences. As the research on the link between nutrition and cognition mounts, the social costs of failing to ensure adequate nutrition for pregnant women and young children become starkly obvious. And this, too, contributes to the broad spectrum that Ellen Teller mentioned. There is something for everyone here -- a prudent investment in human capital for those concerned about the productivity of the labor force of tomorrow, a prevention of suffering for the tender hearted, a unifying concern for would-be organizers, a blatant injustice for critics of our social structure. Many anti-hunger organizations with relatively sophisticated critiques of the structural roots of hunger in America have engaged with the "feeding movement," the soup kitchens and the food pantries, in the belief that, as the Bread for the World Institute once put it, "Hunger can be the 'door' through which people enter an introduction to larger problems of poverty, powerlessness, and distorted public values." For those progressives seeking common ground with a wider range of American opinion, hunger is an attractive issue precisely because of the breadth of the political spectrum of people who are moved by it.

Third, progressives have been drawn into the hunger lobby by the utility of hunger as a means of resisting, or at least documenting the effects of, government cuts in entitlements. In the early 1980s, especially, when Ronald Reagan began his presidential assault on the nation's meager safety net of entitlement programs for the poor, progressives of all sorts pointed to the lengthening soup kitchen lines as evidence that the cuts in income supports, housing subsidies, food assistance, and a host of other public programs were cuts that neither the poor nor the society could afford. While Reagan and his team claimed that they were simply stripping away waste and fat from bloated programs, critics on the left kept track of mounting use of emergency food programs as a means of documenting the suffering caused by the erosion of the welfare state. The scenario is being replayed, this time amid an expanding economy, as soup kitchens and food pantries register the effects of "the end of welfare as we know it."

Finally, of course, progressives are drawn to the hunger issue by a sense of solidarity with those in need. Most of us became progressives in the first place because we cared about people and wanted a fairer society that would produce less suffering. Few of us can stomach an argument that says that we should leave the hungry to suffer without aid while we work for a more just future. "People don't eat in the long run," Franklin Roosevelt's relief czar Harry Hopkins is reported to have said; "they eat every day." Many of the more activist and progressive people I interviewed in the course of my emergency food study

articulated similar sentiments. A woman who worked in the early eighties helping churches and community groups in southern California set up soup kitchens and food pantries to cope with the fallout from the budget cuts in Washington recalled the dilemma as she had experienced it. "As far as I was concerned, the people in Washington had blood on their hands ... but I wasn't going to stand by and watch people suffer just to make a political point." As one long-time left activist in Santa Cruz put it when questioned about her work as a member of the local food bank board, "There are numbers of people who are very compatible with my radical philosophy who also feel that foodbanking is very important, because the reality is that there are ever increasing homeless and poor, including working poor, who need to be fed ... the need for food has increased and the resources for providing it haven't. And if there weren't foodbanks, I think a lot of people would starve."

It is easy to see why progressive people have been drawn into anti-hunger activity in large numbers, and why they have been attracted to the soup kitchens, food pantries, and food banks, despite misgivings about these private charitable projects. I, personally, have counted myself an anti-hunger activist since the nation rediscovered hunger in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, after three decades in the "hunger lobby," and nearly a decade of observing and interviewing in soup kitchens, food pantries, food banks, and food recovery projects, I would like to offer a caution about defining hunger as the central issue.

[The Case Against Hunger](#)

The very emotional response that makes hunger a good organizing issue, and the felt absurdity of such want amid massive waste, makes our society vulnerable to token solutions -- solutions that simply link together complementary symptoms without disturbing the underlying structural problems. The New Deal surplus commodity distribution program, which laid the political and administrative groundwork for most subsequent federal food programs, purchased surplus agricultural commodities from impoverished farmers in danger of going on relief and distributed them to the unemployed already receiving public help. It responded to what Walter Lippmann once called the "sensational and the intolerable paradox of want in the midst of abundance," by using a portion of the surplus to help some of the needy, without fundamentally changing the basis for access to food. As Norman Thomas put it in 1936, "We have not had a reorganization of production and a redistribution of income to end near starvation in the midst of potential plenty. If we do not have such obvious 'breadlines knee deep in wheat' as under the Hoover administration, it is because we have done more to reduce the wheat and systematize the giving of crusts than to end hunger."

For the general public, however, the surplus commodity programs were "common sense," and they made well fed people feel better. Few asked how much of the surplus was being transferred to the hungry, or how much of their hunger was thus relieved. As the New York Times predicted in an editorial welcoming the program: "It will relieve our minds of the distressing paradox." And with the moral pressure relieved, with consciences eased, the opportunity for more fundamental action evaporated. Thus the token program served to preserve the underlying status quo.

Something very similar appears to be happening with the private food rescue, gleaning, and other surplus transfer programs that have expanded and proliferated to supply emergency food programs since the early 1980s. The constant fund-raising and food drives that characterize such programs keep them in the public eye, and few people ask whether the scale of the effort is proportional to the scale of the need. With the Boy Scouts collecting in the fall and the letter carriers in the spring, with the convenient barrel at the grocery store door and the opportunity to "check out hunger" at the checkout counter, with the Taste of the Nation and the enormous array of other hunger-related fundraisers, with the Vice President and the Secretary of Agriculture assuring us that we can simultaneously feed more people and reduce waste through food recovery, with all this highly visible activity, it is easy to assume that the problem is under

control. The double whammy, the moral bargain of feeding the hungry and preventing waste, makes us feel better, thus reducing the discomfort that might motivate more fundamental action. The same emotional salience that makes hunger so popular a cause in the first place makes us quick to relieve our own discomfort by settling for token solutions.

In the contemporary situation, the danger of such tokenism is even more acute. There is more at stake than the radicalizing potential of the contradictions of waste amid want. The whole fragile commitment to public income supports and entitlements is in jeopardy. Food programs not only make the well fed feel better, they reassure us that no one will starve, even if the nation ends welfare and cuts gaping holes in the food stamp safety net. By creating an image of vast, decentralized, kind-hearted effort, an image that is fueled by every fund-raising letter or event, every canned goods drive, every hunger walk, run, bike, swim, or golf-a-thon, every concert or screening or play where a can of food reduces the price of admission, we allow the right wing to destroy the meager protections of the welfare state and undo the New Deal. Ironically, these public appeals have the effect of creating such comforting assurances even for those who do not contribute.

Promoting hunger as a public issue, of course, does not necessarily imply support for the private, voluntary approach. There are undoubtedly social democrats and other progressives who support expanded food entitlements without endorsing the emergency food phenomenon. Unfortunately, however, much of the public makes little distinction. If we raise the issue of hunger, we have no control over just how people will choose to respond. As the network of food banks, food rescue organizations, food pantries, and soup kitchens has grown, so have the chances that people confronted with evidence of hunger in their midst will turn to such programs in an effort to help.

Many private food charities make a point of asserting that they are not a substitute for public food assistance programs and entitlements. Nearly every food banker and food pantry director I interviewed made some such claim, and the national organizations that coordinate such projects, Second Harvest, Food Chain, Catholic Charities, even the Salvation Army, are on record opposing cuts in public food assistance and specifying their own role as supplementary. When it is time to raise funds, however, such organizations, from the lowliest food pantry in the church basement to national organizations with high-powered fund raising consultants or departments, tend to compare themselves with public programs in ways that reinforce the ideology of privatization. You simply cannot stress the low overhead, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of using donated time to distribute donated food without feeding into the right-wing critique of public programs in general and entitlements in particular. The same fund-raising appeals that reassure the public that no one will starve, even if public assistance is destroyed, convince many that substitution of charitable food programs for public entitlements might be a good idea.

Furthermore, as the programs themselves have invested in infrastructure-in walk-in freezers and refrigerated trucks, in institutional stoves and office equipment, in pension plans and health insurance -- their stake in the continuation of their efforts has grown as well, and with it, their need for continuous fund raising, and thus for the perpetuation of hunger as an issue. While many food bankers and food recovery staff argue that there would be a role for their organizations even if this society succeeded in eliminating hunger, that their products also go to improve the meal quality at senior citizen centers or lower the cost of day care and rehabilitation programs, they clearly realize that they need hunger as an issue in order to raise their funds. Cost effectiveness and efficient service delivery, even the prevention of waste, simply do not have the same ability to elicit contributions. Hunger is, in effect, their bread and butter. The result is a degree of hoopla, of attention getting activity, that I sometimes think of as the commodification of hunger. As Laura DeLind pointed out in her insightful article entitled "Celebrating Hunger in Michigan," the hunger industry has become extraordinarily useful to major corporate interests, but even without such public relations and other benefits to corporate food and financial donors, hunger

has become a "product" that enables its purveyors to compete successfully for funds in a sort of social issues marketplace. It does not require identification with despised groups --as does AIDS, for example. Its remedy is not far off, obscure, or difficult to imagine -- like the cure for cancer. The emotional salience discussed above, and the broad spectrum of people who have been recruited to this cause in one way or another, make hunger -- especially the soup kitchen, food pantry, food recycling version of hunger -- a prime commodity in the fund-raising industry, and a handy, inoffensive outlet for the do-gooding efforts of high school community service programs and corporate public relations offices, of synagogues and churches, of the Boy Scouts and the Letter Carriers, of the Rotarians and the Junior League: the taming of hunger.

As we institutionalize and expand the response, of course, we also institutionalize and reinforce the problem definition that underlies it. Sociologists have long argued that the definitional stage is the crucial period in the career of a social problem. Competing definitions vie for attention, and the winners shape the solutions and garner the resources. It is important, therefore, to understand the competing definitions of the situation that "hunger" crowds out. What is lost from public view, from our operant consciousness, as we work to end hunger? In short, defining the problem as hunger contributes to the obfuscation of the underlying problems of poverty and inequality. Many poor people are indeed hungry, but hunger, like homelessness and a host of other problems, is a symptom, not a cause, of poverty. And poverty, in turn, in an affluent society like our own, is fundamentally a product of inequality.

Defining the problem as hunger ignores a whole host of other needs. Poor people need food, but they also need housing, transportation, clothing, medical care, meaningful work, opportunities for civic and political participation, and recreation. By focusing on hunger, we imply that the food portion of this complex web of human needs can be met independently of the rest, can be exempted or protected from the overall household budget deficit. As anyone who has ever tried to get by on a tight budget can tell you, however, life is not so compartmentalized. Poor people are generally engaged in a daily struggle to stretch inadequate resources over a range of competing demands. The "heat-or-eat" dilemma that arises in the winter months, or the situation reported by many elderly citizens of a constant necessity to choose between food and medications are common manifestations of this reality.

In this situation, if we make food assistance easier to obtain than other forms of aid-help with the rent, for example, or the heating bill-then people will devise a variety of strategies to use food assistance to meet other needs. It is not really difficult to convert food stamps to cash: pick up a few items at the store for a neighbor, pay with your stamps, collect from her in cash. Some landlords will accept them, at a discounted rate of course, then convert them through a friend or relative who owns a grocery store. Drug dealers will also accept them, again at lower than face value, and you can resell the drugs for cash. The list goes on and on. Converting soup kitchen meals is almost impossible, but there are items in many pantry bags that can be resold. In either case, eating at the soup kitchen or collecting a bag from the food pantry frees up cash for other needs, not only the rent, but also a birthday present for a child or a new pair of shoes. By offering help with food, but refusing help with other urgent needs, we are setting up a situation in which poor people are almost required to take steps to convert food assistance to cash.

Conservative critics of entitlements will then seize on these behaviors to argue that poor people are "not really hungry." If they were really hungry, the argument goes, they would not resell items from the pantry bag or convert their food stamps. Such behavioral evidence fits into a whole ideologically driven perception that programs for poor people are bloated, too generous, and full of fraud and abuse; it allows conservatives to cut programs while asserting that they are preserving a safety net for the "truly needy." Progressives meanwhile are forced into a defensive position in which we argue that people are indeed "really hungry," thereby giving tacit assent to the idea that the elimination of hunger is the appropriate goal. In a society as wealthy as ours, however, aiming simply to eliminate hunger is aiming too low. We

not only want a society in which no one suffers acute hunger or fails to take full advantage of educational and work opportunities due to inadequate nutrition. We want a society in which no one is excluded, by virtue of poverty, from full participation, in which no one is too poor to provide a decent life for their children, no one is too poor to pursue happiness. By defining the problem as "hunger," we set too low a standard for ourselves.

Where To?

The question of where we should direct our organizational efforts is inextricably tied up with the underlying issue of inequality. Above some absolute level of food and shelter, need is a thoroughly relative phenomenon. In an affluent society, the quality of life available at a given level of income has everything to do with how far from the mainstream that level is, with the extent to which any given income can provide a life that looks and feels "normal" to its occupants. In many warm parts of the world, children routinely go barefoot, and no mother would feel driven to convert food resources into cash to buy a pair of shoes, or to demean herself by seeking a charity handout to provide them. In the United States, where children are bombarded with hours of television advertising daily, and where apparel manufacturers trade on "coolness," a mother may well make the rounds of local food pantries, swallowing her pride and subsisting on handouts, to buy not just a pair of shoes, but a particular name brand that her child has been convinced is essential for social acceptance at the junior high school.

In this context, the issue is not whether people have enough to survive, but how far they are from the median and the mainstream, and that is a matter of how unequal our society has become. By every measure, inequality has increased in the United States, dramatically, since the early 1970s, with a small group at the top garnering an ever increasing share of net marketable worth, and the bottom doing less and less well. And it is this growing inequality which explains the crying need for soup kitchens and food banks today, even at a relatively high level of employment that reflects the current peak in the business cycle. Unfortunately, however, a concept like hunger is far easier to understand, despite its ambiguities of definition, than an abstraction like inequality. Furthermore, Americans have not generally been trained to understand the language of inequality nor the tools with which it is measured. Just what is net marketable worth, and do I have any? As the statistics roll off the press, eyes glaze over, and the kindhearted turn to doing something concrete, to addressing a problem they know they can do something about: hunger. Once they begin, and get caught up in the engrossing practical challenges of transferring food to the hungry and the substantial emotional gratifications of doing so, they lose sight of the larger issue of inequality. The gratifications inherent in "feeding the hungry" give people a stake in maintaining the definition of the problem as hunger; the problem definition comes to be driven by the available and visible response in a sort of double helix.

Meanwhile, with anti-hunger activists diverted by the demands of ever larger emergency food systems, the ascendant conservatives are freer than ever to dismantle the fragile income protections that remain and to adjust the tax system to concentrate ever greater resources at the top. The people who want more inequality are getting it, and well-meaning people are responding to the resulting deprivation by handing out more and more pantry bags, and dishing up more and more soup. It is time to find ways to shift the discourse from undernutrition to unfairness, from hunger to inequality.

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By JANET POPPENDIECK

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