

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Welfare for Profits' Sake

Review by Francisco Arqueros
University of Almería, Spain

Maggie, D. 2019. *Feeding the Crisis: Care and Abandonment in America's Food Safety Net*. University of California Press.

The return to nearly full employment rates after the Great Recession (2008-2009) has not palliated the need for mass food assistance in the United States. In 2012, over 40 million Americans received food assistance from Emergency Food Providers (EFPs) such as faith-based institutions, senior centers, grassroots community organizations and college campuses; 47 million received (public) Food Stamps. After the “recovery” of the economy those on food stamps were still numbered at over 42 million in 2017 and over 40 million received food from EFPs. Hunger is an everyday reality in the USA.

Why has there been such a high number of people receiving food assistance in an expanding economy close to full employment? According to *Feeding the Crisis*, the role of the growing food safety net is “to create the optimal conditions for companies and individuals to act in ways that promote economic growth” (15). Large scale changes in the economy since the 1980s (not described in the book) have brought about the expansion of a low-wage labor force (18) and policies designed to push people into the labor market (16). In that context, public assistance has been reconfigured as “work support” to subsidize low-wage workers (4). Therefore, increasing state support for food assistance programs helps to keep wages low as a basis for economic growth (32, 14). On the other hand, the unemployed have been cut off from public assistance programs and made dependent on charity thanks to the contracting out of social assistance to non-for-profit organizations (11). This second development implies a retreat from previously achieved entitlements and basic rights. The twenty-first century in the US is characterized by the emergence of a public-private partnership to govern hunger and food insecurity in new ways (4, 8), but this partnership is not concerned with dealing with the structural causes of precarious employment.

Feeding the Crisis is grounded in fieldwork carried out during two years in a non-for-profit organization, North Brooklyn Pantry (New York City), where the author worked delivering pantry bags and helped service users with (public assistance) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications. In the introductory chapter, the author characterizes social assistance (welfare for the poor) in the US as a two-tiered system: SNAP for the working poor and Emergency Food Programs for the officially unemployed. Both tiers are part of the state apparatus though only the latter is run by private, voluntary, non-for-profit organizations (4). Here is also where the line is drawn between the deserving and undeserving poor, with (officially recognized) work as the marker of deservingness.

Another point is that Welfare Programs in the US rather than being dismantled are expanding. However, their character has changed (3). We are shown in Chapter 2 that the Food Stamps Program was introduced and developed in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the War on Poverty initiative. It was a universal entitlement as long as citizens met the income requirements and represented an attempt to extend economic citizenship rights (24). The first challenge, under Reagan's administration, was framed as a war against the "culture of dependency," with work as the path to independence and voluntarism as the solution to poverty, which was the forerunner of workfare. It was also at that time, the 1980s, when Emergency Food Providers started to proliferate. However, "work requirements first" (workfare) did not take off until 1996 under Clinton's administration.

Chapter 3 introduces the first informants from the food pantry, prototypes of the deserving and undeserving poor. For example, Nydia is a worker on maternity leave. When she applies for food stamps, she argues with conviction to the welfare officer, "I work. I pay taxes. I think I'm entitled to this." Adwa, on the other hand, is unemployed and is asked to do a workfare assignment, part of the Work Experience Program, WEP, cleaning public parks. She ends up missing days, losing her food stamps and having to work informally to compensate. New York has one of the toughest work requirements in the US (64). Although initially intended for cash assistance, these have been extended to food-stamp-only cases.

In Chapter 4, the focus turns to the under-researched topic of family support and men on welfare. Since well-paid work is not an option anymore for many as in the Fordist period, food assistance helps men on precarious employment to maintain family ties.

Chapter 5 deals with volunteers who are also service users in the food pantry. We meet Fabiola, Diego, Angela, and Ana. Unlike the "truly" well-off volunteers of charity organizations, these volunteers-clients also receive help from the pantry. They work for food. This chapter also deals with the rise of EFPs. They

receive funds from state institutions and constitute “a third rail of the contemporary welfare state” and a “direct response to cutbacks to federal entitlements” (100-101) in the name of “efficiency” (good, altruistic, wageless work). In 2012, EFPs mobilized 2 million volunteers in the US. However, as one of the informants illustrate, volunteers, particularly those who are also pantry clients, cannot present to welfare officials their free labor as a job to get exempted from work requirements in exchange for assistance (112).

Chapter 6 deals with the role of food stamps in promoting healthy eating among poor (deserving) workers. The question is a political economy one: unhealthy eating increases public health spending due to high rates of obesity and diabetes which also deteriorate the working capacity and efficiency of the working poor. For the underserving unemployed, on charity, there is no such consideration: New York local authorities do not care about them as they are of no use.

The book's main conclusions (Chapter 7) are that the huge growth of the food safety net has had very little impact on food security (139) and that addressing the interlocking issues of food insecurity, obesity, and diet-related disease among the poor would require a restoration of economic rights; that is, food and health as basic human rights (142), not in the form of charity (153), and expanding what counts as work (161).

This book is timely and important, particularly since the recent recession precipitated by the coronavirus SARS-CoV2 is consolidating the extension of inequality, poverty and destitution initiated in 2008-9 (the reversal of the tendency in the Fordist period). A question is how welfare states (on both sides of the Atlantic) will cope with the situation and how the poor will react. In that regard, the tendency appears to be towards increasing workfare and loss of rights and entitlements, particularly for immigrants. The author makes the point that this is particularly the case in the “Trump Era.” Therefore, she makes an appeal to Democrats “to admit that welfare reform was a mistake” (169) and to return to a right based approach to hunger and poverty. However, as the author admits workfare was introduced by Clinton’s administration and never challenged under Obama’s administration. Why would Democrats revert to a right based approach and challenge a status quo that they have built?

This paradox points at one of the gaps in the book. We see how informants struggle individually to survive by working informally or in low paid jobs, applying for food stamps and going to the food pantry. A number of them, the unemployed, refuse work requirements (workfare) because they are paid below minimum wage and lose their stamps. Informal jobs or working as volunteers for the pantry are their alternatives. There is no mentioning of any form of organized resistance to workfare whether through work centers, social movements or trade unions. We do not know anything about the grassroots

pressure to which some sections of the Democratic Party, in the absence of a Labor Party, could be receptive.

The book is also difficult to classify as an ethnography since it prioritizes the political economy of the US food security network, based on a review of literature, over ethnographic data, which seems to be brief and lacking depth. It does not engage either with anthropological debates on poverty or social exclusion. Its main strength lies in its clarity in characterizing America's food safety net for a broad audience, making it an excellent text for those working in NGOs and policy making in the fields of social assistance, poverty and social exclusion.

Francisco Arqueros holds a PhD from Maynooth University (Ireland). At present he is a research associate in the Laboratory of Social and Cultural Anthropology (LASC) at the University of Almería, Spain. His two lines of research are industrial agriculture and the moral economy of social assistance (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7084-9147>).



© 2020 Francisco Arqueros