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## Graham Riches: Food Bank Nations: Poverty, Corporate Charity, and the Right to Food

London and New York, Routledge Earthscan, 2018, 204 pp.

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In the face of persistent food insecurity, non-governmental food banks have arisen in many countries, including high-income countries, to distribute unsellable food to needy people. Many observers praise these initiatives, applauding private citizens for stepping in to help meet needs where governments have not fulfilled their legal and moral obligation to ensure that those needs are met.

Riches, however, takes a different view. He sees food banks as raising an issue of moral hazard. By helping needy people when governments have failed to do so, they make it easier for governments to ignore their obligations. A blatant example was provided in Nottingham, UK, where the local food bank closed to protest “the city council justifying welfare cuts on the grounds that desperate people can turn to food banks instead” (p. 118). *Food Bank Nations* joins other critical studies that argue that food banks and other forms of charity should not be allowed to normalize economic systems that create widespread and persistent food security in rich countries as well as poor countries. Riches is also critical of food banks because he sees them as devices used by the food industry for its own benefit. Many food donors get tax advantages by giving their unsellable products to food banks. They also get public relations benefits when they present themselves as being concerned about the well-being of needy people, and as putting to good use products that would otherwise be wasted.

Riches makes an important fresh critique when he speaks of “transnational corporate food banking.” While many people think of food banks as local operations that get their food from generous local food producers and sellers, Chapter 4 shows “the global corporate capture of food banking, a case of Big Food becoming an integral if not the dominant player in privatized food charity” (p. 51). It has a dark side: “Whilst food drives and fundraising are built around themes of ‘ending’ or ‘alleviating’ hunger, the strategies of corporate food banking are a long way removed from the goals of food and

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social justice and from advocating for a living wage let alone adequate welfare benefits” (p. 54).

Riches speaks about the UN’s Social Development Goal to eradicate world hunger by 2030 as if it was serious. I personally do not think it is. There has never been a serious plan for ending hunger. “Serious” implies reasonable hope that implementation of the plan would lead to achievement of the goal. I think global campaigns to end hunger have consistently failed because governments simply do not care enough about it (Kent 2016). Riches recognizes the widespread indifference of national governments to the food insecurity of their people, whether or not there are food banks. That deserves more attention. Caring works best locally. Given the disappointing history of global efforts to end hunger, thoughtful community-based efforts are worth a try.

Riches says the hunger problem is not about a need for more charity, but rather, “It is about the universal right of vulnerable individuals and families to be able to feed themselves with choice and human dignity” (p. 2). Riches has been a strong advocate for establishing an effective right to food everywhere, to ensure food security for all. However, the implementation of the lofty principles of the right to food has been weak. National governments have not met their obligations relating to right to food laws and principles. Food insecurity persists, in high-income and well as low-income countries, with or without food banks. I too have been a strong supporter of human rights, but I have been dismayed by the weak implementation of many rights in many contexts. Over time, I have come to see that powerful people generally do not care much about the well-being of powerless people. They are not going to care just because they have obligations under the law. They will accept such obligations and take them seriously if and when they care.

Riches recognizes the importance of caring in Chapter 6, where he praises another scholar’s “critical study of the notion of success in emergency food provision from the perspective of an ethic of caring” (p. 88). Chapter 8, on “Collective Security and the Right to Food,” recognizes the importance of solidarity, which is based on caring. Hopefully, these lines of thought will be pulled together in future studies of the fundamental role of caring in human relations. The closing chapter of the book addresses the issue of “Gathering Political Will”. Riches focuses on building up support for better implementation of the right to food. Caring about the food security of needy people should be viewed as an important intervening variable, one that should be examined systematically. Far more harm in the world results from indifference than from any sort of direct violence.

Riches’ descriptions of food banking may be accurate. The question then is, what should be done about food banks? Closing them is not likely to lead governments to do what they should be doing. Many governments are callous toward their poor. Hungry people have weak political voices compared to people who have money and political power. Food banks might not be an effective means for ending hunger, but they do a lot of good while we wait for that goal to be achieved by other means. There are reasons for concern, as shown by Riches, but it is not clear that food banks have been a major impediment to the strengthening of the right to food or any other approach to dealing with the hunger problem. I feel that on balance the benefits delivered by food banks are stronger than the harms. Food banks that rely mainly on local food and local communities are likely to do a lot of good, as we have seen many places. There might be creative ways in which local governments could work together with local food banks, making both stronger.

Clearly, there are mixed motivations for Big Food's involvement with food banks. If Big Food has too much influence on local food banks, there are ways to push back against that, but leave the food banks in place, with new guidelines. The weaknesses of food banks do not mean the right to food approach is better. All approaches should be critically examined. Each should be examined on its merits. Several approaches could be used at the same time, with well-considered coordination among them. There is a need for a serious strategic planning to end hunger using all available tools as wisely as possible.

Graham Riches' book provides sharp critical analysis of current food banks. Further study is needed to decide what should be done about them. We need a comparable critical analysis of the right to food approach, together with suggestions on how to make it better. Food banks are useful while we wait for rights systems to be strengthened. Both could be improved, and both could be deployed, along with other approaches, wherever people and governments care enough about the food security problem.

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## Reference

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