Big society or broken society?

Food banks in the UK

Pat Caplan

Pat Caplan is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths. She has worked on food (and many other issues) in Tanzania, India and the UK. Her email is p.caplan@gold.ac.uk.

In the 1990s there was a revived interest in research on food consumption in the UK by social scientists.[1] While it was clear that food was intimately linked to class as well as gender and ethnicity, at that time, food insecurity did not appear to be a major problem in the UK, even though some people, for a variety of reasons, ate what might be termed an unhealthy diet (see Davison et al. 1991; Frankel et al. 1991). It was also apparent that some families were struggling to feed themselves adequately, with accounts of parents, especially mothers, eating little so that children could be adequately fed (e.g. Middleton et al. 1994; Walker et al. 1995; Dobson et al. 1994; Graham 1987). Food was the most elastic part of the budget, and this has remained the case, as will be seen.

PAT CAPLAN

Fig. 1. *PATCH director (right) holds a meeting with volunteers at one of its branches.*

Food poverty in the UK

As the recent large-scale academic research programme 'Poverty and Social Exclusion' (www.poverty.ac.uk) has shown, poverty in the UK increased between 1983 and 2012. There are now some 13 million people (21 per cent of the population) living in poverty,[2] a significant proportion of whom are in what is sometimes termed 'deep poverty'.[3] Many such people do not have the means to obtain sufficient food (i.e. enough calories), let alone food of good quality.

The amount of published material on UK poverty *per se* is large and some of it includes information about the growing phenomenon of food poverty in the UK,[4] which in some cases is extreme: in Wales last year, for example, there were reports of people being treated in hospital for malnutrition.[5]

There is also a plethora of reports on food poverty by a variety of organizations, including official bodies like the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (see DEFRA 2013) as well as a large number of voluntary organizations,[6] including food banks. However, the government has dismissed many of them on the grounds that the quantitative data used are 'insufficiently robust' or that the reports have not been properly peer-reviewed,[7] while they have also been criticized by government ministers for being 'too political'.[8]

At the end of 2014, an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in the UK published its report entitled *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.*[9] While it was critical of the workings of the benefits system and other aspects of the welfare state which are supposed to provide a safety net but often fail to do so, it also proposed that food banks should be ramped up to become 'food banks plus' by providing budgetary and debt advice, and should be tied in with various concerned government ministries. This, it was suggested, would solve the problems of food poverty. In short, voluntarism in the form of food banks should be further institutionalized. The perfect example of the government's 'Big Society'.

Towards an anthropology of food poverty

Seriously concerned by the realization that the kind of food insecurity problems I had previously studied in Tanzania and India are now much closer to home, I have been exploring food banks and other forms of food aid in the UK. I am interested not only in the lives of the clients who use them, but also the volunteers who get involved and those who donate, as well as those who castigate their existence. Who needs food aid and why? Who provides it and how? Who benefits and why from corporate food charity? What kind of solution does food aid offer to an apparently growing problem? Finally, what does this tell us about the society in which we live?

Apart from research carried out by social geographers at Durham University on food poverty as a public health issue (Garthwaite et al. 2015) and an ethnography of a food bank, also by social geographers at the University of Exeter (Williams et al. 2015), it seemed to me that much of the existing research, significant as it was, lacked the kind of ethnographic context which anthropologists demand: a locality and its social environment, as well as the voices of those involved, including not only clients of food banks, but also organizers, volunteers, advocates and activists, critics, and, of course, the state and its policies at both local and national levels.[10]

Accordingly, I chose two areas in the UK that I know well as locations for my research. The first is the north London borough of Barnet where I have lived since 1967, while the second is a more rural area in west Wales which I have known for almost as long and where I had previously carried out research on food and health (and later on the social effects of farm animal diseases). My current fieldwork in both areas has consisted of going to food banks (even serving as a volunteer) and interviewing volunteers, trustees and clients, helping out at a school holiday lunch club, and visiting and observing at community cafés (one in each area).[11] I have also tried to find out more about the terrain of food poverty and food aid more generally, visiting some centres outside of these areas, as well as a few headquarters of national organizations. In addition, it has been useful to do some 'netography' – web surfing and reading what newspapers and social media sites have to say about food poverty in the UK.

With 331,500 inhabitants, Barnet is the second largest London borough by population and covers an area of 33 sq. mi. The council website notes: 'Generally, Barnet is affluent, but there are some significant areas of deprivation. We have six areas within the top 10 per cent most deprived in the country' (https://jobs.barnet.gov.uk/barnet/abouttheborough). These include areas of former social housing, most of which are now being 'regenerated', leading to a significant loss of affordable housing for those on low incomes.

Pembrokeshire (Sir Benfro) in southwest Wales is one of the most beautiful parts of the UK, with a national park and a flourishing tourist industry. However, it suffers from a lack of transport and employment. Much of the work available is seasonal, with some of the lowest wages in the UK. It has only a third of the population of Barnet (122,400

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1. For example, the ESRC funded a large research programme called 'The Nation's Diet' (see Murcott 1998) in which I directed two projects (see Caplan 1997).
2. See www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/19/poverty-hits-twice-as-many-british-households.
3. See Lister (2004) for a searching examination of the many aspects of poverty in the UK.
4. www.poverty.ac.uk/tags/food-poverty; Dowler (2002, 2009); Dowler & O'Connor (2012); Dowler et al. (2014); Lambie-Mumford (2014); Fabian Society (2015).
5. See *Walesonline* 20/04/14. http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/hundreds-diagnosed-malnutrition-wales-amid-7007470. A similar report was carried in the *South Wales Evening Post,* 22/04/14.
6. These include Barnardo's, Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam, the Food Ethics Council, the Rowntree Trust, the Fabian Commission, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Trussell Trust.
7. http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/19/cuts-benefit-changes-driving-up-use-food-banks-study; http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/food-poverty-in-uk-has-reached-level-of-public-health-emergency-warn-experts-8981051.html.
8. http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/foodbank-charity-threatened-closure-government-3682914.
9. The Fabian Society (2015) report offers a somewhat differing analysis of the food poverty situation in the UK.

by the 2011 census), and this is primarily rural, with only a handful of small towns in the centre and south of the county.[12] It is in these small towns that the most deprivation occurs,[13] although in the food research our team had carried out in the more rural areas of north Pembrokeshire in the 1990s, we had already become aware of a great deal of 'hidden poverty'.

Forms of food aid in the UK

There are a number of forms of food aid in the UK, of which perhaps the best known are food banks. But there are also organizations like FareShare (http://www.fareshare.org.uk/) and FoodCycle (www.foodcycle.org.uk) which collect so-called surplus food from wholesalers and redistribute it to other organizations like hostels for the homeless or women's refuges. In addition, there are organizations aimed at schoolchildren which provide breakfast and school holiday lunch clubs; community cafes which serve food at affordable prices and sometimes also train young people as chefs; social supermarkets; pensioners' luncheon clubs; soup kitchens and soup runs, and so on. The majority of people involved in setting up such projects and in running them are volunteers. Although I visited a variety of such organizations (both national and London-wide), in this article I will focus on food banks.

How do food banks work?

Most people in the UK now know (more or less) what food banks are, although their views of them range from 'a free lunch' for 'scroungers' to a 'lifeline' for the desperate.[14] A number of the big supermarket chains have adopted food banks as 'partners' and this may appear on their websites as part of their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) remit. They allow collection bins in their stores and regularly give permission for collections to be held outside their stores where volunteers solicit donations from shoppers. In the run-up to the 2015 UK national election, the existence and exponential growth of food banks were used in a variety of ways by different political parties – from being considered a stain on the conscience of the nation to an example of the Big Society in action[15] – and food poverty appeared in the manifestos of several of the main parties, although not that of the Conservatives.[16]

Perhaps half of the food banks in the UK – by now probably approaching 1,000 – are organized by the Trussell Trust (TT), a Christian charity (www.trusselltrust.org)[17] which works as a franchise, with local branches paying a fee to join and receive training, a web presence and quality assurance checks. Two of the food banks in which I have served as a volunteer – one in Barnet and one in west Wales – are affiliated to TT. But there are also many 'independent' food banks which are more difficult to count, although again many are associated with churches of different denominations. Guesstimates suggest that there are at least as many independent food banks as there are those affiliated to TT. In Barnet, for example, there are two TT food banks and two independent ones. All of these are organized by groups of churches, although some synagogues and schools also give donations. Similarly in Pembrokeshire, there are three TT food banks and three independent ones under the umbrella of PATCH (Pembrokeshire Action to Combat Hardship), all based in churches. Elsewhere in the country, there are Muslim food banks (see www.muslimfoodprogramme.org) one of which I have visited in a neighbouring borough to Barnet (www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk) while in some areas of the country there are food banks organized by secular groups such as trade unions, but I did not find any such in my fieldwork areas.

10. There is, however, an extensive body of academic work on food banks or 'pantries' in the USA, Canada, and Australia, where they have been part of the scene for some time (Riches & Silvaasti [1997] 2014; Poppendieck 1998).

11. All work was carried out with informed consent and complied with the anthropologists' professional code of ethics (http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml).

12. Milford Haven (Aberdaugleddau) and Pembroke Dock (Doc Penfro) in the English-speaking south of the county, and the county capital Haverfordwest (Hwlffordd), in the centre.

13. http://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/content.asp?nav=101,649,1928,652; http://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/county/9256441.Extent_of_Pembrokeshire_poverty_revealed_in_all_Wales_survey/.

14. Loopstra & Tarasuk (2015) define food banks as 'agencies that enact the transfer of grocery-type foods free of charge to individuals in need'.

15. See Nelson (2015). For a contrasting view see Blythman (2015).

16. Although the Conservative manifesto made frequent mention of poverty, it did not allude to food banks (see https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto). Labour's manifesto (www.labour.org.uk/manifesto) notes on p. 16 that 900,000 people, many of them in work, had used food banks in the past year.

17. The food bank which I visited in Brent was originally set up by Muslims but has now expanded to include members of all religions (www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk).

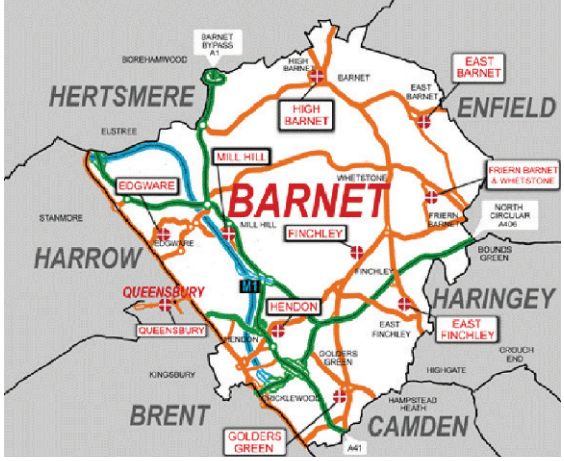
18. These can be found on http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats and are extremely useful, as they enable a breakdown not only by area, but also years. However, work on food banks in Canada suggests that this kind of information may considerably underestimate rates of food poverty (see Loopstra & Tarasuk 2015).

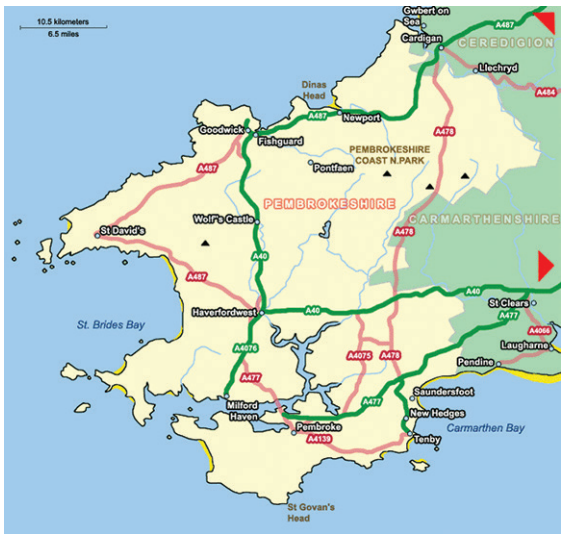
19. This was evidenced by interviews and conversations with both clients and food bank organizers.

20. Middleton et al. (1994) explored this pressure on parents in the 1990s but from my own research it appears to be even greater today.

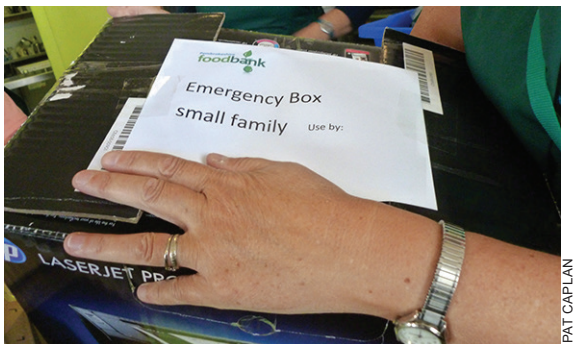
21. See http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/demand-for-food-banks-has-nothing-to-do-with-benefits-squeeze-says-work-minister-lord-freud-8684005.html and http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/12/15/iain-duncan-smith-food-bank-tiny-_n_6325520.html.

22. This argument has been examined (and demolished) by a group of public health academics at Oxford. See Loopstra et al. (2015).





PAT CAPLAN



PAT CAPLAN

Fig. 2. *Map of Barnet, London.*
Fig. 3. *Map of Pembrokeshire, Wales.*
Fig. 4. *TT poster re food banks.*
Fig. 5. *A food parcel packed and ready for collection at a TT food bank in Wales. This is an 'emergency' parcel which may be given out without a voucher.*

23. The notion that the welfare state inevitably creates a 'dependency culture' has been around for a long time and was critiqued in Dean & Taylor-Gooby's (1992) study.

24. See for instance http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11279839/Poor-going-hungry-because-they-cant-cook-says-Tory-peer.html.

25. Indeed, there are not infrequent reports in the media of people appearing in court for stealing food from shops or even for scavenging for waste food from the back yards of supermarkets. www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jul/29/benefits-sanctions-matthew-oakley-report-hunger; http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2731700/Food-bank-s-aren-t-fresh-Middle-class-mother-admits-stealing-food-children-amid-fears-youngsters-going-hungry-without-school-meals-summer-holidays.html.

26. http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/28/food-banks-job-benefits-advisers-iain-duncan-smith.

27. In addition to the donors who drop food into collection bins in supermarkets, there are other categories of 'givers', such as wholesale companies and supermarkets. These will be discussed elsewhere.

28. I encountered Anglicans, Catholics, Nonconformists and Pentecostals.

29. Through its organization Christians Against Poverty (https://capuk.org/) the Anglican Church has also sought to work on issues of debt.

30. http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/27-bishops-slam-david-camerons-3164033; http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2609202/Stop-preaching-politics-Tories-tell-bishops-Fury-church-leaders-use-Easter-speeches-attack-governments-sinful-cuts.html.

31.Kravva (2014) reports that this concept is currently used in Greece for food assistance to people in need.

32. The UK ratified the right to food as part of the 1976 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This covenant also includes the right to an adequate standard of living.

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty 2014. *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*. https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/ food-poverty-feeding-britain-final.pdf.

Blythman, J. 2015. This pursuit of the hungry shows the monstrous side of Britain. *The Guardian*, 14 May. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/14/pursuit-barkers-modern-britain-tesco-compassion-judge.

TT food banks, and some of the independent ones, operate through a system of vouchers which clients receive from doctors, social workers, citizens' advice bureaux and other people with some degree of authority and/or expertise who are in a position to evaluate eligibility. Vouchers usually contain basic information about the client, including the reason for the request for a food parcel, and have to be signed by the voucher holder. The food banks hold copies of signatures and check the vouchers against them. This system thus seeks to give some degree of validity to the claim of need. But the issuing of a voucher for three days' worth of food is limited to three occasions in a six-month period, since TT emphasizes that its food banks are only there for emergency aid.

Some independent food banks on the other hand, do not use a voucher system. The organizer of one such food bank told me: 'if they come here [to the food bank] and ask for food, I imagine that they must need it'. She noted that the food bank with which she was involved had decided to remain independent of the TT franchise, and that one of the reasons for this was that they did not want to use vouchers because 'it is already humiliating enough for the clients'.

Although TT uses a shopping list of acceptable items, all of which must be long-life (i.e. mostly tinned and packaged), donors do not always adhere to it and even if they do, there is no guarantee that the random nature of the donation system ensures sufficient supplies of a particular category of food. Furthermore, supplies fluctuate according to the time of year, with generous donations being given at harvest and Christmas time but less in other periods. So periodically food banks have to purchase additional food and often collect cash for this purpose.

All the food banks I visited operated strict rules about sorting and storing food to ensure that only produce that is within date is issued. TT food banks also collect a range of detailed statistics,[18] including the names of donors, information about clients, and the weight of food donated – this last, because Tesco, the main partner, gives a 30 per cent cash top-up for food donations received. In short, running a food bank is like running a small business and requires a great deal of volunteer time and organization, well beyond the hours that the food bank is open for clients.

Recipients: Clients

Many clients of food banks consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be stigmatized.[19] They see themselves as failures, excluded from normal society, and often claim to be ashamed that they cannot provide for their families. In this way they have internalized the stigma, because worth and self-worth are measured in terms of the ability to stand on one's own two feet, be independent of others, and exercise choice. The notion of shame has been heightened in recent years with the increasing pressures of a consumer-led society where children want what they see advertised and what their peers at school own or wear, and many parents feel that it is their job to provide these things.[20]

Shame is reinforced at many of the job centres, where benefit claimants have to prove their entitlement, and some of those interviewed talked about feeling 'humiliated' there. It is also reinforced by some of the media which refer to clients as 'scroungers', as well as by some politicians[21] who have argued that if food banks are increasing in number, then of course more clients will appear, since demand follows supply.[22]

Notions of shame were particularly manifested in west Wales, perhaps not surprisingly given the small-scale nature of its communities. I was told by one food bank organizer, for example, that clients would always try to avoid being seen coming into a food bank, and that even when people had been referred, they did not always come to collect their

PAT CAPLAN


PAT CAPLAN

PAT CAPLAN

PAT CAPLAN

Fig. 6. *A TT 'shopping list' with a basket of examples seen in a church in Wales.*
Fig. 7. *Converted church garage used as a TT food bank store in north London.*
Fig. 8. *Reception desk at the PATCH headquarters in Milford Haven.*
Fig. 9. *TT volunteers in Wales joke about the muscles needed to lift the heavy food boxes.*

Caplan, P. (ed.) 1997. *Food, health and identity: Approaches from the social sciences*. London: Routledge.
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Kravva, V. 2014. Politicizing hospitality: The emergency food landscape in Thessaloniki. *Hospitality and Society* 4(3): 249-274.

food parcels. In a few cases, he went on to explain, the food bank had been phoned by referral agencies concerned about the dire food poverty of a client and the food bank organizers had actually taken food parcels to the homes of such people, only to have it refused on the grounds that they were 'managing perfectly well, thank you'. A food bank organizer in a different town told me that she was often approached by the media who wanted 'stories'. Most of her clients would not talk to the media because of feelings of shame, but one did agree to do so, only to find after the broadcast that she was ostracized by her neighbours for 'letting down the town'. Clearly, in small-scale communities such as those in west Wales, notions of shame operate more powerfully than in towns and cities, where volunteers and clients are less likely to know one another and where there is a greater degree of anonymity.

But a few clients, particularly in Barnet, exercised resistance to such notions. While all clients are asked on arrival at the food bank if there are any foods they do not eat, on the whole they are expected to accept what they are given. Clients who return items saying 'I want something better. Give me Waitrose, not Tesco value' are thought to be behaving inappropriately. Yet this demand to have a modicum of choice in what they take away may be understood as a claim to be treated, at least to some degree, like everyone else, who does have a 'choice' in what they eat. But this response was relatively rare. More common reactions from clients were repeated thanks, even hugs and tears.

The notion that the food given should be accepted gratefully may of course be explained in Maussian terms (Mauss 1925-1967). The parcel from the food bank is a gift from the donors and from the food bank volunteers, both of whom are strangers to the recipients. It is a gift for which reciprocation is not expected, either immediately or in delayed form. In fact, it may be regarded as an example of what Mauss calls the 'pure' gift. As Laidlaw (2000) points out, this kind of gift, unlike other forms, does not create social relations between giver and receiver who thus, inevitably, have totally different statuses. It is scarcely surprising, then, to find that some clients try hard to change this situation as soon as they can and move from being stigmatized recipients to becoming givers themselves – either as a donor of food once they can afford it or by serving as a volunteer. It is as though they think of themselves as indebted until they are able to do this.

There is no mystery as to why people become clients of food banks and the reasons are clearly shown in the TT statistics mentioned earlier. Until recently the main users of food banks were people who were employed but on low wages or zero-hour contracts. More recently, however, a major reason for using a food bank has been cuts to benefits, which include: benefit caps, the 'bedroom' tax, reassignment to a different and lower category of claimant, or worst of all, being 'sanctioned' which means having benefits stopped altogether – one of the tactics currently being used to discourage the so-called 'dependency culture'[23] and 'make work pay'.

Some of the national media have also contributed to a public discourse which suggests that if people end up at food banks, it is largely their own fault (Wells & Caraher 2014). Aside from comments about inappropriate spending on alcohol or cigarettes, clients are accused of not knowing how to budget or cook.[24] However, one finding of my research was that many food bank clients knew perfectly well how to cook and were often extremely knowledgeable about the prices in local shops. They just did not always have enough money to buy food for themselves or their children, or else they resorted to 'trading down' and buying the cheapest food which was often the least healthy – a fact of which they were themselves well aware.[25]

Recently, the Department of Work and Pensions has announced that its advisors will be placed in some food banks to help clients with problems.[26] It remains to be seen what effect this will have, but certainly such a measure is unlikely to deal with problems of unemployment or low wages.

Givers: Volunteers[27]

In the London food bank where I have spent the most time, volunteers were mostly, although not entirely, middle aged and female. They were also mostly middle class. Many were sympathetic to the plight of clients – as in 'there but for the grace of God go I' – and emphasized that clients should be treated with respect and that food banks should be welcoming places offering not only food, but a listening ear if required and signposting to other appropriate helping agencies. Some volunteers were particularly appreciative of being part of a TT food bank because it had clear parameters which set limits on the help which could be offered; this meant that the volunteer was not overwhelmed by the multifarious needs of the clients.

All of those who helped to set up TT food banks are members of churches, drawn from a wide range of denominations,[28] although once set up and working, the food banks have also attracted volunteers who profess no religion. In interviews, many volunteers explained that they saw feeding the poor as a Christian duty, that food poverty was 'unacceptable' in 21st-century Britain (often referred to as 'a rich country'), and that they felt 'something had to be done about it'. Indeed, it is striking how in recent years, the churches (especially the Anglican Church through its archbishops) have constituted the main advocates[29] for those suffering from poverty and have been vocal critics of government policies.[30]

However, it was less common to hear a more politicized explanation from the food bank volunteers, although some did talk about social justice – or the lack of it – and were aware that the biggest problems which brought people to food banks were sanctions and changes in the benefits regime, as well as unemployment. But a discourse of solidarity, even 'hospitality',[31] much less rights and entitlement, was not often heard. Indeed, it was rare to hear volunteers arguing that benefits and/or wages should be higher, and when I ventured to ask whether such remedies might provide a solution to food poverty, I would usually be told that 'the government' or 'employers' couldn't afford to pay more. It was very clear that the messages of austerity had been absorbed.

Although it would appear that volunteers are the 'givers' in the context of a food bank, it is in fact clear that they themselves often gain from their work. Many volunteers told me that getting involved in a food bank was a highly social activity and there was also frequent mention of a gain in capacities. So volunteering has its own rewards, which somewhat dents the notion of giving out parcels at a food bank as a form of 'pure' gift. On occasion, serving as a volunteer can be a way of giving meaning and agency to a life. But one food bank organizer was more cynical: 'It's how the middle classes salve their consciences'.

The food banks in south Pembrokeshire were rather different from those in London. Volunteers were less likely to be middle class and some had themselves benefited from food banks in the past. Others had come to volunteer to develop their skills and confidence – a course of action recommended by the Pembrokeshire Association of Volunteer Services (http://www.pavs.org.uk/). One observer of just such a process told me: 'This organization [one of the independent food banks] has turned round the lives of many people suffering from problems like substance abuse. It has built their confidence and made them believe in themselves'. Such a result has come less from

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receiving the charity of food banks than from *giving*: by being incorporated into the ranks of volunteers they have been afforded a degree of agency and belief in their own ability to help others, thereby gaining self-respect.

Food: Charitable gift or entitlement?

Over the last few decades in the UK, concepts such as civil society and the third sector have burgeoned, drawing on older communitarian ideas while being given a newer cast as the 'Third Way' or – under the current government – 'the Big Society'. While such examples of voluntarism are lauded by some as examples of the vibrancy of democracy and society, it can hardly go unnoticed that they are also associated with profound changes to the UK welfare state, the discourses of politicians, the policies of the government, and the views of many voters. Charitable giving of surplus food and money by food retailers also confers considerable benefits on the corporate donors – an aspect of food aid which I will be discussing elsewhere.

In his book on bureaucracy, Herzfeld (1992) argued that indifference is socially produced. In the case of food poverty in the UK, it has been shown that there is a climate of blame – encouraged by some of the media and some politicians – laid at the feet of the victims themselves, who are viewed as 'scroungers' and 'work-shy' individuals who do not know how to cook or budget, and who spend their money inappropriately on alcohol, cigarettes and drugs (Wells & Caraher 2014). These exercises in figuration are used to justify such policies as tightening benefits rules or even cutting them, since the subjects of these exercises are considered 'revolting', as Tyler (2013) puts it.

Arguing that food is a universal right to which all humans are entitled, and which the UK government should be ensuring that its citizens receive, has very different implications. Those who take such a tack would argue that food aid, like all forms of aid, deals only with symptoms, not causes; it is a form of sticking plaster – a factor which many food banks themselves acknowledge. At the same time, as other social scientists before me have pointed out (notably Riches working on Canada and Poppendieck in the USA), charity in the form of food banks and food aid is highly depoliticizing. It allows the state to evade its obligations,[32] while still maintaining a degree of control. Furthermore, the existence of charities like food banks allows the public to consider that 'something is being done' which appears to obviate the need to investigate the real reasons for food poverty.

Yet the performance of charity, in the form of provision of food aid, arises from one of our most important attributes: our humanity, and a recognition, however imperfect, that this is shared by the 'Other'. Far from denying that the situation of food poverty exists, the giving of food aid by volunteers attempts to grapple with it, and therefore cannot be summarily dismissed as just part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Those who seek to address the problem of food poverty are certainly not manifesting a state of denial (Cohen 2001), although some may choose to ignore the reasons why it arises in the first place.

Conclusion

As all anthropologists know, thanks to Levi-Strauss, food is *bon à penser* ('good to think with'), so by using food poverty and food aid as a prism, we may pose a series of questions about rights and entitlement; citizenship and the state; morality and ethics; the political economy of inequality, austerity and neoliberalism; government policies and their effects (including low wages and benefits); the self and the other. In short, about the way things are now and whether they could and should be different. Such an 'engaged anthropology' may thus play a part in the search for social justice. ●

PAT CAPLAN


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Fig. 10. *TT volunteers at one of their biannual collections outside Cardigan in west Wales.*
Fig. 11. *TT volunteers at a food bank in Wales sorting and packing.*
Fig. 12. *Volunteers in a PATCH food bank in Wales check dates on food.*
Fig. 13. *Coloured blobs denote 'use by' dates in a PATCH food bank.*