



Andrew Fisher, *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780262036085 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262535168 (paper); ISBN: 9780262339506 (ebook)

Big Hunger is an accessible and welcome assessment of the charitable food system in the United States. Andrew Fisher follows in the tradition of Nestle (2002), Patel (2007), Pollan (2006), Schlosser (2001), and Winne (2008) by writing critically about the political economy of food for a general, non-academic audience. Hunger, or what now is called “food insecurity” in the U.S., is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as when “households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food” (USDA 2017). According to the USDA, 12.3 percent of U.S. households were food insecure at some point in 2016. Importantly, Fisher echoes Amartya Sen (1981) by insisting that, rather than a shortage in food production or personal failings of the poor, food insecurity is caused by factors such as unemployment, low wages, reduced government benefits, racism, sexism, domestic violence, and an increased cost of living.

Yet, Fisher makes it clear that this “is not a book about hunger” but “is instead an analysis of the actions and communications of groups and individuals involved in the anti-hunger field” (p.9). In the U.S., this field includes government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, popularly known as “food stamps”) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), but also an increasingly permanent and professionalized “emergency food system” of non-profit food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens that redistribute food obtained from the federal government, supermarkets, food manufacturers, restaurants, canned food drives, and donated money. Fisher acknowledges that these charitable food programs help feed tens of millions of people, but he correctly maintains that this system fails to eliminate food insecurity because it does not address the underlying causes of hunger. Further, as Poppendieck (1998) has argued, the very existence of a private charitable food system legitimizes reduced funding for SNAP and other government programs.

Fisher describes how anti-hunger groups such as Feeding America, the network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs, and the Food Research and Action Center, which lobbies for federal food assistance, have allied themselves with benefactors such as the USDA and large food and retail corporations such as Walmart and ConAgra in an “anti-hunger industrial complex”. In exchange for donating food, money, volunteer time, and trucks to food banks, these companies receive tax breaks, positive publicity, government contracts for nutrition programs, free disposal of surplus products, and a lack of criticism for their labor practices or unhealthy food. For instance, the Walmart Foundation donates \$2.6 billion to fight hunger even as Walmart’s low wages cost the public \$6.2 billion a year in government benefits. Further, Walmart makes 18 percent of its sales from SNAP and saves millions in garbage disposal fees and tax breaks (p.92-96). Donating a new refrigerated truck to a food bank garners Walmart goodwill, helps overcome public opposition to its expansion into urban areas, and undermines attempts to unionize its workforce.

Fisher’s experience as the former executive director of an advocacy and education network called the Community Food Security Coalition yields an insider’s familiarity with dozens of food programs, but also fuels a preoccupation with advocacy and professional discourse. His analysis relies heavily on hallway chatter at conferences, interviews with anti-hunger leaders, mission statements, corporate codes of ethics, and recommendations to Congress. The central argument of *Big Hunger* is that food banks and other anti-hunger organizations are overly concerned with protecting SNAP, WIC, the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), state nutrition programs, and the charitable giving tax incentive, rather than addressing the minimum wage, affordable housing, child care, public transportation, health care, state and federal tax policy, and immigration reform. Though most elements of his book are fastidiously researched, down to the per-bucket rate for Florida tomatoes (p.246), Fisher’s evident frustration with the status quo culminates in the exaggerated claim that these narrow advocacy goals constitute “an alliance to maintain a low-wage economy” that perpetuates hunger (p.101, 262). By making a false analogy to Big Pharma, Big Oil, Big Ag, the military-industrial complex, and

the prison-industrial complex, this hyperbolic language implies that Big Hunger actually wants more people to be food insecure.

Yet, Fisher takes great pains to clarify that food banks and anti-hunger advocacy groups desire no such outcome and *have* limited cuts to SNAP through their single-issue advocacy. By lamenting that “anti-hunger work has become big business” (p.8), Fisher means that food banks depend on donations from big companies and use economies of scale such as large warehouses, not that food banks are sources of profit for anyone other than the food and retail companies who benefit from tax breaks and federal contracts. This “unholy alliance” rhetoric obscures the “power imbalance...between corporation and nonprofit group” (p.89) that Fisher details elsewhere in the text. Most sections of the book more accurately depict the emergency food system as constrained by its dependence on donations from large food processors, retail chains, and federal programs.

For Fisher, “still remaining is the question of whose job it is to move the needle on wage issues” (p.212), and there is little evidence in *Big Hunger* that the mainstream anti-hunger groups are up to the task. Indeed, Fisher provides plenty of indications to the contrary: the emergency food system’s simultaneity with neoliberal rollbacks, the presence of corporate executives on the boards of food banks, the cozy relationship between the USDA and food corporations, and the Right’s preference for private charity over government welfare programs. Since two-thirds of the food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens in the Feeding America network are connected to a house of worship (p.17), it is unlikely that such groups would risk the wrath of their politically conservative members or disrupt a carefully-curated apolitical image by prioritizing seemingly peripheral political issues. It is fanciful for Fisher to expect Feeding America to adopt a radical perspective given that it is helmed by a former chief marketing officer at Delta Airlines and funded in part by partnerships with ConAgra, General Mills, Panda Express, United Airlines, and Ford Motors (p.86). Whereas smaller groups such as WhyHunger or religious organizations such as Bread for the World might be able to endorse minimum wage increases, Feeding America is far too dependent on large food and retail companies for donated money and products.

Similarly, after delineating the many problems with SNAP (Chapter 4) and other federal food programs (Chapter 5), Fisher maintains a curious faith in government programs. As he explains, the food stamp program, much like food aid sent abroad, maintains bipartisan support in Congress by benefiting the agriculture and food processing industries. Further, since hunger derives from America's "entrenched poverty, shrinking middle class, and concentration of wealth" (p.186), it is unclear how more local and environmentally-friendly federal food purchasing could address the structural causes of food insecurity. Fisher argues that the massive purchasing power of federal food programs could be used to change the food system, but his examples suggest that significant progress is improbable due to the USDA's ties to large growers and food processors, its key role in the contemporary safety net, and its vulnerability to political whims.

Indeed, Fisher concludes that "most likely, structural change to the anti-hunger industrial complex will not be led by the powerful national groups. Instead, the onus to create models that inspire falls on leaders from smaller and local organizations" (p.264). Fisher's most interesting proposals come from case studies of smaller-scale initiatives: homeless shelters (p.219), community gardens (p.220), farm stands in food deserts (p.221), loans for local farmers (p.221), buying from regional farmers (p.221), job training for at-risk populations (222), nutrition classes (p.230), free tax preparation services (p.239), healthy corner store initiatives (p.240), and state-level nutrition incentives (p.172). Rather than broadening the advocacy goals of anti-hunger non-profits, composing a statement of principles (p.102), expecting dependent organizations to levy pressure on their corporate donors, or modifying politically fraught federal programs, I wish Fisher would dedicate some space to explaining whether more radical programs similar to Food Not Bombs (Heynen 2010) or the Black Panthers' free breakfast program for children (Bloom and Martin 2013; Pope and Flanigan 2013) could scale up to address food insecurity at the national level. Such programs could espouse a more critical perspective than entrenched groups such as Feeding America because they would not be beholden to government largesse or food corporations in search of a tax break or image makeover.

Even if these smaller organizations could not feed millions of food insecure Americans without partnering with large corporations or government agencies, Fisher could explore whether non-hunger groups such as the Service Employees International Union, Occupy, or Black Lives Matter could successfully confront the structural causes of hunger at the national level. Fisher hints at more promising strategies when he recounts how the Coalition of Immokalee Workers was able to improve tomato worker pay and conditions by using hunger strikes, work stoppages, investigations of slavery, and a boycott of Taco Bell (p.244-245). Similarly, he relates how Walmart employees in 46 states used strikes and protests to increase their minimum hourly wage (p.251). A reader of *Big Hunger* is left with the notion that food insecurity might be best combated outside of the deeply flawed food and political systems that Fisher portrays.

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