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Radical Teaching and the Food Justice Movement

Introduction

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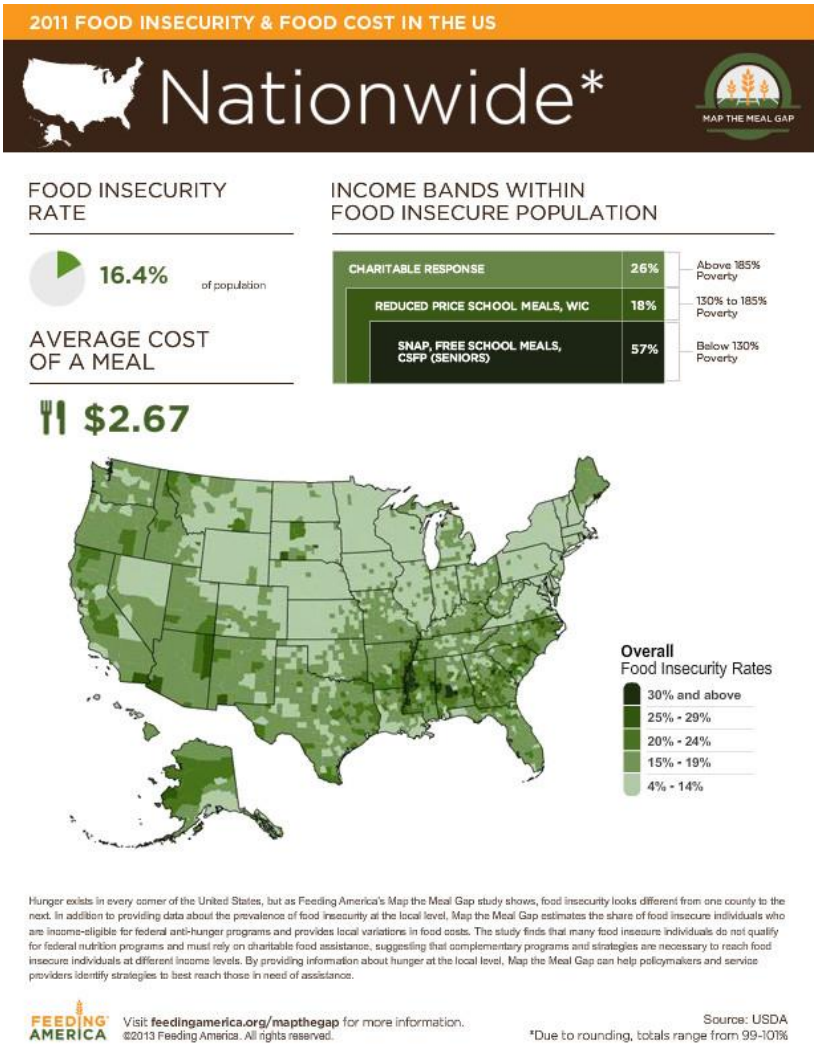

FOOD INSECURITY CHART

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When we first proposed an issue of *Radical Teacher* focusing on food, we had no idea how much interest there would be, or how much radical politics has found a home in the food movement. We knew from the beginning that assembling articles on this topic would be challenging, since so much of the writing and thinking on food studiously avoids radical analysis of the human, environmental, and social costs of the corporatization of food production and the alienation of Americans from the food they eat. The dream of the natural food movement has been realized not by the toppling of agribusiness, but by the Walmartization of organic farming. And while organic factory farming is an improvement over its conventional counterpart – less pollution of waterways by fertilizer runoff, less poisoning of farmworkers by pesticides, and less injection of antibiotics and hormones into the food chain are certainly positive developments – it hardly addresses the interlocking injustices endemic to the food industry.

We tested the waters with a panel at the Left Forum entitled "What is Radical About the Food Movement?" which attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd, and from which two of the articles in this issue – Nancy Romer's and Doris Friedensohn's – originated. Once we sent out the call for papers we were stunned by the volume of response: more than thirty proposals for an issue we envisioned comprising five or six articles. And we were heartened by the range and engagement of the proposals, which came from a broad diversity of writers. Many were from people of color, many from the young, several from older writers, several featured grassroots movements and organizing, including union organizing, several from an international perspective, written with an energy and passion that was refreshing. At the same time, we also saw how dominant the liberal analysis of food systems has become in the discourse on food justice, implicitly arguing that community gardens and school mini-farms and organic produce are, in and of themselves, radical interventions. Certainly, creating a venue for fresh fruit and vegetables in food deserts and teaching children where their food comes from are palliatives to the brutal economies of the food systems in which McDonald's double cheeseburgers are cheaper than apples. But what we were looking for were articles that did more than offer a bunch of collard greens in place of a systemic critique. As you will see, the articles we selected for this issue do the difficult work of engaged political analysis of a broad array of places where food is grown, processed, prepared, marketed, and consumed, and recognize the complex connections among and between those various sites.

Too often, the various actors in food politics and culture, let alone food activists and political radicals, do not talk directly to each other (although, as Nancy Romer points out in her article in this issue, the food justice movement "can be transformative for people who begin to engage politically, often for the first time in their lives"). Ironically, the organization that seems most aware of the intimate interconnections between artificial supports to agribusiness in rural America; the immiseration of the urban and rural poor through disinvestment, deindustrialization, and neoliberal economic policies; and the triumph of food chemistry is the U.S. Congress. The most recent Farm Bill, still languishing in the Republican-dominated House as of this writing, implicitly links subsidies to agricultural conglomerates, with 75 percent of all subsidies going to the biggest 10 percent of producers, to deep cuts in food stamp programs of about $25 billion over ten years. All this at a time when disparities in wealth between rich and poor and the shrinking income of the amorphous population we call (with increasingly bitter irony) the middle class are the most distinctive features of the US economy.

It is a truism that poverty too often goes hand in hand with lower-quality, less nutritious food. As Michael Pollan noted in a 2010 article in the *New York Review of Books*, the control of both the job and food markets by behemoths like Walmart and McDonald's leads to a kind of reverse Fordism: "instead of paying workers well enough to allow them to buy things like cars, as Henry Ford proposed to do, companies like Wal-Mart and McDonald's pay their workers so poorly that they can afford *only* the cheap, low-quality food these companies sell."[1] Doris Friedensohn's article points out a similar phenomenon, in which many of the young people trained at the Food Service Training Academy of the Food Bank of New Jersey will not earn enough to eat at the restaurants at which they hope to be employed.

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At the same time, Pollan's argument points to one of the shortcomings of the leading voices in the food movement. Fordism itself was based on the subordination of the worker to the needs of the corporation, and required the steady drumbeat of consumerism to keep the factory gears moving. Moreover, the establishment of the living wage in manufacturing was not the magnanimous policy of Ford and his ilk, but rather the result of years of hard struggle by union activists. Jennifer Gaddis's article about organizing work among school lunch-room employees provides a current example of this fact: after all, one of casualties of the massive cuts to school food programs has been a living wage for food workers.

Hence our use of the term "food justice" in the title of this cluster and our orientation towards selecting the articles for it. Food justice has been defined in a number of ways, but most often recognizes what the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York calls the "legacy of historic racism and the structural inequities created by decisions that were made in the food system." Moreover, food justice resists the seductions of libertarianism and cultural conservatism, whose arguments (voiced most strongly by celebrity farmer Joel Salatin and many in the Slow Food movement) denigrate government intervention in food systems and bewail the disappearance of the full-time (which is to say female) homemaker and cook. Food justice connects the dots between the ubiquity of contingent labor in all segments of the economy and the

increased reliance on fast and processed food; between neoliberal individualism and cultural contempt for obesity; between disinvestment in education and the rise of the frozen, processed, prepackaged school lunch; between ballooning rates of incarceration and the transition in much of rural America from agricultural to prison-based employment.

Food justice also acknowledges and learns from activists outside the United States, and strategies from the past. Nils McCune, Juan Reardon, and Peter Rosset's detailed analysis of La Via Campesina (LVC), in their words "an international alliance of social movements that challenges transnational agribusiness and indeed the entire neoliberal model through peaceful protests, policy proposals, and global articulation," provides an exemplum for transnational and local organizing by agricultural workers that we here in the US could do well to learn from. LVC also gives us a new model through which to think about agriculture and food systems: "food sovereignty," which "puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations." This is a very different conceptualization of what is at stake in food politics from the US paradigm, which too often conflates the consumption of food with the "demands of markets." What would it mean to separate buying, cooking, and eating food from the market forces that manufacture demand and set prices, for example?

We lead off the issue with Nancy Romer's thorough and important overview of the radical potential of the food justice movement. Not explicitly about teaching, Romer's article is different from the typical *Radical Teacher* article, but it provides a crucial introduction to the issues discussed in the rest of the cluster. By turns inspiring, alarming, encouraging, and invigorating, it anatomizes the profound challenges we face in transforming national and global food systems even as it provides one example after another of grass roots activism fighting the degradation of land, livelihoods, and the food we eat. We imagine this article as a resource for educators who want to teach about food and food justice: Romer's article is a crucial contribution to the growing literature on food movements in the US and around the world.

Food justice education can also be local, as John Burdick shows us in his article. His focus on the cultural, economic, nutritional, and race politics of soul food is an exemplary treatment of the multiple interlocking structures that food studies can reveal. As Burdick argues, the simplistic condemnation of soul food as unhealthy, fat-laden, and overly-sugared ignores both the historical reasons for soul food as the diet of rural, disenfranchised, impoverished black people (as well as the comforts and plain deliciousness of soul food) and the work of a number of community-based organizations within African American communities that see food as a site for political work.

After all, food has long been the catalyst for political action. The French Revolution was midwifed in part by the women protesting bread shortages and price hikes, and during the Civil War, women throughout the South demonstrated against the impoverishment of the region by a combination of war and commodity farming in plantations, which led to massive food shortages, especially for the urban poor, both black and white. From Russia during WWI to Egypt in the 1970s, food deprivation has led to political uprisings. And, as Mary Potorti shows in her article, political activists often recognized the potential of food as an organizing tool, in this case the Black Panther free breakfast program.

The hunger and malnutrition that the Panthers faced have taken on a new form in the twenty-first century: the phenomenon the USDA calls "food insecurity," and defines as "lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members; limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods." Food insecurity as a phenomenon matches the contingency of the labor market: like part-time work, it is not usually a permanent condition, but a situation that comes and goes, depending upon other demands on a family's budget. According to the USDA, more than 14% of the population is food insecure, with an additional 6% with "very low food security." Needless to say, food insecurity maps directly onto poverty levels, structural inequalities, embedded racism, and unemployment: the poorest states with the most food insecurity, such as Mississippi and Alabama (which have counties in which over 30% of households are food insecure) also have the lowest-performing schools, reduced access to reproductive health, most restrictive public assistance, and low-standard healthcare. On the whole, food insecurity is more common in urban areas, where there is less opportunity and space to be self-sufficient by growing food. In New York City, the numbers are astounding: almost a quarter of Bronx residents are food insecure, for example. In 2011 City Harvest estimated that federal, state, and local authorities would have had to contribute over $150 million to food programs to eradicate food insecurity in the Bronx, even with meal costs estimated at under $2.50.

Current solutions to the problem of food insecurity are stop-gap at best. While organizations like City Harvest and Feeding America channel food that would otherwise be wasted to people who need it, the charity-based model, as the Panthers understood, runs counter to a critique of the systems that create hunger in the first place. Food insecurity is a symptom of insecurities of other kinds: wage insecurity, housing insecurity, health insecurity, educational insecurity. Likewise, secure access to healthful, fresh, high quality food is itself an index of a variety of other types of security.

As the articles in this cluster illustrate, the focus on food justice puts people's self-determination at the center of the analysis. And that is truly radical.

Notes

[1] Michael Pollan, "The Food Movement Rising." *New York Review of Books.* June 10, 2010. nybooks.com.