

Book Review: First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food? Second Edition, edited by Graham Riches and Tiina Silvasti

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09/01/2015

Steven Harkins finds that this book is a useful resource for students of both the practical challenges posed by food poverty and also the philosophical questions that the issue raises: do people have a right to food in wealthy food-secure countries?

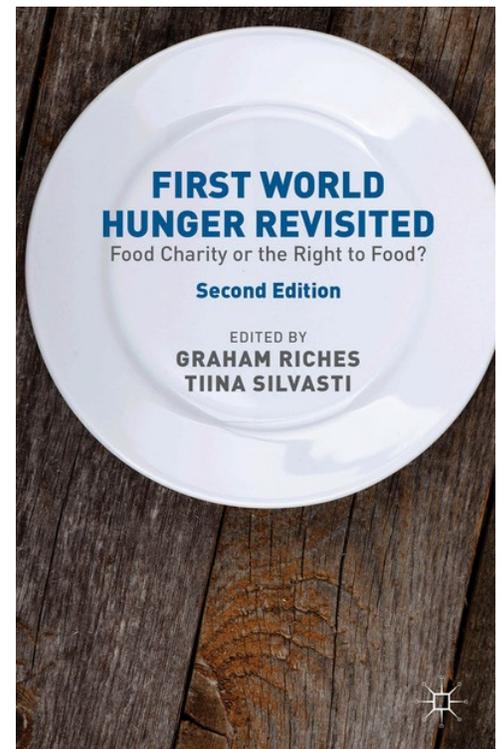
First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food? Second Edition. Edited by Graham Riches and Tiina Silvasti. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

Find this book: 

First World Hunger Revisited by Graham Riches and Tiina Silvasti is the second edition of a collection of essays on food poverty in 'food-secure' countries. The first edition was published in 1997, and this updated second edition 'explores and analyses the rise and development of charitable food banks and emergency food aid since the mid 1990s as a continuing response to growing domestic hunger in basically food secure, rich "First World" countries' (p.2). The book adopts a critical perspective by questioning whether food charity depoliticises hunger as 'an issue requiring the full attention of states and their governments' (p.2).

The growth of food charity initiatives presents a serious challenge to proponents of neoliberalism who have attempted to rationalise the existence of poverty through two powerful myths. The first myth is that wealth is redistributed from the richest to the poorest members of society through a benevolent 'trickle-down' process, an idea which has [no basis in economic theory](#). The other is that the main cause of poverty is the behaviour of those affected by it, a view point evidenced by Michael Portillo's [recent TV appearance](#) where he argued that children need to use food banks because their parents spend their money on drugs; he added, 'to say that food banks prove there is hunger is illogical'. The contributors provide evidence that there is a serious issue with food poverty in Britain and 11 other food-secure countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Turkey and the USA.

Chapter 12 focuses on food poverty in Britain and is written by Elizabeth Dowler, Professor of Food and Social Policy at Warwick University. Dowler argues that between the first and second editions of this book an 'astonishing and scarcely imaginable situation' is unfolding in the UK (p.160). Dowler outlines how, as Portillo's comments show, the growth of food poverty in Britain has been rationalised through an ideological context whereby 'people's individual-level competencies in knowing how to budget for, choose or cook healthy food' are questioned (p.164), this rationale constructs food poverty as an issue where people experiencing it 'only have themselves to blame' (p.164). This has been exacerbated by a climate where 'there has been a systematic dismantling of the post-war consensus on the need for and maintenance of a welfare state' (p.164). The official government response to the growth in food banks has been to deny that they are part of the welfare system and argue that they 'generate supply-led demand' (p.169). Dowler notes that:



'There is no recognition by the central state of the problems associated with, nor acceptance of responsibility for, the growing number of households unable to survive economically, and who are using charitable and emergency food sources' (p.169).



Food bank items. Credit: [vancouver foodbank](#) CC BY 2.0

Dowler argues for a rights based approach to solving the food poverty crisis and recommends that the British Government implements the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) into law, a move they have resisted so far despite recommendations from the Joint Committee on Human Rights of the Houses of Lords and Commons. The chapter concludes with a damning assessment of the British Government's inaction on food poverty:

'The Government's resistance to acknowledging structural contributions to household food insecurity, to monitoring their effects or to addressing causes, is a clear dereliction of duty to implement the human right to food. Instead, a country which is one of the world's richest, and which, in hosting the 2012 Olympic Games, demonstrated creativity, generosity and the best of human nature, seems slow to grasp the realities of how many of its citizens are having to live because of harsh programmes of enforced economic austerity and the systematic undermining of its social safety net. It is time that food injustice in all its forms is challenged' (p.175).

Critics of poverty and inequality in Britain often point to the Nordic welfare state as an ideal model for the delivery of social justice. However, Chapter 6, outlines how Finland has a constitutional commitment to 'those who cannot obtain the means necessary for a life of dignity' and who 'have the right to receive indispensable subsistence and care' (p.85), in sharp contrast with the British denial of a responsibility. Tiina Silvasti and Jouko Karjalainen link the growth of food banks in Finland to the European trend of widening inequality, and the authors argue that 'politicians seem to be powerless and confused in front of the globalizing economy' which is driving the growth of low-paid jobs which are in themselves 'a guaranteed recipe for feeding the growing need for food aid' (p.86). The chapter provides a stark reminder that not even the Nordic welfare model is immune to pressure from the global economic system.

This book is a useful resource for students of both the practical challenges posed by food poverty and also the philosophical questions that the issue raises: do people have a right to food in wealthy food-secure countries? Is this the beginning of a shift away from the universal welfare state and towards a greater involvement of charities in

providing social welfare?

This book is an excellent guide to understanding what is likely to become a key debate for students in a range of disciplines including economics, politics and human rights. It offers a well-researched comparative study of food poverty across 12 'food-secure' countries and offers a valuable contemporary contribution to a very old debate. For example, famines in India and Ireland in the 19th Century were rationalised by focussing on the scarcity of food and on the behaviour of the malnourished population. These justifications ignored the fact that both of those countries were exporting food during those famines (see Ross's *The Malthus Factor*).

In Britain, many of those on the political right agree with Portillo, that people living in poverty only have themselves to blame, despite [strong evidence to the contrary](#). Meanwhile, many of those on the left point to mirroring the Nordic welfare state model as a possible solution, yet this idea is undermined by the evidence in this book. These arguments appear to be a 'Ptolemisation' of the [neoliberal 'paradigm'](#) (see Zizek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*). This book concludes that 'the right to food is still a distant goal waiting to be fulfilled' (p.207). When we live in a paradigm where the 'right to food' becomes a radical political position, the question needs to be asked, is it time for a new paradigm?

Steven Harkins is an ESRC funded PhD candidate based in the in the Journalism Studies Department at the University of Sheffield. He is also a tutor and occasional lecturer in the same department. His PhD research focuses on reporting poverty and inequality in the UK press with a particular emphasis on the relationship between journalists and their sources. He holds a BA (Hons) in Journalism and Politics from the University of Stirling and an MSc with distinction in Media and Communication research from the University of Strathclyde. [Read more reviews by Steven](#).

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