Maggie Dickinson, 2019, *Feeding the Crisis Care and Abandonment in America's Food Safety Net*

University of California Press, 224 p.

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Accepted: 1 February 2021 / Published online: 15 February 2021

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“Feeding the Crisis” by CUNY Professor Maggie Dickinson is the product of two years of ethnographic research in the North Brooklyn Pantry, a non-profit organization in New York City, and follow-up advocacy with pantry volunteers and recipients. The author employs the stories of eight individuals to explain the political economy of food assistance programs and their intersection with the labor market and the care of children and elders. She shows how the 1996 welfare reform, in removing the entitlement structure from the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, increased the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The SNAP program has grown dramatically under the Bush and Obama Administrations, and with the COVID-19 pandemic under the Trump Administration to serve 43 million persons as of September 2020 at an annual cost of \$85 billion.

Changes to the SNAP program have limited benefits to unemployed able adults without dependents (ABAWDs) to only three months out of every three years, effectively requiring that recipients either work in the formal sector or at government-run workfare. This provision has transformed SNAP into a work support program. This policy change has taken place in a labor market that has abdicated employers’ responsibilities to provide living wages and adequate benefits, and in doing so, Dickinson argues, has driven up food insecurity rates. With this work requirement, SNAP has stopped being an entitlement program with the goal of averting human misery. Instead, SNAP exists to cajole people into productivity, to create a surplus labor pool, in which wages are depressed and business can maximize their profits. Non-workers are essentially left out of the social compact, as citizenship has become fundamentally linked to engagement in the formal labor force.

“Feeding the Crisis” is organized into seven chapters, including an introduction, history of the food safety net, an exploration of the ways in which men and women

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interact with food assistance programs and the labor market, emergency food and volunteer labor, the relationship between public health nutrition and food assistance, and recommendations.

The new food assistance regime criticized by Dickinson devalues women's traditional role of caring for family members in favor of emphasizing their role model potential as working mothers. The author points out the hypocrisy in the divergent messages sent to poor- and middle-class women who stay at home to take care of their children: for the impoverished woman, doing so is seen as passing down a pathology of laziness, while for the middle-class woman, childcare is presented as a paragon of familial responsibility. Dickinson also describes how SNAP regulations combined with the decline of the formal labor sector has meant that individuals who are working in the informal economy or taking care of their families are denied food assistance benefits because of their lack of appropriate work documents. To receive SNAP, these individuals are encouraged to participate in workfare programs, organized by the local government, in which the state becomes a super exploitative employer, with stringent rules, submarket wages, and frequent sanctions.

To illustrate this point, the author describes the plight of one individual, Jimmy, as he loses one job after another, and in doing so finds his hourly wage decreasing. He considers the opportunity to participate in a workfare program cleaning up a park, in order to access SNAP. But he recognizes how exploitative this program is, as he would be making the same amount in a 28-hour week as a regular employee would make in the identical job in an eight hour day. Jimmy has been left behind by a radically changing labor market, in which being willing and able to work is not enough to make a living in America of 2020. Jimmy's idea "of work as an exertion that should be remunerated" is increasingly out of place in a highly competitive workplace. Interestingly, Dickinson points out that male SNAP recipients, while not always living with or caring for their families in a traditional arrangement, often use their food assistance benefits to feed their children, and in the process are the ones that typically suffer from the worst food insecurity.

Other authors have preceded Dickinson to critique the emergency food system—the network of food pantries, soup kitchens, and food banks—for what Jan Poppendieck (1999) in *Sweet Charity* calls their "seven deadly ins," (inadequacy, inappropriateness, etc.). While Dickinson does renew and amplify those criticisms of the emergency food system being an "institutionalized form of crisis management," with a "self-perpetuating cycle at the heart of funding," her greatest contribution to this discussion is to explore the tensions inherent in the nature of volunteering at food pantries. She describes the role of one woman, Fabiola, who volunteers at the North Brooklyn Pantry because it provides her with extra food to feed her family. These extra provisions that she can access from her privileged position contradict the social construct of volunteerism, which assumes that she labors for no compensation whatsoever. Volunteerism is a middle-class construct that is in contradiction with the material realities of the needs of low-income volunteers such as Fabiola.

Dickinson also points out the structural inadequacies of the SNAP program and of food banks in the context of a fractured food system that offers unhealthy food for a low cost. As Monsivais and Drewnowski (2007) has shown, caloric-dense foods are cheaper than nutrient-dense foods. This food system is especially traumatic for those

with the least means, as neoliberalism has come to stigmatize those who suffer from poor health as a financial burden on society.

In her final chapter, Dickinson identifies three broad strategies for a radical transformation of food assistance programs. She argues that we need to establish food and health as a human right, with food assistance equitably distributed and decoupled from work. She sees an important role for the NGO sector, such as community kitchens and food pantries, in this effort. Second, she stresses that the public must have a right to work, with a federal jobs guarantee ensuring that everyone has access to productive and fairly remunerated employment. She sees that many of these jobs could play a role in addressing the crisis of care that affects America. These jobs could help to supplement unpaid labor in covering elder care, child care, and other social services needs that are going unmet.

“Feeding the Crisis” is an essential read for anyone interested in nutrition, hunger, and labor policy in America. It does unfortunately omit an analysis on the political drivers of the food assistance safety net, specifically in the corporate and anti-hunger sectors. Dickinson does reference how food assistance programs help corporate profitability by keeping downward pressure on wages, but she doesn’t address how Big Food and Big Ag drive both SNAP and emergency food. SNAP constitutes a significant portion of food retailers’ and processors’ sales, and both sectors lobby heavily for the program. They have a vested interest in SNAP’s growth, and conversely when the program declines, it is a threat to their revenue streams. Likewise, as Josh Lohnes (2020) points out, the food industry depends on the emergency food system to revalorize surplus food, converting its donation into an act of corporate social responsibility and tax deduction. Similarly, the book would benefit from an analysis of how the anti-hunger community, especially the DC-based lobbying groups, has, out of pragmatism, embraced SNAP as a work support. In doing so, and in conjunction with their weak or non-existent support for a higher minimum wage, they have made a Faustian bargain, trading SNAP for wage boosts, in essence selling low-income workers down the river.

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