



JOURNAL OF HUNGER & POVERTY

RESPONSE TO WHY FOOD BANKS?

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In his treatise entitled "Why Food Banks?" Geoffrey P. Lougheed notes that food banks used to be a stopgap measure to assist people until government assistance, in whatever form it may take, kicks in. However, he notes, this band aid measure has become institutionalized. Even though the Canadian public pays taxes to ensure that our basic economic needs are met, freedom from hunger being one of these, government has been reticent to reallocate funds from other much needed projects in order to finance such essential needs as ensuring that all Canadians are free from such social conditions as chronic hunger.

One course of action that has received much support has been the suggestion that all food banks should simply close down and cease operation. While this would bring about dramatic attention, and possibly even government action, Mr. Lougheed is correct in pointing out that to close food banks in protest is indeed to harm the very people we seek to support. It is reminiscent of the fascist state in which conditions exist that are harmful to the public, yet are considered to be "for one's own good". Hunger benefits no one.

Yet, to fight hunger is easy. It has been said that if the top 250 executives of the most successful corporations were to provide 12% of their profits to fight hunger, judicious application of these funds would succeed in wiping hunger from the face of the entire planet, at least temporarily. It is here that we get into trouble. The old maxim, "If you give a person a fish, he will eat for a day. If you teach a person to fish, he will be able to eat every day", can be put to use here. In short, hunger is only a symptom of a larger issue; the issue of poverty. It is not so easy to fight poverty and, as a benefit, to eliminate hunger. This is because poverty, like hunger, has become institutionalized. When a youngster was asked, "Why do you think there are poor people in the world?" the response was that there had to be poor people in the world so that the rich people would have someone to work for them. While this is, on the surface, a very simplistic view of the relationship of poverty to the larger society, it reveals an innate understanding of how Marxist Theory suggests that the "Bourgeoisie", or middle class, have the means to provide manufactured goods and materials but does not have the labour power to produce these things in the quantities that are needed by society. As a result, the "proletariat" are hired because they have what the factory owners require - labour. Now, all this would work out well as long as the workers earned what it was that these produced goods were sold for. However, that does not happen. Profit margins, invented

by the owners of the factories and businesses, prevent this from happening. Consequently, according to Marx, these profit margins result in the accumulation of capital which is then invested. The workers only receive a portion of the value of the product and frequently never see the completed work. Because of this practice of capitalism, the rich become even wealthier while the less fortunate are only able to maintain their standard of living or are doomed to inexorably fall behind.

This, then, is the real problem behind the issue of hunger and the ever more pressing need for food banks is that poverty has become institutionalized and, along with it, hunger has become endemic. Since hunger and poverty have now been recognized as an issue for the society to concern itself with, why not attempt to involve the larger society in resolving this inequity? Mr. Loughheed states that "The idea of public protest has a positive effect on education and understanding of a problem to the public." This is true enough but, like the government which can not bring itself to pay greater attention to such basic needs as freedom from hunger because it would have to redirect funding from more "essential" projects, the average citizen also has difficulty in sustaining a positive and constructive attitude towards this issue because the average citizen most commonly believes that he or she pays taxes in order to prevent this very thing, the institutionalization of hunger, from happening.] It is hard to refute such logic. Perhaps one way to help to ameliorate the issue is to return it to institutions which specialize in education of future citizens. This, then, begs the question of how educational institutions can help.

In one instance, Patrick Inglis and John Willinsky, both professors in faculties of education, have written an extraordinary chapter in a volume co-edited by the authors of this piece. The volume is entitled "The Practical Critical Educator" (Springer, 2006) and the chapter by Drs. Inglis and Willinsky is entitled "Soup kitchen democracy: Practical, critical lessons in theory". The chapter uses a class field trip, working in a downtown soup kitchen, to explore what can be done to increase the educational value and service of such important experiences for students and teachers. Drawing on various theories of democracy, the chapter constructs a very practical twelve-step program for democratic inquiry, skill development and community service. This approach toward exercising and practicing democratic rights, on behalf of oneself and others, is intended to demonstrate to students a broad range of practical, critical activities which can be undertaken to address issues of hunger and poverty in the soup kitchens of democracy.

The chapter reaches out to teachers in a variety of school settings with the message that each and every individual can learn about the issues and can take steps to become involved in achieving some sort of resolution to the issue of hunger. The chapter speaks of the agency of the individual to empower him- or herself to advocate on behalf of those who can not advocate for themselves. In so doing, more powerful individuals are able to not only champion the cause of those less powerful than themselves, they are able to transmit the power of the individual to others in order to fashion a process by which those who are less fortunate can begin to advocate for themselves. The task is not easy - far from it - but it is not insurmountable.

Take for example those schools which provide hot lunch programs to students, some of whom may have only that meal in the course of the entire day. While this is a step in the right direction, it is not enough. Such programs need to be expanded through classroom work in order to recognize that hunger is only one of the issues that poor and hungry students face. Without becoming preachy, superior or maudlin, the real value of such education at the school site is to not judge but to work with all students and their families in an attempt to establish a much needed resource – trust. While trust can occur in many forms, basically it is the recognition that we all want the same things.

Education may also help to ameliorate harmful judgements that poor people “deserve what they get”. This is a meritocratic attitude which supports the idea that we all have the same amount of “cultural capital”. As a result, those of us who succeed are somehow “better” than others who may not have been so fortunate. This is a damaging way of looking at poverty as it allows us to blame the victim for his/her plight.

Society in general will benefit as it begins to understand the complexity of politics that surround issues of hunger and as it begins to shoulder its responsibility to all of its citizens. To those who have steadfastly provided food banks, they lead the way. It is up to the rest of us to follow, not only with food, but with a change of attitude and a change of heart.

Geoffrey Loughheed concludes that we must speak to people about people without getting caught up in statistics, rhetoric and other unuseful banter because food banks are about providing food to the hungry. Let us join in by supporting and extending how we and others help to feed the poor and hungry, and in doing so begin to help eliminate the cause of such hunger – poverty.