Chapter 11
Food Austerity; Concluding Thoughts and Reflections

Martin Caraher and John Coveney

This chapter takes the form of a conversation between the two editors reflecting on the chapters and the process and, yes, it did happen like it is reported below. We have changed very little and added some references, but it is pretty much as it occurred.

John The overall concept we've been working with for this book, is broadly food security and food poverty in the age of austerity. Perhaps I am reserved about rampant austerity, but I would like to give support to the notion of some kind of parsimony. That is to say, a belief that less is often more (Coveney 2011). In a world where we're consuming madly I think the idea of having a parsimonious approach to food and health is an approach that I would want to support. What I don't like is the way that the requirement to be austere is not evenly distributed; that some people, usually those less well off, are required to be more austere than others, and I'd like your thoughts about that.

Martin I think that's true but I also think what's happened is that parsimony has become a dogma. It is now become part of public health rhetoric in that we expect people to behave in certain ways which do not recognize that the society we live in—a consumer environment. This has been described as a consumptogenic environment (Dixon et al. 2006). In order to live parsimoniously it takes capital; it takes assets. The poor now can't live parsimoniously because the rich have hijacked that area. So the well off can eat local, can eat sustainable and the poor can't. The poor now eat 'global goods'; these are highly processed foods.

John That's very interesting, isn't it, because if you say that one has to be reasonably well off to be parsimonious, that really buys into our

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understanding about how to eat sustainably. For example, what a lot of farmers' markets are about.

Martin Yes but it is not always the case that farmers' markets are the province of the rich (Markow et al. 2014). In this book we have examples from New York (Libman, Chap. 6) where farmers' markets exist where people on pensions and benefits are given extra value, even premiums, for shopping at farmers' markets so there are ways around, it but you have to be very creative and use policy to make an impact. Here we have an example from these problems, probably in the most consumptogenic environment in the world, New York, and yet people are finding ways around some of the problems of access and equity and using the system; I think that's the interesting point being made.

John And your point about the way that parsimonious living has been hijacked by a certain elite really is important because what you're saying there is that in order to be parsimonious one often has to have choice. You choose to be parsimonious—so called 'opt-in frugality'. You choose to follow rules about austerity. But the less well off can't choose. Yet they are required to be parsimonious. It is required of them; they don't have any choice about that.

Martin Yes, I think we've all got to live more parsimoniously in this environment otherwise the planet is not going to survive, but for some of us that's a choice; for other people that's not a choice, it's an enforcement, a requirement (Egger and Swinburn 2010). Those of us with resources can choose to make decisions about local, sustainable, organic, etc., and some people just don't have that choice. The chapter (Carimentrand et al., Chap. 7) on the rise of community supermarkets in France shows how the links can be made to deliver a more sustainable food supply but also a more politically related food system which engages people.

John It's interesting that some of our authors in our book pick this up. For example Randy Stringer (Chap. 2) talks about the way that the problem of food security is not really to do with the production or the amount of food; we do have enough food.

Martin Absolutely and we have enough food, Stringer says, for the next 10–15 years. The problem is distribution of that food. Some authors in the book have focused on a 'rights' argument; for example, in both India and South African right—the right to food (Lindgren, Chap. 5; Muzigaba, Puoane and Sanders, Chap. 4), the Brazilian right to food (Rocha, Chap. 10). But it goes back to a more structural issue which might be Peter Townsend's argument (Hick 2014; Townsend and Black 1992; Marmot 2010) that this is more about structure than about rights. So people may have a *right* but that right does not give them *access* to the food. So Townsend (1979) would have argued in the past, in his classic book on poverty, that this is a structural issue so we're midway between rights and structure and a lot of the chapters in this book reflect that.

John So are you saying that the right is not facilitated in any way. It's a principle, but in practice the structure isn't there to allow those rights to transfer to practices?

Martin I think that's a good analysis. A number of the chapters in this book show that. I think the right to food is important; but on its own it is not sufficient to provide food security. It is merely the first step. I was heartened by the Brazilian chapter (Rocha, Chap. 10) which showed one of the emerging economies in the world—the Brazilian economy—is not just accepting neoliberalism but is actually harnessing it. So Brazilian welfare programmes are not divorced from the principle of neoliberalism but they're not allowing it to run roughshod over rights; they're harnessing it. To some extent the chapter on France said something similar (Carimentrand et al., Chap. 7). It is about bringing back power to people, but they don't necessarily have a rights approach in France. I think that although we have three chapters in the book with rights approach—in India (Lindgren, Chap. 4), Brazil (Rocha, Chap. 10) and South Africa (Muzigaba, Puoane and Sanders, Chap. 5)—each show the practical elements about how to deliver on that right. So approaches are welfare driven: hand-out rather than hand-up approaches.

John To what extent do you think the Brazilian example and the French example is about the way neoliberalism has been influenced by the ideology in those countries? I don't know so much about Brazil but certainly in France the neoliberal market-driven ideology would have been softened by the French socialist foundations.

Martin Yes. But most of these political transformations have not happened under a socialist government, don't forget, but more under a right wing political system. But people in France still tend to have a rights approach to more general issues, not necessarily only around food. But what is interesting about the French example is that the chapter describes the involvement of communities—in a business sense—and that was the interesting thing. It wasn't just volunteerism; it was based within a business model. These businesses had to be sustainable from a number of perspectives, dealing with local farmers, but from a business perspective they had to break even. I still think they rely somewhat on volunteers but they employed people and this is, you know, a big movement, I think akin to what's happening in the Brazilian situation.

John Yes, I was also very interested in the kind of post-neoliberal approach taken in the chapter on Brazil (Rocha, Chap. 10). It demonstrates for me that neoliberalism doesn't always have to be a market-oriented approach; it can actually be harnessed for other ways and means and opportunities.
Some of the other chapters in the book address not so much *rights* but *wrongs*. I'm thinking about the discussions on food banks as an example so-called "successful failures". What are your thoughts here?

Martin Yes a number of the chapters discuss the growth of emergency food aid and food banks, including the chapters on Australia (Pollard, Begley and Landrigan, Chap. 9), France (Carimentrand et al., Chap. 7) and food banks as successful failures (Ronson and Caraher, Chap. 8). Undoubtedly food banks fulfil an immediate need and that is hunger. But do they solve people's underlying problem of food insecurity? There's little or no evidence that they do. Food banks are growing and Australia and the UK. There is concern that advanced neoliberal economies are turning to food banks as the welfare state retreats. This becomes a chicken/egg dilemma. Food poverty is not a problem so long as food banks are dealing with the situation. I think that's one of the things public health communities haven't got to grips with this. There appears to be a tendency to tackle the symptoms rather than the underlying cause.

John So again that's structural isn't it? There is just a solution that doesn't really question the problem.

Martin And it probably doesn't even draw on evidence. Indeed, there is no evidence to show food banks provide food security in the longer term, yet we still invest in them (see Ronson and Caraher, Chap. 8).

John I wonder whether it's another example of the more middle class agenda, because basically this is about some sense of austerity. Is it saying 'well, we're not going to throw this food away, we're going to give it to a food bank because that's part of our overall ideology towards food excess'?

Martin I mean that's from the individual donor and that's very true, this sense of the individual donor can put their tin of beans in the box and feel they're doing good, and business can donate their waste or surplus food and not feel they're sending it to landfill, and indeed get tax breaks and not have to pay for landfill. The growth of food banks and the supposition that they are a solution to the underlying causes of food poverty and hunger misses the point. They merely offer emergency food aid. Elevating them to a solution ignores the earlier argument over the issue of structure. Partially this is related to an argument over rights versus structure and, while I am a fan of Amartya Sens' work, an over-reliance on a rights agenda can lead to a dismissal of the structural argument (Hick 2014).

John It is quite a food bank industry in some places.

Martin Yes. In the UK we've gone from zero to a thousand within 12 years and it's like—and in Australia, you know, it's now a nationwide system of distribution of food. Yet again the examples from Brazil and France show other options.

John I was intrigued by the South African example (Muzigaba, Puoana and Sanders, Chap. 5) in the way in which two consequences of food insecurity manifest themselves: one as under nutrition and the other as over nutrition. We know that this 'malnutrition' affects different demographics, where in the face of food insecurity children are more likely to become undernourished, and adults become overweight and obese.

Martin Lots of the data we now know this happens (Popkin 2006) and it is a structural issue, but it's also a cultural issue. I think what the South African chapter shows is you've got people coming out of a situation where old fashioned austerity and underweight was associated with starvation and famines. But also where fatness is a cultural phenomenon where heaviness is admired. I think the interesting thing is that the people who grow hungry are the people who are obese. I mean they're the same cohort in the developed world and that's quite a hard concept to get across. This is especially so in the media where there is a tendency to portray people as either fat and lazy and thus the undeserving poor, or as victims of hunger and thus the deserving poor. Actually they're not different groups.

John Which is quite a new experience for us, isn't it? Because one normally associate obesity with surplus and excess. One of the things that did strike me reading the chapters was that there doesn't seem to be a 'one size fits all' solution in terms of addressing food insecurity, even thought there appears to be a common rhetoric of austerity which gives the impression that the same measures are being applied. But the solution to food security within those austerity measures is not going to address food insecurity in all of them.

Martin I think that's true. I think what we've encouraged in this book is many voices. We're hearing voices from different perspectives and I think the South East Asia chapter (Tahil, Chap. 3) shows up a number of issues around that. For example, technology is presented as one of the solutions to food security, whereas none of the other chapters highlight technology in the same way. That goes back to the argument about parsimonious living. Some economies may simply not have the choices required to be parsimonious. It becomes very clear from South East Asia that they are on a different trajectory. Many South East Asian countries are emerging economies, and, unlike other jurisdictions in this book who might be ten or 15 years in front of the problem, are looking at school meal programs, infant feeding systems and other similar interventions. The global north, on the other hand, has found that some of these interventions are potentially part of the problem as well as part of the solution. I think that the South East Asia chapter covers about 11 countries and this covers a wide range of political, religious and cultural issues of concern.

John It was also interesting that the Australian chapter (Pollard, Begely and Landrigan, Chap. 9) has a lot about kind of calibration and the measurement of food insecurity and the way that has kind of influenced the response; I was fascinated by that.

Martin Yes. I wonder if that is an issue about the demand for evidence in some countries like Australia. What do you think?

John I think that that's very much the case in Australia. In order to argue that food insecurity is be a serious problem you need to demonstrate not only its existence but its magnitude. You also need to demonstrate that it is getting worse before anybody will do anything about that. In Australia that is very common.

Martin Yet on the other hand in Australia, you know, food banks of various types are being funded by government, either directly or indirectly, so while wanting this evidence funding is given to what is considered to be part of the solution, with no evidence to suggest that works at all (Ronson and Caraher, Chap. 8). So we have evidence of a problem but we're still lacking the evidence base for a solution. I think Brazil (Rocha, Chap. 10) probably comes closest to that in terms of saying they've got outcome measures and showing this had been largely effective in some ways.

John I think the way that the chapters in the book cluster around themes is really great. I wonder, though, if were doing this again, what other chapters we might want to add.

Martin I think something from a user perspective. How do people feel as the recipients of food aid or food charity? I think that voice is missing. There is a nice piece on that in a British Food Journal from the Netherlands (van der Horst et al. 2014) which shows that for some people, shame of coming to receive food aid is massive. It's not something people take lightly, and I think that voice is missing, both global south and global north.

John There's two chapters I would have liked to include, one on so-called food rescue, which is quite big in Australia at the moment (see for example www.ozharvest.org). Also probably quite big in the UK and similar countries. Food rescue is based on the idea that you collect food that would go to immediate waste and you distribute that to people who are food insecure. I think, like food banks there are some arguments about that; you know, what role does that really play in terms of addressing both the issue of food waste and the issue of food insecurity. The argument is that 'look, food waste is happening so why don't we put the food to good use? We can't sit on our hands and watch this stuff be wasted and watch it not being pressed into service'.

Also I would have liked to have had a chapter on how some jurisdictions—and the one that leaps out to me is the experience in Cuba where austerity measures that simply had to be pressed into practice—gave rise to all sorts of innovations about how to dealt with that. My understanding is Cuba underwent a massive move to produce food everywhere and anywhere to try and grow itself out of that problem. I would have liked to have had a chapter which explained that. Of course, all this happened in a particular and highly regulated political environment.

Martin I think what the Cuban experience shows is that economies which are regulated better protect against food insecurity. Look at our discussion of Cuba earlier and the chapter in Brazil in this volume. UBS Warburg, has produced reports (UBS Warburg 2002) showing regulated economies are healthier economies, whether that's around obesity or access to food. There is a lot of literature appearing in the journals at the moment about the social psychology of giving—let's call it philanthropy—in is a consumptogenic environment. We still produce food, and probably too

much food. But philanthropy gives the excuse to produce more and surplus food because it can be send to food banks as welfare. This goes back to the issue where we started this conversation. It is about rights. The principles of rights ask: why should the poor have to rely on my dregs or your dregs or leftovers, perfectly good food when all of us have access to food in shops? This stems from very early political turmoil that has historically been food related. We discuss some of this in the Introduction of the book.

John And we in the west continue to produce food at a rate which creates surplus and then we expect the poor to be the ones who are recipients, in other words we're not questioning our own practices here.

Martin No, we're dressing it up. I mean most global economies, the UK, Australia, US, for example, we produce food and we export food. Actually what we're doing is exporting usually processed food, usually milk products in the form of infant feed and, with this, we are exporting a burden of disease and our contributing to global inequality,

John We started this conversation looking at the notion of austerity and how this impacts unevenly in terms of food insecurity. We have some real case studies here.

Martin Well, the people who have practised austerity have been the countries like Ireland and Iceland who have repaid the debts. They have therefore been rewarded for austerity. Greece on the other hand, because of a slightly different political model, is being punished because it does not fit the existing austerity dogma. What we've seen in Greece, as you know, is a massive rise of food banks. But also food banks that are community-owned. This is a very different beast to a food bank that operates on religious or principles of charity. So the way this plays out will be interesting.

John So, in terms of the readers of this book, we always believed that the book would be of use to people from quite different backgrounds because the book chapters come from a variety of sources; that is to say, each chapter doesn't repeat the ideas in the chapter before or the ideas in the chapter after. I think that's quite a refreshing part of this enterprise, so I think that's going to be very useful teaching and reference text.

Martin I am very pleased with the calibre of the chapters we were able to attract for this book. I hope the readership get value from the thoughts of our contributors.

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