

Beyond ‘food apartheid’: Civil society and the politicization of hunger in New Haven, Connecticut

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Assigned to Associate Editor Sam Wortman.

Funding information

Fulbright-EPA Scholarship 2018-19

Abstract

This article illuminates the extent of community-based activism around food justice in New Haven, CT. Data was gathered through 28 in-depth interviews with civil society actors and participant observation across the food policy and urban agriculture (UA) sectors in the Fall of 2018. The paper traces the challenges that the sector faces in advancing a more democratic food agenda even when the municipality is relatively open to activist claims. Three key findings are identified. (a) Following in the American communitarian tradition, civil society groups working at grassroots level largely set the agenda for tackling food hunger in New Haven. That agenda, however, is broad-based and contradictory, incorporating initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity and radical advocacy for food justice. (b) The efforts of civil society actors are structurally constrained by their dependence on philanthropic or grant-based funding, on the one hand, and the symbolic rather than substantive support afforded by a fiscally weak, resource-poor municipality, on the other. (c) There is an inherent tension within the civil society sector arising from the disjuncture between strategies that have the effect of depoliticizing hunger and those that increasingly demand a repoliticization of hunger. These issues have been brought into sharper relief in light of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilization, which, in concert, expose deep fissures in American society.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many cities in the United States and further afield are attempting to address the question of food democracy by challenging entrenched food production, consumption, and distribution systems that reproduce inequalities in urban settings (Mansfield & Mendes, 2013; McClintock, 2010;

McClintock & Simpson, 2018; Morgan, 2015; Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2017; Prove et al., 2018; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016; Tornaghi & Certoma, 2019). For some sectors of the urban population, even in the richest countries of the Global North, there are problems of food access and affordability in the wake of widespread neoliberalization at state and municipal levels. Adapting a case-study approach, this article evaluates the role of civil society initiatives in New Haven, CT (population 130,950), a city that is both socially and spatially segregated. High levels of food poverty are reported among the poorer sections of the population including the working poor (Santilli & O'Connor Duffany, 2018). Civil

Abbreviations: BLM, Black Lives Matter; CT CORE, Connecticut Community Organizing for Racial Equality; FAWG, Food Action Working Group; NHFPC, New Haven Food Policy Council; NPO, nonprofit organization; UA, urban agriculture

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society activism brings a wide cast of actors into the food poverty space ranging from the pragmatic (mitigating the effects of food poverty and its impact on health) to the potentially transformative (reinscribing the principles of land stewardship and restituting the local food landscape). This paper assesses whether civil society actors can play a meaningful role in reshaping the urban food system in the context of potentially contradictory aims and asymmetries of power.

2 | SITUATING THE STUDY: FOOD AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM

In the popular imagination, alleviating hunger and food poverty generally involves provisioning the needy through food banks, pop-up food pantries, and soup kitchens. In the United States, emergency food provision can be traced to the 1980s and has been growing apace since then (Poppendieck, 1994). One of its most pernicious aspects is “the erosion of the cultural foundations of public entitlements associated with welfare states” (Poppendieck, 1994, p. 73). The unravelling of the social safety net has become more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically increased food insecurity in the United States (Wolfson & Leung, 2020). Approaching the issue of food insecurity from an alternative viewpoint, food justice initiatives “seek to be the antithesis of ‘charity’, where food, although shared free of charge, is not a gift but a means of asserting and fulfilling a right” (Heynen, 2010, p. 1227). Some food justice advocates seek forms of empowerment such as improving the quality of neighborhoods; reinvigorating local economies; implementing fairer working conditions; and making local, fresh, sustainably produced food affordable to the most vulnerable (McClintock & Simpson, 2018). Others pursue a more self-consciously political agenda arguing for alternative food networks that challenge the dominant economic system often evolving in the context of a failure of existing public policies (Heynen, 2010; Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck, 2011; McClintock, 2014; McClintock & Simpson, 2018; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016; Simon-Rojo et al., 2018). The critical literature suggests that a food justice standpoint constitutes a means of liberation from a sphere colonized by neoliberal relations (Tornaghi, 2016). However, the potential for such initiatives to be co-opted and instrumentalized by the state has also been noted (McClintock, 2014; Tornaghi, 2014; Rosol, 2012).

On the one hand, those who involve themselves in civil society campaigns and activities can contribute toward developing solidarity and resilience in the face of structural changes in the wider urban economy. On the other hand, reliance on volunteering places an onerous burden on activists. Furthermore, middle-class dominance in projects and groups (Rosol, 2012) may marginalize or exclude activists representing the disadvantaged from shaping solutions to pressing problems.

Core Ideas

- Civil society plays a key role in the politics of food in the contemporary U.S. city.
- Initiatives range from addressing food insecurity to radical advocacy for food justice.
- Repoliticizing hunger forms part of a wider agenda of addressing class and racial inequalities.

The ‘do it yourself’ ethos that underpins much civil society activity ironically may have the effect of underplaying collective political responses, unintentionally contributing to regimes characterized by “austerity urbanism” (Peck, 2012) that outsource responsibility for service and infrastructure provision to citizens (Rosol, 2012; Pudup, 2008).

The genesis of food hunger lies in structural issues of inequality and the effects of a food political economy that is primarily market driven and profit oriented (Fine, 1994). This has led to food overproduction, homogenization, and the creation of a global food market that has major implications for climate and the ecosystem in terms of sustainability and food miles. Moreover, it has also presaged the rise of ‘convenience food,’ a concomitant reduction in capacity to self-provision, and the loss of food skills (Tornaghi, 2014; Willett et al., 2019; Kaiser et al., 2021). These trends are exacerbated by political strategies that roll back state services, adopt market (rather than public good) strategies as a way of reducing state spending, and promote individualized and privatized approaches to service provision (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

The number of food banks has increased dramatically in the United States over recent decades. When President Reagan assumed office in 1980, there were 200 food banks in the United States; today there are more than 40,000 (Romanoff, 2019). The proliferation of food banking has been characterized as “a practice of containment” for controlling and disciplining the poor (Heynen, 2010, p. 1226). Paradoxically, the self-same corporations that contribute to food inequity have also positioned themselves as part of the solution. Riches (2018) notes the corporate capture of charitable food banking through proffering food waste as a solution to domestic hunger. Corporate food donors, Fisher (2017) asserts, are part of the American hunger-industrial complex, burnishing their reputations as caring companies without having to face any threat to their profits. Cash donations to food banks earn them a tax deduction. Food donations save on the disposal costs of surplus or out-of-date supplies. Positive media coverage can bolster stock valuations. Meanwhile, some of these corporations fail to pay a living wage and even advocate against a minimum wage, both of which would go some way toward obviating the need for emergency food provision.

Charitable initiatives in the form of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens “recognise the problems of the agri-food system without proposing an agenda to overcome inequalities” (Sbicca, 2012, p. 461). Civil society organizations take on the task of plugging the gaps in provision in what has come to be known as the ‘shadow state’ (Wakefield et al, 2013; McClintock, 2014), producing a range of ameliorating actions and services that are delivered unevenly to the precarious poor. These deflect attention from inequities that have arisen in relation to food that, in turn, mirror inequities in the wider society. Analyzing the links between environmental justice, social equity, and public health, R. Morello-Frosch (unpublished data, 2018) refers to the “political economy of riskscapes.” The social context of structural inequality, racial segregation, and discriminatory policies interacts with particular racial, ethnic, class, income, and gender demographic profiles to produce disparities in exposure to environmental and health risks and social vulnerability. Black and Latinx people today are significantly more food insecure than foreign or U.S. born whites (Myers & Painter, 2017). Moreover, in the course of the current pandemic, Blacks and Latinos have experienced disproportionately high infection and death rates, reflecting the fact that “today’s disparities of health flow directly from yesterday’s disparities of wealth and opportunity” (Bouie, 2020).

Focusing specifically on a food justice agenda in the contemporary city, Tornaghi (2016) argues for a politics of engagement, capability, and empowerment that extends citizens’ control over social reproduction. This is of particular relevance to people of color whose lives are deeply impacted by “underlying racial and class dynamics which perpetuate structural inequity” (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016, p. 10). Indeed, it is the very “racial grammar of citizenship” rooted in the colonial past and configured around a trinity binding liberty, property, and whiteness that has produced an egregious pattern of uneven development in the United States (Safransky, 2014, p. 238). In an extended essay on the thorny issue of reparations and how the state might respond to past wrongs, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) observes that “no statistic better illustrates the enduring legacy of our country’s shameful history of treating Black people as sub-citizens, sub-Americans, and sub-humans than the wealth gap.” That wealth gap is very visible in New Haven, where Blacks and people of color suffer multiple disadvantage, most recently noted in the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic in their communities (Breen, 2020).

Dispossession has been a crucial part of the African-American experience. Access to land and the opportunity to own property are central to the capitalist system upon which American democracy is based and are key assets in the social reproduction of class and race. Property markets in the United States have historically been distorted by power relations that ensured racial inequality was built into the very structure of

society extending from the time of slavery right to the present day. Under this system, Blacks and other people of color have been dispossessed of land, excluded from property ownership, or subject to systematic discrimination by banks and other mortgage lenders (Coates, 2014; Kahrl, 2019). Historic legacies exacerbate the situation facing those who seek to make a livelihood on the land at a time when land available for farming is diminishing. Nevertheless, White (2018) demonstrates the significance of agriculture as a site of resistance and a template for contemporary food justice activists. She does so by tracing the creation more than 50 years ago of a cooperative alternative food system by Southern Black farmers. In a similar vein, Reese (2019, p. 4) argues that examining the lived experiences of resistance and refusal of anti-Blackness “opens up possibilities for us to reconsider and imagine constraint and possibility, harm and care and destruction and community-building.” Reframing land in the city as a communal resource (commoning) rather than private space opens up transformative possibilities politically, socially, and spatially (Bresnihan & Byrne, 2015). Food justice movements that call for radical action start from the premise of dispossession and claim “the right of historically disenfranchised communities to have healthy, culturally appropriate food, which is justly and sustainably grown” (Sbicca, 2012, p. 445). Claiming the right to access and cultivate land with a view to provisioning for self and others in the context of local food systems amounts to a direct disavowal of the industrial agri-food system.

3 | STUDY RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

Food hunger is a live issue in the city of New Haven. In two recent studies, food insecurity was shown to affect one-third of adults in the city’s lowest income neighborhoods; Latinx communities are most likely to be affected by food insecurity as are those who are unemployed or underemployed. Over 56% of New Haven children live in households that participate in the government funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program colloquially known as SNAP. Not surprisingly, those who are food insecure are more likely to report health problems (Santilli & O’Connor Duffany, 2018; Abraham & Buchanan, 2016). The United Way nonprofit organization (NPO) has characterized the working poor as asset limited, income constrained, employed (ALICE) households. Thirty percent of Connecticut households have earnings above the federal poverty level but below a basic cost-of-living (Connecticut United Ways, 2018).

Since 2012, the city of New Haven has hosted the New Haven Food Policy Council (NHFPC), which provides a platform for a range of actors from across civil society to come together and develop strategic responses to local food deficits. In 2016, the municipality appointed a food policy

director, the first of its kind in Connecticut and among just 20 similar jobs (at that time) throughout the United States. As of 2018, the United States hosts 238 active food policy councils (Bassarab et al., 2018). A new food policy director was appointed by the New Haven municipality in September 2018 coinciding with the start of this research.

This article is based on a case study carried out while the author was on a Fulbright Scholarship affiliated with Ireland's Great Hunger Institute at Quinnipiac University. The objective was to explicate the role of the civil society sector in advancing a food democracy agenda in the city of New Haven. A case study methodology was employed. I identified key gatekeepers through academic and personal contacts, desk research, and attendance at a Soil and Social Justice Conference held at Yale University 6 Sept. 2018. Interviewees were selected through a snowball sampling technique based on initial contacts. In the semistructured, open-ended interviews, I focused on motivations, attitudes, and experiences in the sector. Twenty-eight interviews were completed each lasting between 45 and 90 min. The sample included five executive directors, 10 program managers (with responsibility for specific programs within their organizations), 11 activists on the ground, and two municipal employees. All interviewees were engaged in urban agriculture, food, or environmental greening practices. Several of the aforementioned were former or current members of the NHFPC.

In addition, I engaged in approximately 50 hours of participant observation over a 3-month period from September to November 2018, attending regular meetings of the NHFPC and its Food Action Working Group (FAWG), going to social events organized to support Witnesses to Hunger, attending protests outside City Hall, visiting community gardens and urban farms with key informants, volunteering at a community garden, at the Yale Farm Program, and at a local soup kitchen. A detailed ethnographic field diary was maintained throughout. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and they, along with the field diary, were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). No names have been used to protect confidentiality.

4 | SETTING THE FOOD AGENDA: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

New Haven is distinguished by a high degree of civil society activism, evidenced in the existence of between 800 and 1,000 (by respondent estimations) NPOs on the ground. The data revealed the existence of a strong communitarian ethos at the grassroots level, which emphasizes interactive and reinforcing relationships between groups of individuals who have a clear commitment to a particular set of values, norms, and meanings (Etzioni, 2014). Many NPOs are

involved in a wide spectrum of activities that range from providing meals to vulnerable populations to advocating for self-sustaining, self-determining local food systems, and everything in between. This is consistent with the findings of a recent survey of cities across North America, which shows that organizational practices with a UA remit range from those that align with a neoliberal logic to those that challenge hegemonic structures, mediated by geography, funding, and organizational size (McClintock & Simpson, 2018). I provide an indicative classification of civil society activities in New Haven in Table 1. Though I have categorized them in terms of their primary mission, some combine a number of different activities and foci, reflecting the 'stacked functions' feature of their work. While the motivational frames do not map precisely onto McClintock and Simpson's (2018) typology,¹ I do note the presence of entrepreneurial, educational, and radical civil society initiatives in New Haven, in addition to more pragmatic, service-oriented provision focused on alleviating hunger and improving the quality of the urban environment.

My data indicates that, in the specific context of the New Haven food landscape, the civil society sector (a) acts as a loose network of interconnected agents that keeps the issue of food alive in New Haven and (b) performs crucial advocacy, mediation, and political organizing functions linking the population of the city with the municipality and with the state. As such, they form part of a "nonprofit industrial complex" tasked with stewarding food citizenship (McClintock, 2014, p. 10). In New Haven, as elsewhere, NPOs are largely dependent for survival on volunteerism and raising funds from government, individual, philanthropic, and corporate donations (McClintock & Simpson, 2018; Wakefield et al., 2013). A number of interviewees pointed out that their organizations spend a considerable amount of time grant writing, advocating, and developing story narratives to capture the imagination of prospective donors. One NPO executive director explained:

"Mostly, it is about the story; give them a tour of what they have paid for, and it is more an emotional connection and an assurance that we are doing something meaningful with the money... If I was a donor, I am not sure what I would want to support. I guess you throw a bunch of money at a bunch of different non-profits and something good is bound to happen."

¹ McClintock and Simpson (2018) describe six motivational frames that appear to guide organizations and businesses in UA practice: entrepreneurial, sustainable development, education, eco-centric, DIY secessionist, and radical. The authors also note that motivational frames can co-occur, producing a 'stacking' or 'bundling' of functions.

TABLE 1 Civil society nonprofit organizations and the food–urban agriculture sector in New Haven

Type of intervention	Nature of activity	Organization responsibility
Pragmatic and service	Food provisioning to the vulnerable, support for greening initiatives in community	Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen (DESK), food pantry and soup kitchen
		Food In Service to the Homebound (FISH)
		Connecticut Food Bank
		Fresh produce prescription program at New Haven Farms
		Common Ground School's mobile pantry
Pedagogic	Teaching and learning activities in schools and beyond	Land Trust Community gardens
		Urban Resources Initiative (Yale), supporting communities trying to improve the environmental quality of neighborhood including community gardens
		Lelia Day Care Center nature curriculum for young children.
		Common Ground High School environmentally focused curriculum and leadership program
		Yale Farm Program, student volunteers work with gardeners to cultivate food which is donated
Eco-entrepreneurial	Business oriented interventions and enterprises	Leon Sister Cities project, practical and financial support to a sister city in Nicaragua
		Love Fed education program, teaching New Haveners how to grow their own
		CitySeeds farmers markets
		City Seed food business incubator
		Land Trust Growing Entrepreneurs initiative, internship program for High School students, business incubator
Political	Advocacy and interventions aimed at capacity-building and political change	Community supported agriculture (CSA)
		Peels and Wheels composting
		Connecticut Community Organizing for Racial Equality (CT CORE), food justice platform
		Witnesses to Hunger
		Love Fed home gardening
		Citizen's Campaign for the Environment

Another interviewee who is an eco-entrepreneur and activist spoke with frustration about the extent of philanthropic fundraising that is required to address societal concerns:

“Many of these nonprofits have an executive director, an assistant, and a bunch of volunteers. These are not jobs... You receive in the Summer, in the Spring, at Christmas...hundreds of requests for support: ‘A kid is dying...an animal is perishing,’... but how much can you stretch that model, how thin can it be spread? That is how the model works. So, it’s a ‘begging economy.’ How is it different from the guy on the street asking you for money?”

Invariably, because of the size of the sector and the relatively limited number of donors, there can be competition between organizations for funds. Financial models are precarious, reliant as they are, on an annual round of grant applications often involving relatively modest amounts. Paradoxically, all share the same end goals, but to maintain each organization’s viability, they must act in the individual organization’s interest rather than in the collective interest. This produces competition rather than cooperation (Rosol, 2012). The perennially uncertain funding environment militates against more long-term or joined-up strategic thinking in the sector. Inevitably, this limits the ability to advocate for broader systemic change (Wakefield et al., 2013) and can produce “mission creep” in pursuit of donor support (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016, p. 102). In a crowded field, organizations veer toward the use of safe concepts such as food security and

sustainability that imply the desire to reform rather than transform existing arrangements (McClintock & Simpson, 2018).

5 | MUNICIPAL WOES

A major reason for overreliance on philanthropic fundraising is the structural constraint arising from a fiscally weak and resource-poor municipality. The situation has been exacerbated by the neoliberalization of urban regimes in the United States, resulting in the re-engineering of the (local) state “as an agent imposing the diffusion of market ethos and discipline in an increasing number of social spheres” (Pinson & Journel, 2016, p. 137; Rosol, 2012). The fiscal weakness of the municipality was repeatedly raised by interviewees and at meetings of the NHFPC and FAWG. While the city acts as a partner on several projects and funds on a small scale, there is deep unease across the sector about the implications of budget cuts and the dire financial straits in which the municipality finds itself.

Reynolds and Cohen (2016) have noted that throughout the United States, policy making that deals with food and agriculture is relatively new for municipal governments, and that presents its own challenges in terms of garnering the financial and other supports needed to further an equitable food agenda. It became apparent through interviews and field work that the food policy directorate was a “poor relation” within the municipal bureaucracy primarily playing a symbolic rather than a substantive role. While making efforts to be a willing partner on a range of environmental and food sustainability initiatives, the municipality has largely abnegated its core leadership role to the civil society sector, transitioning from a providing state to an activating state (Rosol, 2012). Hence, food policy largely centered on distribution through centralized food banks that work closely with the civil society sector to counter hunger and food poverty. Food distribution amounts to a ‘sticking plaster’ attempt “to meet the shortfalls in services and benefits that result from entitlement reduction and withdrawal of funding” (Rosol, 2012, p. 241). Many of the NPOs in New Haven operate as part of a shadow state, effectively tethered to their charitable role within this system of social service provision (Wakefield et al., 2013; McClintock, 2014). This state of affairs was characterized by one interviewee in terms of a stark failure on the part of government:

“The onus is being shifted from the government to people then people do like this ‘charity’ model... (which is not dignified). It does not solve anything. It is a hole in a big tank of water, and you are putting a piece of gum in there and hoping for the best.”

It became clear at the meetings of the NHFPC that there was underlying tension between members engaged in food

provisioning and those more committed to food justice. One interviewee, a former chair of the NHFPC and food justice activist, noted that:

“Emergency food access is a piece that gets a lot of attention and resources on one side and often isn’t a big part of the conversations about grassroots justice...the way the emergency food industry operates, it doesn’t leave a lot of room for self-determination or even addressing system issues about why people are hungry in the first place.”

The chair of the NHFPC similarly expressed a desire to pivot the focus away from emergency provision and toward a more holistic food systems approach:

“It seems like a lot of our work over the last few years has been way more reactionary than it has been proactive, in a way that ... makes me wonder what our agenda is... We worked closely around thinking through how to reorganize our meeting agendas...to make a transition away from sterile, very reportorial, performative meetings to meetings where we could talk about more systemic and structural issues, hold a space where people could actually pause thinking about their clients, or the demands of their funders or the language that is more apt for grant writing ... it has been sort of like a personal mission to make sure that emergency food services don’t have the monopoly.”

The exacerbation of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for exactly this sort of change within the NHFPC. The focus of the meeting space has pivoted toward prioritizing relevant food policy and system issues as well as planning forward for campaigns and on long-term and short-term policy solutions (NHFPC email communication, 12 Nov. 2020).

Food justice advocates were critical of the extent to which some NPOs seem to have a vested interest in expanding their client numbers, seeing these (numbers of meals served, numbers of food parcels distributed at pantries, etc.) as a measure of their success rather than evidence of systemic failure. The food policy director couched the alternative in terms of a social justice framework linking all elements of the food system:

“Instead of a depoliticization of hunger, it should be about the right to food...it should be a dignified process. There should be no lack of dignity. The anti-hunger industrial

complex [is structured around] a complex relationship between corporations, food banks, and pantries. But the goal should be for those food pantries and soup kitchens not to exist in a few years...restaurants are part of the food system, workers' rights within restaurants like a livable wage, all of those are part of the food system. Urban-rural linkages, community supported agriculture... [are part of the food system] I want to create something that people understand as an ecosystem...."

One initiative that proved particularly egregious to food justice activists exemplified the unintended consequences of pursuing a charity model of provision. As part of a federal program, the local police in New Haven provided dedicated space for neighborhood management team infrastructure. Subsequently, that infrastructure came to be relied upon to distribute supermarket food waste via food pantries located in police substations mostly in relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods. Some activists viewed this as an affront to those most marginalized, such as undocumented immigrants or ex-offenders, who might be reluctant to avail of the service for fear of bringing unwanted police attention to themselves:

"I can be cynical and say that they [food pantries in police substations] are just a way in which the state can surveil people of color more easily...My reaction was that it was the stupidest thing. Like I think all charity is problematic ... but especially in spaces where you know the kinds of people who would be accessing that service would historically have been on the receiving end of violence from the state."

What this suggests is a form of what Bourdieu (1979) called 'symbolic power.' Here, the marshalling of resources (food) by the municipality in partnership with the police into disadvantaged communities becomes a means for the police to advertise their community credentials while simultaneously enhancing their opportunity to engage in informal social control. This instance illuminates the contradictions that have arisen as a result of the shifting roles of the state and charity sector and the ensuing drift toward constructing the poor as disciplined subjects rather than rights bearers in relation to food access.

6 | FROM DEPOLITICIZING TO REPOLITICIZING FOOD

The civil society sector in New Haven, as elsewhere, is dominated by white, middle-class activists who are committed to

environmental stewardship and creating viable alternatives to the agri-food system (Sbicca, 2012). As a result, concerns about the racial and economic inequalities associated with the agri-food system may be overlooked. Blacks in New Haven keenly recognize that their faces and their voices are marginal within the civil society sector. They, alongside other people of color, have identified food justice as one arena where there is potential to develop a much more powerful leadership role and build a more organic connection to the communities that food NPOs serve. Three such activists pointedly noted that:

"Almost all of the nonprofits that are successful are white led. The ones that are headed by people of color tend to stay at grassroots group level and not necessarily move to an established nonprofit funded organization. And there are reasons for that that are structural and systemic in the way that funding works."

"Being born and raised in New Haven and being Black we just felt, especially with existing nonprofits, there is a lack of leadership of color ... [and] there is definitely a lack of connection to the community that they are trying to help."

"These organizations that are big in the urban food system are viewed as white NGOs. They are led by white people and staffed by white people working in neighborhoods that are not made up of white people. That is not food justice."

These activists are acutely aware of the systemic inequities, both historical and contemporary, that structure their lives. They see a food justice agenda as a means to move beyond what one interviewee described as 'food apartheid' to begin to model system change. Some present a radical political analysis that causally links food system disparities today to "historically inequitable power relationships that, in turn, confer social and economic advantage to some over others" (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016, p. 41). Attempts to repoliticize food in New Haven generates debate around wider racial and class disadvantages and opens up the possibility of a food justice framework that can account for the "structural oppression responsible for many injustices throughout the agri-food system" (Sbicca, 2012, p. 455). This is evident in the work of CT CORE (Connecticut Community Organizing for Racial Equality) a Black-initiated NPO².

The CT CORE NPO adapts a radical approach to the food sector. Firstly, it has as a core goal to promote people of color

² CT CORE is now known as the Black Infinity Collective

into leadership positions on racial justice and equity issues. To this end, it seeks to remove barriers to self-advocacy for people of color. It organizes state-wide to create coalitions and networking using a people of color lens. Secondly, CT CORE has produced a racial-justice platform as well as a food-justice guide. From CT CORE's perspective, an authentic community initiative is one grounded in understanding of the past, focused on organizing in the present, with a view to moving toward a transformed future. The codirector expressed the desire to move beyond historically structured barriers and create new, more inclusive social arrangements. This would require a radical transformation of political economy:

“Systematic inequities and disparities are not a modern phenomenon. They have always existed and are baked into how our country was always meant to function and was never meant to allow for equal opportunities for everyone...and so our approach is to look at the food system and figure out how we can use our organizing approach and our liberation frame to put in place a just food system.”

As noted earlier, an understanding of the dispossession of those who work the land is central to a food justice analysis. The CT CORE codirector further reflects on the parallels between the political economy governing the land in the past and in the present:

“The more I was having conversations, especially with leaders of color, indigenous Americans from both North and South, migrant workers, Black farmers, and looking at that history...it was like tracing back all oppressive systems that exist to the idea of the land; who owns the land, who works the land...and I am seeing a lot of similarities in how food is grown now with migrant labor, and that the system finds it necessary that those who grow food cannot achieve full citizenship, that they always have to be second-class citizens or worse.”

Attuned to the dispossessions of the past and committed to exploring anticapitalist alternatives, CT CORE seeks to achieve cooperative-based self-subsistence and self-determination in the farming of food and its production and consumption.

More generally, the issue of farmers' rights, the right to access farmland, and the aspiration to preserve farmland for socialized uses as a basis for radical transformation of the food landscape also emerged. For instance, the eco-entrepreneur and activist observed that:

“National Parks are an iconic part of [American] monumentalism... what we do have is the landscape and the resources... So National Parks are very important. In the same way, you should have protected farmlands...that you cannot sell, leave for fallow, or give away for development. Because that is the main source of food sovereignty. But a lot of the land is being developed as, for example, parking lots.”

A farmer activist involved in a food education initiative argued for diverting some of the investment in new technologies of food production into enabling people to become custodians of the land:

“As we make many advancements with food and food systems, we start talking about vertical farming and clean meat and all these things. Billions of dollars are being invested in all these new technologies. And I don't want to leave our farmers behind. So, it is important to me that we are continuing to think about investing in new and beginning farmers. I appreciate new technology. I just think that the more we are sinking power and money into narrow technologies, we are ignoring the one thing we already have which is soil... When many farmers –so many people want to take care of the land and grow food and just need a few barriers removed... [so that they can cultivate] the land that already exists, that is asking to be farmed.”

Groups, such as CT CORE, among others, are politicizing food in the city and offering an analysis that raises many more fundamental questions about the political and economic arrangements currently in place. This thinking goes beyond reformist or even progressive innovations in the food sector to radically question the very basis of land markets, farmer access, and resource distribution.

A second activist group led by Blacks and people of color, Witnesses to Hunger, also engages in a direct-action approach to food justice. They identify the value in bearing witness to the everyday lived experience of hunger and deprivation through telling their own stories and presenting visual and verbal testimonies to legislators and municipal officials and at academic and policy conferences. As one member noted:

“We are empowering ourselves to tell legislators that what they propose isn't working. We put you in. We can put you out. We tell stories, and we tell them through pictures: the trouble of getting to a food pantry, to a soup kitchen, with

a sixteen year old who won't go because she is embarrassed."

Witnesses to Hunger has continued their activism in 2020, channeling their own food justice agenda into a wider democratic movement, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. The campaign, named after that organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1968, aimed to place the needs of poor and low-income people center stage in the run up to the November Presidential election. The Poor People's Campaign's commitment to a reconstruction of society around the needs of the poor and dispossessed aligns closely with the missions of both CT CORE and Witnesses to Hunger. Witnesses to Hunger has also partnered with local campaigns to encourage people to return their Census 2020 forms the better to inform policy innovation and poverty interventions in the future. Most recently, they have provided public testimony at hearings on a Right-to-Counsel Bill (for those facing eviction) at the Connecticut State Housing Committee. The focus on empowerment, finding voice, and the refusal of invisibility echoes the call by Karen Washington, the New York City food activist, for greater access to opportunity, capital, and land in order for people of color to take control of their own narrative (unpublished data, 2018). This kind of activism holds out the promise of moving from dispossession to repossession, from extractive to agro-ecological approaches to food production and planning, from corporate-led to citizen-driven food ecosystems, and finally from urban 'food apartheid' to food justice.

7 | CONCLUSION

This article has examined civil society activism around food planning and food systems in New Haven, CT, a city whose demographic profile reveals significant socioeconomic and racial inequalities that are inscribed in a socially and spatially segregated landscape. Civil society groups working at a grassroots level largely set the agenda around food hunger in New Haven. That agenda, however, is broad-based and contradictory, incorporating the objectives of feeding the vulnerable (addressing food insecurity) and empowering the vulnerable (radical advocacy for food justice). The NPOs make interventions across the spectrum from emergency food services provision through to radical social movement activism. In between, a range of educational, awareness raising, and sustainable entrepreneurship programs build greater food literacy and contribute to enhancing ecosocial capital among the citizenry.

Activists meet regularly through the NHFPC and the FAWG, where the contradictory objectives outlined above are held in tension with each other. The food policy director

is in a strong position, morally (if less so materially), to help shift the focus from emergency provision toward a just food system. However, the efforts of civil society actors are structurally constrained by their dependence on philanthropic and grant-based funding, on the one hand, and the symbolic rather than substantive support afforded by a fiscally weak, resource-poor municipality on the other.

Finally, the paper has elaborated the disjuncture that has arisen between strategies that have the effect of depoliticizing hunger (soup kitchens, food pantries) and those that increasingly demand a repoliticization of hunger (access to land, capital, and resources). Running a food bank or soup kitchen is rather a different intervention to radical grassroots organizing aimed at transcending systemic inequities as Sbicca (2012) and others have demonstrated. The reform vs. radical taxonomy is not surprising in that opposing positions within the civil society sector more generally "encapsulate the contradiction between acting as consensual glue to avoid civil disorder and acting independently to promote critical or dissenting voices" (Milbourne & Murray, 2017, p. 15). It is clear from the analysis presented here that dissenting voices in New Haven have emerged to advocate for food justice and to contest political and economic hegemonies. Such advocates seek to connect food growing, food consumption, food distribution, and food waste within the contours of a socially just and racially equitable framework.

It can reasonably be argued that an inflection point in relation to food justice has been reached. The riskscape that exists in New Haven and in many other cities across the United States has become much more visible (and therefore more susceptible to political mobilization) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the BLM movement. According to epidemiologist Camara Jones, the virus is "unmasking the deep disinvestment in our communities, the historical injustices and the impact of residential segregation" (Johnson & Buford, 2020). The widespread mobilization of BLM in 2020 was catalyzed by the graphic images of George Floyd dying on the street while in the custody of the police. Both the pandemic and BLM have succeeded in focusing public attention on the disproportionate suffering of Blacks and other people of color in terms of hunger, susceptibility to COVID-19, and victimization through racism in the United States. As a result, there is now a real political opening for NPOs to amplify their grassroots organizing and exploit the opportunity structure to achieve greater food justice.

Food justice activists in New Haven emphasize the iniquitous impact of a food system built upon the logic of extraction, accumulation, profit, and exploitation. They advocate for a fundamental redistribution of resources that will put land back into the hands of the people. Historians and social commentators have noted the long-term social process of dispossession that has alienated many people from the land (Coates, 2014). This has culminated in what has been characterized as a kind

of modern enclosure movement that “distances people economically, socially and politically from the land they inhabit” (Christophers, 2018). Through practices such as commoning (the exercise of common rights to land use) and restitution, it is possible to move from dispossession to repossession. For instance, at the local level, the community land trust initiatives in New Haven have succeeded in acquiring municipal sites for communal growing “as a vehicle for democratic stewardship of place” (Thompson, 2015, p. 1021). At the national level, the Justice for Black Farmers Bill introduced in Congress in 2020 sought to increase Black-owned farmland to reverse decades of discriminatory practices. The Bill provided for the acquisition of up to 160 acres by a Black farmer at no charge through the USDA system of land grants. Recipients would be new or experienced Black farmers. Although unsuccessful, elements of the Bill are discernable in the Covid Relief Package signed into law by President Biden in March 2021. Under those provisions, the income of the poorest 20% is set to rise by 20%. The package directs US\$4 billion to Black farmers as a step toward reparations for slavery (Freedland, 2021). These examples signify a value shift in terms of our conceptualization of the food system and echo a call for “a radical change towards the explicit inclusion and deliberation of [a] plurality of values to reconcile inherent value conflicts among diverse food actors in the global food system” (Kaiser et al., 2021, p. 8).

Urban dwellers have been equally dispossessed of the capacity to produce, distribute, and consume food within the context of their localities. That is because food production, distribution, and consumption operate on an industrial scale and almost wholly with a profit motive in mind. Increasingly, the food system as currently organized is seen as not sustainable. Many NPOs seek to place sustainability, environmental degradation, food waste, and food justice on food policy agendas (Kaiser et al., 2021). Moreover, many experts now contend that the complexities of the food system can only be captured through a circular and interlocking system interacting with a variety of other social and natural systems (Kaiser et al., 2021). NPOs are now well positioned to capitalize on value shifts that are beginning to occur in the wake of COVID-19. Already, research has shown a growing interest in a more holistic approach to food, including an interest in diversifying sources of food, making more meals using raw material instead of processed foods, throwing away less, and trying a vegetable box or ordering food from a local farm for the first time (The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, 2020). One of the consequences of the pandemic may be an increase in food literacy, which will be beneficial from a health and well-being point of view. There is an opportunity now for securing greater recognition of the food ecosystem and the values that underpin it, leading potentially to an alternative food system that is embedded locally and where people themselves become the agents of social change.

Finally, community-based activism around food in New Haven plays an important role in cultivating connectedness that can be harnessed to deal with crisis events such as COVID-19. In the wake of the pandemic, the NHFPC director worked closely with the NPOs in the city to pivot toward a more joined-up approach to food provisioning (M. J. Chadukiewicz, personal communication, 2021). Indeed, throughout the United States (and in the United Kingdom) a distinctive form of civic engagement, known as mutual aid, has resurfaced advocates who “preach the virtues of neighborly ‘solidarity’ over ‘charity’” (*The Economist*, 2020). The term ‘mutual aid’ was used by the Black Panther Party to describe their Free Breakfast for Children Program, “which gave black and poor children in West Oakland food before they went to school . . . West Oakland’s struggle for FJ [Food Justice] thus began with the Black Panther Party” (Sibcca, 2012, p. 460). The renewed popularity of mutual aid speaks to the long-standing problem of endemic structural inequalities that consistently produce adverse outcomes for poor Blacks and other people of color. Making ‘food apartheid’ more visible is the task taken up by food justice groups like Witnesses to Hunger. The latter’s engagement with the Poor People’s Campaign throughout 2020 is also evidence of the kind of solidaristic alliances that can be built in the interests of a common political cause. That political cause has come into sharp relief through the twin impacts of COVID-19 and BLM. There is now an opportunity to advance a food justice agenda in the contemporary city, forging a politics of engagement, capability, and empowerment that extends citizens’ control over social reproduction (Tornaghi, 2016).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude to the people of New Haven for their time and contribution to this research. Thank you to the Special Issue editors, Marian Simon-Rojo, Kathrin Specht, and Katrin Bohn, for selecting my article for inclusion. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

FUNDING

The research was supported by the Fulbright Commission. Fulbright-Environmental Protection Agency Scholarship awarded in 2018–2019.

Open Access funding provided by IReL (Maynooth University).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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How to cite this article: Corcoran, M. P. Beyond 'food apartheid': Civil society and the politicization of hunger in New Haven, Connecticut. *Urban Agric Region Food Syst.* 2021;6:e20013. <https://doi.org/10.1002/uar2.20013>