

## Book review

### Hunger Pains: Life inside foodbank Britain

Kayleigh Garthwaite  
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The UK is experiencing an explosion in food aid and support for people in poverty. Thus, the Trussell Trust's network of food banks alone grew from 2 to 400 in the ten year period leading up to the 2015 general election, when they reported that over 1 million people received emergency food parcels. Given the parallel growth in independent food banks, the total figure is likely to be significantly higher. *Hunger Pains* seeks to reveal the complexity of the human suffering behind these figures, and to offer a challenge to some of the dehumanising discourses that circulate around those who find themselves unable to meet their basic human needs.

Garthwaite spent 2 years volunteering with her local Trussell Trust food bank in Stockton-on-Tees as part of an action research project, recording hundreds of hours of interviews and observations. The book draws upon the stories and experiences of people working in and utilising this particular food bank. However, it seeks to go beyond this specific example by setting the findings within the broader neoliberal political context in which poverty is cast as an individualised failure rather than a systemic inevitability. As she reports, the lived reality for ordinary people means grappling with a toxic nexus of austerity spending cuts, welfare reform and the expansion of precarious and low paid employment.

The book starts by describing the research project, introducing the reader to the socio-economic profile of Stockton-on-Tees and explaining the background to the study, which was the author's involvement in a project exploring localised health inequalities and the decision taken to combine the role of researcher with that of food bank volunteer in order to deepen engagement with the research environment. We are taken through a typical day as a food bank volunteer, introduced to the mechanics of gathering, sorting, storing and distributing donated food, and provided with an overview of the Trussell Trust's referral and voucher system.

The focus then shifts to the juxtaposition of the political and media discourses surrounding the need for and use of food banks with the lived experiences of the people Garthwaite worked with and interviewed during her time as a volunteer. Responsibility for the growth in food bank use is resolutely attributed to policies such as austerity-driven public spending cuts, welfare reform, and the growth the poorly paid, precarious employment. She robustly dismisses the suggestion by some right

wing politicians that food bank expansion is supply-led or in some way a desirable example of community self-help.

We are introduced to people who have been left without any income for weeks, sometimes because of delays in processing benefit claims, sometimes as a result of sanctions that appear draconian at best, and increasingly because a zero hours contract can sometimes mean zero hours (and hence zero income). The picture painted is one of impossible odds stacked against those at the foot of the socio-economic ladder. Food bank users have typically been exposed to a benefits system that assumes an unreasonably high level of bureaucratic literacy, welfare reforms that presuppose the availability of sufficient secure jobs that pay a living wage, and the growth of low-paid, precarious work that tacitly demands state subsidy.

One of the most important contributions this book makes to the ongoing debate about the role of food banks in poverty alleviation concerns what the author sees as their creeping 'institutionalisation' in the UK, and the extent to which they are becoming a normal feature of welfare support rather than an indicator of a broken system. The reader is reminded that emergency food provision has become embedded in the welfare regimes of North America, where hunger is an anticipated and normalised feature of poverty within an advanced economy. One of the warnings from the US experience is that food banks create dependency. Garthwaite underlines this point well in concluding that it is society as a whole that risks forming an unhealthy attachment to food banks, allowing the state to withdraw from providing social security to its citizens, leaving the most vulnerable hostage to the philanthropic whims of individuals and organisations.

Whilst the existence of 'independent' food banks is acknowledged, this book draws very heavily upon Trussell Trust data. This poses a risk that the Trussell model is seen as representative of food banks as a whole, masking the complexity and interdependencies of community support networks that respond to local need in different ways. To be fair, the book does not claim to be presenting a comprehensive picture of poverty alleviation infrastructure, making it clear that it portrays the standpoint of one volunteer who has decided to use their platform to give voice to people who have very little opportunity to share their experiences.

Emphasising the unique 'insider' perspective afforded by her role as a volunteer, Garthwaite is careful to present food bank users in a humane and nuanced way, including those it may be difficult to empathise with, such as the drug user sanctioned for not bothering to turn up to an interview. Her bottom line is that no one, no matter what their circumstances, deserves to go hungry - especially in one of the richest countries in the world. The commitment to honouring the dignity of her research participants whilst not shying away from some of the more controversial clients she encounters is a real strength of the book. However, for me, the author's position as a privileged outsider is a little too visible in the narrative at times. She describes the street where the food bank is located as 'filled with betting shops, pawn brokers and shops offering cheap fast food'; we hear about her discomfort when she is mistaken for a food bank user rather than a volunteer; and she returns again and again to one client of the food bank having 'two inch long roots on your dyed red hair' as evidence of someone's life heading off the rails. However, it could well be that, for some readers, Garthwaite's honest account of her emotional responses to encounters with poverty adds to the accessibility. Equally there is a tacit assumption that the reader is also a privileged outsider, someone who needs to be persuaded to care.

This then leads to a final consideration, namely: who is this book for? It is engaging, passionately political, and highly accessible. It sets itself up well as a counterpoint to the demonising narratives surrounding poverty, and may well persuade people who

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have never experienced poverty to reappraise some of their ideological assumptions about people who find themselves turning to charities to help feed themselves and their families. Whilst it is by no means a heavyweight academic tome, and as such lacks theoretically informed analysis, it is clearly aimed at a wider audience. As such it provides a good introductory overview of the complex and contested drivers of poverty within an advanced economy and the lived experiences of those who are going hungry as a consequence.

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