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Citation: Caraher, M. (2011). Food Austerity: a lifestyle choice for whom!. Journal of the Home Economics Institute of Australia, 18(2), pp. 17-25.

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Food austerity: A lifestyle choice for whom!

Martin Caraher, PhD

Introduction

We live in a global world where the consequences of an action in one part of the globe have implications in another. Since 2007, the global food crises have highlighted the interdependence of the global food system. Natural disasters, divergence of crops to bio fuel and the increasing use of financial speculation through future trading on key food commodities have all resulted in rising prices (HLPE, 2011). For example, in Australia the Queensland floods in 2011 resulted in an immediate need to address food as an emergency issue; the indirect effects of the natural catastrophe were on global cereal prices in 2011 with the loss of the wheat crop from the Darling Downs. An IBISWorld (2011) business report on the Queensland floods noted that:

This is expected to flow on to a short-term price spike for food, with prices expected to rise by up to 200%. The lost wheat production is expected to exacerbate existing global wheat shortages, caused by poor production worldwide, particularly in the US and Russia. This is likely to cause a further increase in global wheat prices (p.1).

So the consequences were, and are, that for some in other parts of the world, bread in the supermarket increased in price.

Global inequalities are stark, with the rich developed nations enjoying choice and food safety at a time when the Millennium Goal to reduce hunger is not being met. In fact, the numbers at risk have increased (George, 2010; HLPE, 2011). When abroad in the developing world, these divides are sometimes stark and obvious as a section of the population engages in conspicuous food practices and consumption while others suffer 'want'. While these global divides are often apparent and somewhat visible in intra-country differences and indeed in countries in economic transition, the inter-country differences are sometimes less apparent.

In addition, what is occurring is that the choices that people are making, in the name of what might be called the new concerns with ecological health, mirror the facts of life of those who live with 'want'—that is, restricted choice and diets. The distinction is, of course, that of choice—if I choose to eat less meat and consume less or eat a locally-based diet then that is different than if this consumption is a matter of necessity and lack of choice (Kingsolver, 2007; Pollan, 2009). At a time when the Australian Government (2011) is developing a national food plan, these matters are of grave concern and need to be included in any actions.

This article sets out as a case study some of the key concepts of what is being called the 'new austerity' movement in the developed world or what is sometimes called the global north. This new austerity is characterised by behaviours that are voluntarily undertaken or adopted and which have an underpinning ecological basis. These choices, in other circumstances, might be seen as limiting. So choosing not to eat imported food, spurn supermarkets, eat locally, grow your own food or buy foods that are local or organic all fit into this category (see Andrews, 2008; Roep & Wiskerke, 2006; Stuart, 2009). All these can be seen as part of the attempt to 'save the world'. All worthy and notable, and actions many reading this article would aspire to. These are not up for debate here but what is being questioned is the use of these motivations and behaviours for application to a wider population.

The article sets out to explore two issues: firstly, changes in dietary and food culture using the model of the nutrition transition; and secondly, the new round of food behaviours and lifestyles being developed to tackle the ecological sustainability problems that we are faced with. Some argue that there are links between the availability and use of resources and the nutrition implications of the production system. This is what Lang (2010) terms 'big choices' about the food system and asks

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the question: Is there is a link between healthy diets and the development of a sustainable agricultural and food production system?

The nutrition transition

As the background to the changing nature of food poverty and insecurity, the world is experiencing a 'nutrition transition' (Caballero & Popkin, 2002) with diseases, such as obesity and type II or late-onset diabetes, previously associated with affluence, middle age and lifestyle factors, now skipping a generation and occurring amongst younger members of society and in low-income and marginalised groups. So, in developed countries, we are seeing overabundance and want existing in the same societies. But the nutrition transition is also occurring in the developing world with non-communicable, diet-related diseases sitting side by side with diseases of under-nutrition.

At the same time as the nutrition transition, the face of food poverty is changing with problems of over-nutrition now existing alongside the problems of under-nutrition and micro-nutrient deficiencies. This is important to note as the changing nature of food supply and consumption is leading to a need to revisit and reconceptualise our ideas of food poverty, see Table 1.

The changes in any society are complex and subject to local food culture and customs.

However, they tend to follow a pattern whereby in the first stages of development, the rich adopt the food habits of the rich first-world countries. This can take the form of consumption of take-away and processed foods, all of which can contribute to chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancers (Popkin, 1998). The reasons for this are twofold—these lifestyle choices are culturally aspirational but also expensive and only the well-off can afford them (Rodrigues, Caraher, Trichopoulou & de Almeida, 2007).

The second stage of the changes is rooted in the food system becoming more industrial and concentrated so that processed foods and fast food become more affordable to all. Fast food is 'fast' thanks to modern technology and suits modern lifestyles (Schlosser, 2001) and in many instances a viable option for those on low incomes (the Big Mac index is an indicator of how much time you have to work to afford a Big Mac, see <http://www.bigmacindex.org/>). In fact, the use of take-away and fast food (or street food) often becomes an important money- and labour-saving mechanism for many who are engaged in piece-meal work.

At the latter stage of the transition, the rich classes return to eating more basic foods due to the health implications (Rodrigues et al., 2007).

The dietary impacts of such moves are an increase in the fat, salt and sugar content of these foods

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Table 1. The 'Old' and 'New' forms of food poverty

	'Old' food poverty	'New' food poverty
Availability	Lack of food	Over-abundance of processed foods
Nutrition problem	Under-nutrition	High calorie intake and overall lack of balance and possible micro-nutrient deficiency
Specific groups	The urban poor, the 'indigent' and those who are unemployed	The same but with the addition of the working poor
Nutrient profile	Nutrient light	Energy/calorie dense
Nutrition problem	Under-nutrition	Lack of balance
Meal occasions	Few	Continual 'grazing'
Food expenditure	High % of household spending	Low % of household spending
Price implications	Absolute cost of food	Relative cost of food
Social implication	Removal from the norm	Social & cultural isolation
Work	Manual	Sedentary
Easiest mode of access	Walk or bike	Car
Fuel	Food	Fossil fuel
Drink	Water	Carbonated drinks
Price pressures	Cost of food	Cost of food relative to other demands
Appearance	Thinness	Obesity
Fantasy role model	Plump / fat royalty	Thin celebrities
Disease patterns	Diseases of 'want' characterised by under-nutrition	Diseases of 'want' and affluence occurring side by side.

Adapted from Lang, Barling and Caraher (2009)

with possible long-term consequences for health burdens. Obesity and coronary heart disease (CHD) have, until relatively recently, been viewed as diseases of affluence/food choice and less of a problem in developing countries than in rich, industrialised ones. This is no longer true (see Caballero & Popkin, 2002; Egger & Swinburn, 2010). CHD and some food-related cancers (e.g. bowel) (WCRF/AICR, 2007) are on the increase in developing countries, where the more affluent social groups are tending towards a more 'Western' lifestyle—eating different foods, taking less exercise—and not just aspiring to, but achieving western patterns of consumption. In developing countries, obesity now exists alongside more traditional problems of under-nutrition.

The modern globalisation process means that many of these changes are now occurring in the space of single years as opposed to decades. The consequence is that the chronic and acute diseases and problems associated with food occur side by side as opposed to occurring temporally or sequentially. So the behaviours associated with poverty are played out by a section of the population, while another indulges.

The eating habits of whole populations are changing fast. The transition has taken place over 50–70 years in areas such as the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and other members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) block of countries. But it is now occurring in shorter time spans in the newly emerging nations of the developing world. Whilst the nutrition transition is driven by urbanization and the increasing supply of readily available pre-prepared, processed and energy-dense foods in the diet, there are also inter-related cultural and structural elements. As a result, changes in eating out have both cultural and technology elements. Because the transition has occurred over a longer period of time in the nations of the developed world, the consequences of it are sometimes less apparent or visible.

Concomitant with these changes, the nature of food poverty, hunger and even the outcomes of this have all changed. For the majority of developed economies such as the UK, United States (US) and Australia, the problem is not one of hunger (although some still do go hungry). Rather, the emphasis has shifted from under-nourishment in calorie terms to one of micro-nutrient inequalities and of over-consumption of calories, leading to obesity among some groups (refer back to Table 1 for some indication of these changes).

Allied to this is the concept of relative poverty, where the shifts reflect both changing lifestyle

practices and cultural norms, and not simply the amount of food. Food poverty is relative in that it is dependent on the standards in a society and people define their cultural needs relative to the population standard—in many developed countries, not being able to afford meat or being able to eat out are now considered part of the measures of food insecurity/poverty. The term 'socially acceptable ways' is often included in definitions of food poverty/security. This could, for example, be taken to mean that if you were getting your nutrient requirement from a source such as a foodbank, that it is relatively unacceptable if the majority of your contemporaries are able to afford a healthy diet and shop at supermarkets. A definition of food security is '*Access to enough food for an active, healthy life; at minimum, includes the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and an ensured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways*' (included in Troy, Miller & Osler, 2011). The recent US Institute of Medicine report provides definitions of high food security, low food security, food insufficiency and hunger. They (Troy, Miller & Osler, 2011) define very low food security as:

A range of food insecurity in which households report multiple indications of food access problems, but typically report few, if any, indications of reduced food intake on the USDA survey. Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted (p.2.1).

This illustrates the changing nature of food insecurity/poverty. The Feeding America campaign (see <http://feedingamerica.org/>, accessed 4th August 2011) reports that 37 million Americans regularly go hungry. This is alongside the problems associated with over-consumption such as obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes. Indeed, many of the same groups who over-consume may at different stages go hungry.

There is a societal problem with both over- and under-consumption in that whilst they impact on all, there is a disproportionate impact on the poor (George, 2010). Data on food insecurity and hunger in both the UK and Australia are not routinely collected, fuelled in part by a belief among politicians and policy makers that hunger has been conquered.

Hunger still exists in many communities and the changing global economic crises are exacerbating this, often in new ways such as impacts on migrants and the working poor (for an Australian example see Gallego, Ellies & Wright, 2008). For example, migrants in many nation states have ambiguous status and entitlement to welfare and security

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benefits. Plus the working poor are in danger as they may not be entitled to welfare and food benefits but are forced to squeeze their available income, and we know that spending on food is the elastic item in the budget that you can cut back on. Hence we see the emergence of foodbanks and food tables. Agencies such as the foodbank movement in Australia report increasing levels of poverty among new groups such as the working poor as well as the more familiar groups such as Aboriginal communities, rural communities and single-parent families (Troy, Miller & Osler, 2011; Koshy & Phillimore, 2007).

Riches (2002) has reported similar trends in Canada. The Canadian Association of Food Banks (2003) produced a report asking if foodbanks were the way Canadian society wanted to tackle food poverty.

Australia, almost alone among the developed nations, has escaped the ravages of economic decline; the economy is growing and the level of exports rising. However, this prosperity has brought about some difficulties in food poverty and we see the gap widening between the rich and the poor. In Western Australia, for example, rising house prices have created a new generation of homeless and the development of new suburbs has created food isolation for some new migrants who may not have access to a car for shopping (Koshy & Phillimore, 2007; Gallegos, Ellies & Wright, 2008).

The point is that such changes in consumption are not merely the consequence of individual lifestyle choices but of structural changes in both the national and global food systems such as the ready availability and cheapness of foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. This has shifted the balance of symptoms of food poverty to issues such as over-consumption of processed and take-away foods as well as obesity (see Table 1). So there is a shift from under- to over- or mal-consumption, but also the nature and quality of the foods change.

These global class divisions can be seen within nation states. In high to middle income countries, the middle and poor groups in a country may have access to the same facilities as the consuming class but be disadvantaged by issues such as price, ease of access and cultural distance. Many low-income groups, as well as facing problems with the price of food, also face problems with the price of fuel to cook it and the competing priorities of whether to spend on food or other necessities that are non negotiable.

At the same time as we are seeing these changes in food security/poverty, we are also witnessing

a growth in new ways of dealing with food, to which we now turn and which I have labelled the 'new austerity' movement.

Alternative food networks and the new austerity

Egger and Swinburn (2010) make the link between the nutrition implications and the planetary ones in the subtitle of their book *How we're eating ourselves and the planet to death*. We are drawing on an ever-decreasing resource while the global population increases. The current Australian consultation document on food (Australian Government, 2011) sees the solutions to 'eating ourselves and the planet to death' as located within consumer choice and the increasing efficiencies of an industrial agri-food system. Australia is unique in never having gone through a pastoral system of development. It has, in its recent past, adopted an agricultural system that is not indigenous and reflects a continent without a tradition of indigenous pastoralism (Flannery, 2005; Symons, 2007). In effect, Australia bypassed the development of its own system of agriculture and imported a European model (Caraher & Carey, 2010 & 2011). The Australian grasslands were changed to enclosure to grow food on scales not previously seen but also not in tune with the local ecology. In essence it was an imposed model of agriculture. The dominant agricultural model is a Eurocentric one reflecting the early waves of immigration. Similarly, with the development of ranch farming, the scale of this and the subsequent damage to the environment have become apparent in recent years (Flannery, 2005).

The term 'new austerity' is used here to describe those choices people make in the light of ecological sustainability. This is different from the austerity experienced in, for example, Europe after WWII (Kynaston, 2007; Hardymen 1995; Fearnley-Whittingstall, 2010), when many of the choices and behaviours were imposed and controlled through legislation and rationing. The new austerity is different in that it is closely related to concerns about ecological concerns, peak oil and a genuine desire to make things 'better' and make a difference (Hopkins, 2008; Pinkerton & Hopkins, 2009). A new generation of food campaigners has arisen who see denial and lifestyle choice as a solution to the global problems of over-industrialisation of the food system and concentrations of power within that system.

This emerging group of 'new austerity' initiatives and behaviours centres around sustainability, alternative supply chains and local food, with

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many of this new generation of ‘alternative food’ networks being rooted in choice and lifestyle. This is not to demean or diminish these new approaches based on lifestyle choice, but to point out that the opportunity to exercise choice is not equally an opportunity for all (Troy, Miller & Osler, 2011). My point here is not that these are wrong or have no impact but that individual and communities’ choices do not compensate for the damage done at a structural or corporate level.

This new austerity movement also runs the risk of stigmatising and alienating those who live in deprived circumstances as they are premised on the principles of choice and availability, options not equally available to all.

The irony is that choice based on limiting your choice requires other resources such as time, land or skills such as health literacy. So those who grow their own food require land, knowledge, skills and time. Of course, those in reduced circumstances can grow their own food but with greater resource demands and fewer returns for their inputs.

Also, if the solutions are seen to lie in self choice then such approaches run the danger of distracting attention from the structural determinants of food choice and behaviour and reinforcing the victim blaming model. As a result, food poverty will be reduced to an issue of choice or management. ‘Hunger’ will be reduced to a matter of individual choice and a consequence of the wrong choice of the lifestyle—that is, if only you grew your own food or cooked from scratch you would not be hungry or wanting (see James, 2011 for an example of this argument). In a similar vein, Pollan (2009) calls eating an agricultural act and calls for us all to be involved in growing at least some of our own food. Yet such a laudable aim is subject to the availability of resources and social capitals (Caraher, 2009; Caraher & Carey, 2010 and 2011).

An inter-country example illustrates some of these contentions. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the Russian population experienced shortages of basic foodstuffs. Rooftop gardening emerged as one way of addressing urban food shortages. In one district in St. Petersburg, 2000+ tonnes of vegetables are grown in this way. This arose out of the need to meet food shortages and food insecurity (World Health Organization, 1999). On a similar climatic level in Michigan but a few degrees south in latitude, there is group of local food consumer activists—those committed to ‘eating locally’ in Michigan. The group has adopted the name *Edible WOW* (WOW takes its name from three densely populated counties in southeast Michigan: Washtenaw, Oakland and

Wayne) and is part of ‘Edible Communities’ network of local food publications (see www.ediblecommunities.com). The reasons for these actions in Michigan are very different from those in St Petersburg; the WOW group is focused on eating locally, methods of food production, food storage over the hungry season, local production within the city and the provenance of food. So here we see two groups doing similar things but for different reasons—one because they had to, the other because they chose to.

The activity in Michigan fits what Winter (2003) has called ‘defensive localism’, where the development of local and alternative food economies are seen as bulwarks against the dominant system of food supply and delivery. Indeed, they are seen as acts of rebellion and protest but protest for many is a luxury that comes with a cost. On the other hand, such developments have also been critiqued for being ‘middle class’ and niche in their operations. They can also be critiqued for the level of social skills and social capitals needed to adopt an alternative lifestyle.

Alternative food behaviours within the ‘new austerity’ movement often arise out of dissatisfaction and a legitimate concern with the dominant food models/systems. They are often premised on a desire to make things better, which is admirable and to be supported (Roberts, 1996). Very often the focus is on the local, even where there is a wider movement as in Slow Food or the transition town movement (Andrews, 2008; Hopkins, 2008; Pinkerton & Hopkins, 2009). The new generation of projects and behaviours has arisen out of the focus on locally-based models of production and consumption (the four Ps of producer, product, process and place), with quite a few being producer- or grower-driven as in box schemes or farmers’ markets.

These alternative food behaviours can be broken down into two overlapping groups. The first group comprises those with a clear commercial purpose and the second those who are part of the new social enterprise movement (Mawson, 2008). So the alternative is often an alternative to the dominant food supply models but not necessarily an alternative economic model. Some are individually focussed and assume the power of the individual to make changes in the system (Belasco, 2007).

Stuart (2009), in his book on waste food and the whole freegan movement, points out an important issue with respect to over-production and waste within the current food system. Whether this can be a lifestyle choice for all, and especially

for those in poverty, remains questionable. Skip raiding for food requires resources and skills—resources of time, transport and storage, and skills in food preparation and even the law. For those in deprived circumstances, shopping at the supermarket with two children requires a remarkable feat of logistics; raiding skips for food with two children in tow may introduce other necessary skills and resources!

Belasco (2007) and Fromartz (2006) note that many of the original US alternative food networks were, by the 1970s, torn apart by disputes over the issue of meeting consumer choice and the extent to which these undermined the original values of 'oppositional' politics. Fromartz (2006) documents the development of the organic movement from an alternative counter-culture movement to one that is now mainstream and highly industrialised. According to Gibson-Graham (2008), alternative does not equate with archaic and regressive but rather, for him, in the best cases, uses different capitals to create something that is more than the aim of 'economic monism' and acts as a transformative force. This can perhaps be seen in the emergence of a new generation of community-owned companies (community interest companies) in the UK, where the focus is on community ownership and reinvesting any surplus (financial and social) back into the community.

Many of these new austerity projects are individually focussed and assume the power of the individual to make changes in the system (Belasco, 2007), whether as a participant in an alternative project or as a consumer. Pollan (2008 and 2009) can be seen as one of the key advocates of this new austerity. He has listed a number of rules for a food manifesto that typifies this approach to the problems, the vast majority being based on the individual making choices (see Figure 1 for a similar list). However, the poor often do not have the option to adopt alternative food behaviours. Initiatives based on growing often ignore the fact that one of the major limitations on the poor is space—space to live and space to grow. So, for some, the new austerity is a lifestyle choice while for other groups it is a fact of life.

The issue here is not that Pollan's or Lang's rules or guidance are inappropriate or inaccurate, but that the application of them to addressing food poverty is limited. They are rooted in lifestyle or individual behaviour change and do not address the social determinants of behaviour or the resources needed to make such changes. As such, they offer little to the alleviation of food poverty per se. At best, they are the application of healthy living and eating advice within an alternative perspective.

Discussion

Why is all this important? It is important because the lessons of the past are not being addressed and this new generation of food projects are presented as if they were something new, whereas in fact they are part of a longer tradition.

Albritton (2009) argues that capitalism creates hunger and obesity, and that these dialectics of the new poverty are the result of control of the food system by a small number of global companies right through the food chain. Australia is no different in this respect with two companies (Coles and Woolworths) accounting for the majority of food purchases. For many, food is something that is sourced in supermarkets, comes in packets and from take-away outlets. Some seek ways to redress that disenfranchisement through food initiatives based around growing and production, and this results in, for some, a reconnect to food. So, in an attempt to regain control from the dominant food system, some resort to a re-engagement through growing their own. Many school-based initiatives now adopt this approach combining cooking with food growing (see <http://www.stephaniealexander.com.au/garden.htm>). This is among the reasons why many embrace alternative food networks and supply systems as an attempt

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Figure 1. Eighteen cultural rules for ecological public health eating*

1. Eat less but better; go for quality
2. Choose food not just for what it is but for how it was grown, reared, delivered and processed
3. Eat simply as a norm and eat feasts as celebrations, i.e. exceptionally
4. Eat no more than you expend in energy; build exercise into your daily life
5. Eat equitably; don't take food out of another's mouth
6. Eat a plant-based diet with flesh more sparingly, if at all
7. If you do eat flesh (fish or meat), choose that which has run/swum as wild /free-range as possible; the nutrients are different
8. Celebrate variety, the goal being to get biodiversity into the field and thence to your plate; for instance, try aiming to eat 20–30 plant species per week
9. Think fossil fuels; embedded energy in food is 'oil'
10. Eat seasonally, where possible
11. Eat according to the proximity principle, as locally as you can; support local suppliers
12. Learn to cook quickly producing simple meals; leave fancy food for really special occasions
13. Be prepared to pay the full (sometimes hidden) costs of producing and transporting the food; if you do not, others will
14. Drink water not soft drinks
15. If you drink alcohol, use it moderately
16. Be aware of hidden ingredients in food; look at the label to locate the unnecessary salt and sugars; if they are there, don't buy
17. Educate yourself without becoming neurotic
18. Enjoy food in the short-term but think about its impact long-term

* Expanded & altered from an idea in: Tim Lang & Michael Heasman (2004).

to escape such control by outside factors; a lack of trust in the conventional food system drives people towards a sense of localism (Morgan, Marsden & Murdoch, 2006).

Belasco (2007) noted that the instigators of the 'new austerity' movement and the alternative food networks often had their roots in 'oppositional' politics and this can be harnessed to develop what Thompson (1993) termed the moral economy of the mob—that is, a concern with higher level elements beyond the individual. However, there is the concomitant danger of encouraging people to act and then blaming them when their material and financial circumstances work against them making such changes. Or blaming them when their individual changes do not add up to a mass change (Caraher, 2003).

Others see the austerity movement as a self-interested one where groups such as the baby boomers started out with a social conscience but, some argue, became focused on individual health as they aged. Their social capital changed from one of group and the planet to that of being centred on the individual (Belasco, 2007). So, for example, a concern with organics may move from a concern with the environment to one focussed on individual health and wellbeing although, as Seyfang (2006) points out, organic consumers do constitute a broad church.

While the new generation of non-government organisations (such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth) are developing sophisticated ways of dealing with the new global order, other activists are becoming disenchanted and seeking ways of direct action or, more increasingly, indirect action by opting out of the system. Those protestors, who through their violence gain media attention, may be less concerned with the issues of reform of the system than with its overthrow. They may, in fact, be diverting attention from the problems of poverty and access.

Yet this new protest may involve others in simply getting on with growing and supplying food to themselves, their families and neighbourhoods. Some of this can happen at a structural level, whether at state or regional points. Toronto stands out as an example of a city-wide food policy, which in recent times has sought to influence its own food supply hinterland and foodshed (Straessle, 2007; Lister, 2007). The difference between the Toronto experience and that of other alternative food movements is that food policy is embedded in the systems of the state. This, of course, brings with it its own disadvantages but does include the possibility of more structural and lasting changes in terms of what it can

influence. Also, the Toronto experience is one of linking the ecological aspects of food production with reductions in food poverty.

Some argue that green consumers' attitudes and values vary from those of others—that they intrinsically value nature, hold pro-social and pro-environmental values, and have positive attitudes towards local products and fair trade (Gilg, Barr & Ford, 2005). Other studies have examined these attitudes and found that such individuals feel their purchasing behaviours can positively influence the outcome of environmental problems (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). Others have shown little difference in attitudes and beliefs to wider environmental issues (White et al., 2009).

In terms of attitudes and values, those on low incomes generally exhibit the same values as all other groups, but those on low-incomes are not able to act on those values and behaviours due to a lack of social, physical and economic capital. There is little to suggest that low-income consumers are not interested in ecological sustainability and the environment but they lack the capital assets to act on their interest.

Moving forward

Food austerity is the 'new rock and roll'—eating local food and growing your own are the new badges of lifestyle choice. What people sought to hide during the Great Depression (Steinbeck 1936/1988) is now a public badge of alternativeness—growing your own, being frugal and denying certain foods—albeit through choice as opposed to necessity (Kingsolver, 2007).

The new austerity movement needs to specifically endorse and embrace issues of the greater good and inequity in the food system. They should have distinct policies to ensure that they address food inequity—a form of inequity auditing of their activities.

This issue of the wider food system being instrumental in food poverty and insecurity is not often addressed, nor is the concomitant withdrawal of the state from food welfare provision. We have reached a position where food is seen as a private good and one that occupies the realm of choice and consumerism as opposed to being seen as a public good, the equitable distribution of which can ensure public health outcomes.

Perhaps, ironically, the work on food welfare in the US, through its women, infant and children scheme (WIC) and the school lunch programme, exemplifies a public goods approach to food

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Capitalism
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and obesity
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(Oliveira & Frazão 2009). Contemporary calls in the US to address 'food deserts' focus on deprived areas having a supermarket or large grocery store that sells a range of fruit and vegetables (United States Department of Agriculture, 2009). This is a reflection of the dominant market system. Michelle Obama, the President's wife, announced a US\$400 million effort to eradicate food deserts within seven years. This comes at a time when the alternative movement is growing, but for the poor and disenfranchised there is, it appears, no 'alternative'. It may be that future development of alternative food systems and networks will contribute to a further sense of alienation and create a further gap in the social divide. At a time when well-off consumers are moving away from the dominant system, the dominant system is being brought closer to the poor.

The current focus on food as a green issue hides the poverty of many who are not able to access or afford food, and may also misunderstand the cultural aspects of food and its social significance (Caraher & Reynolds, 2005). So some, with self denial and lifestyle choice as part of the 'new austerity' such as 100 mile or 100 kilometre diets or locavore-based diets, are expressing a form of social capital which has its roots in the protestant ethic of denial and the greater good. But, ironically, this may not be an option for those on low incomes or disenfranchised in other ways (see as an example of this new genre Kingsolver, 2007). Many in this genre refer to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854 and 2004) with its focus on independent living and a harking back to bucolic times when life was perceived as simple.

This analysis of the new austerity movement may seem harsh to some, and it is important to remember that the critical lens used was that of offering an alternative perspective on these and not an analysis of the work undertaken by these projects as such. Many of you reading this article, myself included, subscribe to the values and behaviours of the new austerity movement. This seems to be a given. The challenge for these new networks is to broaden their scope by adopting a broader approach to include lobbying, campaigning beyond members' individual interests, and a specific approach to addressing inequality and inclusiveness.

With the popularity of the new austerity movement, there is a danger in taking the words of the American philosopher Aldo Leopold at face value when he said there are spiritual dangers in not owning a farm, the first is to suppose that 'breakfast comes from the grocery store' and the second that 'heat come from the furnace'. The thrust of this argument is alluring but worrying as

it runs the risk of victim blaming and of allowing the behaviours to be closely associated with values that assume self-help is the answer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the changing nature of food poverty allied to the nutrition transition has perhaps encouraged policy makers to adopt a narrow focus on behaviour and choice as solutions. Movements and projects based on the new austerity principles do not contribute in any significant way to preventing or alleviating food insecurity/poverty. They may also, unwittingly, lend a model to policy makers that is rooted in self-help and alternative practices. These, while useful, do not fundamentally change the conditions or circumstances in which people live, and for those who are food insecure or living in food poverty, they will in most cases introduce an extra burden. The Via Campesina movement from the developing world provides one model where the welfare of food is linked to the green issues of sustainability and concern for the environment (see <http://viacampesina.org/en/>), but the roots of this movement are in oppositional politics and providing a voice for the poor and disenfranchised. The focus on self-help within the alternative food movement may shift attention from the underlying causes of poverty to the symptoms. There are possibilities, like broad alliances of food poverty/anti-hunger work and new austerity projects and movements, to maximise strengths, build on the oppositional nature inherent in the new austerity, and develop action and protest around food poverty.

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Alternative food
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