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Salonen, Anna Sofia

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Religion, poverty, and abundance

Anna Salonen ¹**ABSTRACT**

In contrast with most social theories, which are inclined to see the world and its problems as a matter of scarcity, this paper discusses poverty and religious organizations as actors in the field of poverty alleviation from the viewpoint of excess and abundance. The analysis draws from two essays that deal with the question of excess and excessiveness from the perspectives of social theory and moral philosophy, and applies their ideas in order to understand and reconsider the social practice of food assistance and the role of religious organizations as food assistance providers. This paper suggests that charitable food assistance is an excess rescaling strategy, which brings together food insecurity and food waste and thus makes food excess more desirable and less disturbing. Via the processes of rescaling and decriminalizing food excess, excess becomes a utility and a resource for helping people who suffer from poverty. Religious organizations, in turn, become middlemen in rescaling and decriminalizing excess and transforming it into a virtue.

¹University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to A.S. (email: anna.s.salonen@helsinki.fi)

Starting elsewhere

There is an abundance of research on how religious communities and other voluntary sector organizations help people who live in poor economic and social conditions by giving these people food (e.g., Salonen, 2016a, b, 2017; McIntyre et al., 2016; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2015; Silvasti, 2015; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2014; Van der Horst et al., 2014; Noordeggraaf, 2010; Riches, 1997, to name but a few). It is nothing new for churches and other religious communities to do so. However, the food assistance practices that we witness today are different in that they proliferate across the affluent world and are promoted by national and international organizations.

Charitable food assistance is a social practice that is often framed in terms of poverty, insufficiency, and shortage. This article, however, takes a rather different perspective and discusses the topic from the viewpoint of excess and abundance. The need to do this derives from my observations of food banks in Finland, where I have witnessed keenly-felt experiences of poverty and social exclusion, but also profusion that our food system is spilling out and trickling down to food banks. Food assistance is not only about poverty; it is also tightly linked to abundance, which leads to the preconditions of assistance (Salonen, 2016a, p 56). This puzzling link between food surplus and food poverty has attracted increasing research interest in recent years (e.g., Lindenbaum, 2016; Garrone et al., 2014; Lorenz, 2012; Alexander and Smaje, 2008). Researchers have justifiably asked whether it is appropriate to use surplus food to feed people in hunger (Caraher and Furey, 2017).

This article is inspired by Graham Harvey's (2013) proposal of going 'elsewhere', that is: taking unconventional, surprising and new perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of familiar topics. This paper does so by discussing charitable food assistance as a matter of abundance. The analysis draws from two essays that deal with the question of excess and excessiveness from the perspectives of social theory and moral philosophy and applies their ideas to two cases: a Finnish project called Shared Table and a Canadian children's book Emma and the Food bank (McLure, 2014). In the light of these examples, the final sections consider the role of religious organizations as food assistance providers and suggest steps forward for research on religion, poverty and abundance.

Abundance in social theory and moral philosophy

In his article *The problem of excess* (2014), Andrew Abbott notes that even when confronted with excess, we still tend to make scarcity the center of our attention (Abbott, 2014, p 1). We are inclined to see the world and its problems as a matter of scarcity. However, Abbott maintains that scarcity theories alone are not sufficient; they might even constrain the effective analysis of crucial social problems. Abbott argues that excess is the pivotal question that should be the focus of sociological analyses. This approach differs from much previous sociological and economic thinking, in which scarcity has traditionally played a central role (Abbott, 2014, pp 3–7).

Interestingly, Abbott argues that we ought to take excess seriously in research on poverty. In his words:

we would need to see poverty as a case of too much of something rather than too little, and conversely to start seeing privilege as a case of being able to minimize some problematic form of excess rather than of being able to maximize something else, whose excess is definitionally regarded as unproblematic. (Abbott, 2014, p 7)

Abbott's focus is mainly on intangible excess, such as emotions and cognitions. In his example of how to think about poverty in

terms of excess, he notes the large cognitive burden that poverty and its reduction strategies such as welfare-to-work programs create for people (Abbott, 2014, p 25). However, Abbott's ideas can also be applied to poverty and material abundance.

In his article, Abbott outlines four strategies for dealing with excess: defensive, reactive, adaptive and creative. The first two types he calls reduction strategies, which aim to cut down on the amount of excess. The defensive strategy refers to ignoring or avoiding excess. In describing how one defensive strategy to deal with excess is to reduce, tame or steer desire, Abbott (2014, p 18) mentions, for example, mystic ascetic religions. The reactive strategy means hierarchizing and abstracting excess to deal with it more easily. In the context of food surplus, this could mean, for example, steering attention to the section of the food chain that generates the largest amounts of food surplus and waste, that is, household food waste. The other two strategies, which Abbott calls rescaling strategies, redefine excess 'out of existence'. The adaptive strategy means finding excess more desirable and less disturbing, whereas the creative strategy entails creating and even celebrating excess.

A rather different scrutiny of abundance and excessiveness is provided by William I. Miller in his essay on *Gluttony* (1997). In this essay, Miller discusses the moral history of gluttony, in the Middle Ages and the early modern period in particular, but also to some degree in today's world. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the moral ambiguity of excessiveness in Miller's essay.

Historical reviews reveal interesting distributional aspects to gluttony. Before the rise of the industrial, global food system, gluttony was a seasonal sin. The pre-industrial food system required consumption of whatever was available at any given time, whether too much or too little (Miller, 1997, p 98). The contemporary global food system has now detached us from such seasonality. However, Miller notes that even today, we are invited to reflect on our own ample consumption, particularly in the face of others who are in need.

Excess and excessiveness carry negative connotations and have often been seen as morally suspicious or dangerous (see e.g., Abbott, 2014, p 6). Miller (1997, p 93), nevertheless, notes that '[w]e are somewhat conflicted about the precise moral status of gluttony'. Gluttony is, on the one hand, reprehensible, but on the other hand 'motivates a certain kind of amiability that makes for good companionship, hospitality, and even a kind of easygoing benevolence' (Miller, 1997, p 92). Miller refers to the narrative of the rich Dives and poor Lazarus in arguing that feasting includes both the threat of gluttony and the possibility of redistribution. In Miller's words, conviviality requires sharing and even wasting food (Miller, 1997, p 98). Gluttony has a virtuous side: features such as sociability, hospitality and amiability actually require a degree of excess, even excessiveness.

Finally, Miller pays attention to a process that he calls the 'decriminalization' of gluttony (Miller, 1997, p 107). Certain words that have been used in the past with judgemental undertones; for example, luxury, gourmand or delicacy, are now considered acceptable, even desired. Miller's examples refer to the shift from quantitative to qualitative excess. However, in a broader context, the idea of the decriminalization of excess underlines the contingency of what is considered reprehensible and what is praiseworthy. The moral nature of excess is not solid. It is contextually bound, and the ways in which we relate to it depend greatly on situational and societal factors.

Food assistance as an excess rescaling strategy

Against the grain of the ideals of the Nordic welfare model, the first food banks arrived in Finland in the deep recession of the

early 1990s. At that time, they were considered temporary solutions to the current economic crisis. However, food assistance continued, even during the economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and has become a rather permanent feature in Finnish society. Until recently, the Finnish food assistance system was characterized as having an ad hoc, grassroots nature and low level of organization, in which the diaconal ethos of helping those who are not helped by others was prevalent. Food banks have been mainly considered anomalies in the Finnish welfare landscape, and have thus mostly kept a low profile despite sustained assistance work, only slowly gaining general societal acceptance.

In recent years, the rationale of food assistance has gradually expanded from poverty alleviation to fighting food waste. Legal initiatives in, for example, France, Italy and Finland obligate supermarkets to donate surplus food to charities instead of wasting it. There are also signs in the Finnish media that in recent years, food assistance has been increasingly often associated with questions of food excess (Tikka, 2016). Appealing to the ideas of environmental protection and recycling seems to have increased the acceptability of charitable assistance.

An example of the new way of outlining food assistance in terms of fighting food excess is a project called Shared Table, which emerged as a novelty in the Finnish field of food assistance in 2012. The two major operators of the project are the city of Vantaa and the Vantaa parish union. The project operates in close collaboration with local religious communities, non-governmental organizations and the food industry. According to the project website, Shared Table seeks to combine environmental and communal issues through three aims. First, it aims to bring assistance food closer to people in need. Second, it aims to reduce food waste by redistributing it. Third, it aims to relieve social problems such as loneliness by providing shared meals and recruiting volunteers.

Shared Table's model of food banking can be regarded as a social innovation (Mumford, 2002, p 253). With a novel combination of different fields of ideas and policies ranging from logistics to social policy, and actors across the public, private and third sector, the Shared Table project involves the creation of new, collaborative procedures. It contains potential for a new social movement, as it aims to combine the fight against poverty, social exclusion and food waste in a way that is unique to the Finnish context. The model rests on already functioning practices and actors (local food assistance providers), but reframes the aims and scope of measures by incorporating ecological and social goals in the provision of last resort material assistance. According to its website, the Shared Table project 'combines utilization of food waste with a customer oriented approach and communal civic activity in a way that has never before been done in Finland' (Shared Table, 2017).

Although this is new to Finland, similar cooperative excess-based food assistance models have already been established in many other countries. The rationale for excess-based food assistance is often presented in a sort of flow chart, in which surplus food is in danger of being wasted on one side, and hungry people need food on the other. In between these sides are the middle men: food bank organizations that salvage the surplus, and local community partners that utilize it to feed the hungry. These community partners are often religious communities or faith-based organizations that distribute the food to people afflicted by poverty.

The reframing of charitable food assistance in terms of the fight against food waste means a shift in focus from scarcity to excess. When associated with excess food, food assistance becomes an arrangement in which the excess, which is perceived as inevitable, is transformed into means for benevolence. In other words, the problem of excess is transformed into a problem of logistics and

distribution. For example, the website of the Global food banking network, a transnational organization that promotes food assistance globally, states that 'Hunger is often not a food problem; it's a logistics problem' (GFN, 2017). This statement aptly illustrates the new way of constructing food assistance as a social innovation: by addressing an ethically relevant social problem in technical terms and by providing a technical solution. Importantly, the new solution still resonates well with the ethics of the agencies that take part in this field; particularly with the age-old obligation of the faith communities to feed the hungry.

As an arrangement that combines food excess and poverty, food assistance is in line with Abbott's ideas about rescaling strategies for dealing with excess (cf. Abbott, 2014, p 15): food banks redefine excess 'out of existence' by making it a resource and utility of last resort assistance. In the process, the critical societal question of how to fight poverty is transformed into an innovative answer to a question on how to deal with food waste. Following Abbott, we could argue that food assistance is an adaptive excess rescaling strategy: it brings together food insecurity and food waste and thus makes food excess more desirable and less disturbing. Further, it also makes the social problem of poverty and the poor-people of excess-less disturbing. In the food bank flow chart, the impoverished individuals and households are positioned as useful users of surplus.

Food assistance as a creative strategy and means for decriminalizing excess

Six, almost seven years old, Emma wonders why her Mom puts some groceries in the Food Bank donation box at the supermarket. Mom explains that some families need groceries in emergency situations. Emma wishes she was old enough to help, but she learns there is something she can do now to help the food bank. (Calgary food bank, 2017)

This passage is a synopsis of Emma and the food bank, a children's book written by Sue McLure (2014) and published by the Calgary Food Bank, which aims to be a 'fun, educational book that helps children understand how food banks work and why giving is important' (Calgary food bank, 2017). In the book, Emma learns what a food bank is ('Food Bank collects food from people and gives it to families who need it'), why it is needed ('Sometimes moms and dads have problems and can't work for some time, and may need help with groceries'), and how she can help the food bank (by donating food items, by volunteering at the age of 12, and by having a food drive at her birthday party). It is not just any food that is given out: Emma's mother allows her to give food that she really likes (illustrated by a honey jar), and together they compose a birthday bag for the food bank to give to a family with a birthday boy or girl.

The essential issue in the book is Emma's genuine willingness and desire to help and to do good. This readiness is given a form and content by the established societal practice of giving food to the food bank. What is more, this practice is even connected to what Emma already loves doing: going grocery shopping with her mother. Thus, doing a good deed by donating to a food bank is not an art of sacrificial giving, but a fun way of helping others.

Even though the book is about helping people who suffer from poverty and hunger, abundance of food is palpable in the story through colorful illustrations throughout the book of various food items and bags filled with groceries. In these illustrations, affluence creates an undisputed yet unspoken precondition for helping people afflicted by poverty.

At one point in the book, there is an imaginative picture of Emma having a birthday party. The guests are invited to donate

food to a food bank. People with smiling faces, surrounded by birthday balloons, line up for their turn to put food into Emma's food bank box. This picture portrays food assistance as a creative strategy to handle excess, a strategy that creates and celebrates excess as a way in which to feed the poor. In the example of Emma and the food bank, helping people in need becomes a celebration enabled by excess and abundance.

The examples from the book help highlight the moral aspects of food banking. The moral ambiguity of excess and excessiveness discussed in Miller's essay is in the seamline between gluttony and feasting. Excessive individual indulgence carries more negative connotations than sharing abundance together, and excessiveness becomes acceptable or even needed if it contributes to bettering the situation of the other. In her analysis of gluttony in children's books, Anne Malewski (2014, p 113) has noted that excessive eating, which is most often represented as something deserving punishment, can instead be presented as glorious if culinary wealth is shared with other people. Such benevolent use of excessiveness shares connotations not so much with the sin of gluttony, but with the virtue of unconditional or neighborly love.

Food banking is an assemblage of ideals, norms and values, and a domain of consumption that bears with it the ideals of good corporate and individual citizenship. It is a way for people to display moral agency, and provides an opportunity to engage in helping the needy in a way that is considered not only socially acceptable, but even valued, admired and enjoyable. However, studies have shown that celebratory hunger campaigns and institutional practices that highlight the good will of charitable donors distract attention from the mechanisms that produce food insecurity and waste (e.g., Lindenbaum, 2016; DeLind, 1994). In his case study of the German food bank network *die Tafeln*, Stephen Lorenz notes that 'charitable food assistance contributes more to cementing exclusion and excess rather than to overcoming them' (Lorenz, 2012, p 386).

The process of cementing exclusion not only has practical or structural, but also ethical relevance. The contemporary food assistance system serves to legitimize excess, and even requires a certain level of extravagance, excess or abundance. Abbott states that rescaling strategies are 'strategies that somehow make a virtue of the inescapable fact of excess'. The perceptions of food assistance, such as Emma and the food bank, suggest a process of reframing food excess as acceptable or even virtuous, or, in reference to Miller (1997, p 107), a process of decriminalizing excess. Via the processes of rescaling and decriminalizing food excess, excess becomes a utility and a resource for helping people who suffer from poverty.

Religious organizations as middlemen in the processes of rescaling and decriminalizing excess

The discussion above suggests that while surplus food is in principle morally reprehensible, it can be made more acceptable and easy to deal with by turning it into utility of charitable assistance. In progress, food assistance becomes an excess rescaling strategy and a means for normalizing food poverty and food surplus. As waste-based food assistance providers, many religious communities become middlemen in the processes of rescaling and decriminalizing excess and turning the vice of waste into a virtue.

It would be unfounded to say that the organizations that participate in food assistance provision are uninformed or indifferent to the critical insights and problems inherent in what they do. Many of them are indeed aware that their work is not a sufficient long-term solution to either poverty or the waste issue, and some even acknowledge that their work might stand in the way of more long-lasting solutions to the problems behind

poverty and waste. However, historical trajectories and structural engagements can make it difficult for food assistance providers to criticize the system they are invested in. In John Lindenbaum's (2016, p 386) words, food banks 'cannot advocate for political solutions that would alienate their benefactors'.

In addition to these entitlements, religious motivations are important drivers of hands-on food assistance work, and in some cases the religious obligation to help people in immediate need overcomes the ambivalence of the assistance on a societal level. For example, a director of a local church-run food bank whom I interviewed in Toronto in 2014, explained why they continue food bank work despite its societal-level problems: 'Theologically, we can't not' (quoted in Salonen, 2016b, p 38). Another interviewee described their motivation to provide food assistance by summarizing: 'Jesus's main concern was about food. And he became the food for the people. So, that's where the theology comes in' (quoted in Salonen, 2016b, p 37). Adherence to the theological narratives and teachings of giving food to the hungry, and the practical commitment to helping one's poor neighbor who has immediate needs keep the food assistance system going on a grassroots level, despite its ambiguity.

Moving forward

Based on this brief scrutiny, I suggest that it is indeed beneficial for research on religion and poverty to begin 'elsewhere'. The call to do so is not novel (see e.g., Harvey, 2013; Gusterson, 1997; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Nader, 1972), but it is nevertheless worth noting and there are many new places at which to start. First, rethinking religious organizations as providers of material aid from the perspective of excess and abundance indeed provides a fruitful way to go forward. Research in this field would benefit greatly from more detailed and more empirically grounded analyses than I was able to present here: studies that would take excess and abundance as starting points for the analyses of poverty alleviation, and would generate new sociological and ethical theories that take the perils and potentials of excess seriously.

Second, starting 'elsewhere' could mean starting from many places at the same time. Strategies for dealing with excess have both societal and moral underpinnings and consequences. Research would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration that combines sociological and moral philosophical knowledge and brings together insights from fields as diverse as theology, social policy and food studies. This would enable progression from studying how food assistance systems work and how the interlinkages between the food industry, policy and non-governmental actors are structured, towards facilitating deeper knowledge of the ideals and pursuits of the various actors involved in this activity, including religious organizations, and of the historical, societal and contextual facets that have given rise to these various connections and interests.

Third, starting from excess rather than scarcity does not have to limit us to material surplus. Research ought to also explore potential intangible, theological, cultural, and ideological excess. Although worthy in its own right, acknowledging that the religious motivation of many food assistance providers is crucial for understanding why food banks proliferate might also provide a point to start 'elsewhere'. For example, following Abbott, we could rethink the issue in terms of excess by claiming that perhaps there is an excess of theologies that concentrate on giving food to people in need, and perhaps this excess obscures the context of abundance in which contemporary food assistance takes place and proliferates.

Furthermore, how we understand the relationship between scarcity and excessiveness in food consumption carries a great

deal of symbolic weight. In the recent past, children were encouraged to eat their plates empty while thinking compassionately about the ‘starving Koreans’ (as Miller was taught) or the ‘children in Africa’ (as I myself recall it). However, as Miller aptly notes, ‘[t]here are several layers of irony to a strategy that seeks to combat sinfully negligent waste by training up a generation of gluttons’ (Miller, 1997, p 101). Perhaps there is an excessive distance between the people who live in abundance and those who live in scarcity, both globally and within societies that rescale their food excess by utilizing it for charitable assistance.

Finally, while ‘[t]he emergency food system is permeated with religion’, to use Janet Poppendieck’s (1999, p 188) words, it is worth noting that in the context of the global North and in related research, religion refers in practice to the Western tradition of Christianity. Future research would benefit from starting ‘elsewhere’ also in this regard; by engaging people in discussion on how religion, poverty and abundance are related and negotiated in different places, cultures and traditions.

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