

Breadlines
Knee-Deep in Wheat

Food Assistance in the Great Depression

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

Janet Poppendieck

Foreword by Marion Nestle

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FOREWORD

What a gift to have this new edition of *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat*, too long out of print and badly missed. Janet Poppendieck and I exchanged books when we first met, in the late 1980s, and I still treasure the signed copy she gave me, even with its water stains from hurricane damage to my New York University office some years ago. Brought up to date with its enlightening new epilogue, her book could not have arrived at a more timely moment. As I write these words, the government is still recovering from the effects of a sixteen-day shutdown caused by Tea Party Republicans who believe that federal authorities should have no role in health care, let alone in food assistance to the poor.

Food assistance is what this book is about. *Breadlines* tells the story of how the U.S. government, confronted with destitution during the Great Depression of the 1930s, first became involved in feeding the hungry. Government agencies attempted to resolve two pressing social and political problems with one stroke: *breadlines*, the great masses of people in unemployment-induced poverty who queued up for handouts of free food, and *knee-deep in wheat*, shorthand for the great bounty of American agriculture that was available at the time but unaffordable and allowed to rot or intentionally destroyed. The solution: distribute surplus commodities to the poor while also—and politically far more important—providing farmers with a paying outlet for what they produced. The earlier chapters of *Breadlines* focus on the politics—as played out in disputes between members of the Roosevelt administration—that led to a critical shift in the fo-

cus of food distribution programs. Once aimed at hunger relief, they ended up aimed at protecting the income of farmers.

As a result, the hunger problem remained unsolved. Addressing it required a new approach. Enter food stamps. The earliest stamps required participants to purchase some surplus commodities, but the program eventually evolved into its current form, SNAP—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The epilogue takes us from the 1970s to the present and has much to say about the current politics of SNAP.

Because of its evolution from commodity distribution origins, SNAP, a program aimed at promoting human welfare and nutrition, is overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and authorized by the farm bill. In 2013, it provided an average of \$133 per month to an astounding 47 million down-and-out Americans—one out of seven—who, because of low-wage jobs, job losses, illness, lack of education, or plain bad luck, had so little income that they qualified for this form of food aid. Nearly half of the recipients of SNAP benefits are children, too young to fend for themselves. For participants, SNAP is a lifeline—the single most reliable element in what remains of the country’s vanishing safety net for the poor.

By law, SNAP is an entitlement. Anyone who meets its eligibility requirements and applies can get the benefits. When the economy is in trouble, up goes SNAP enrollment. So do its costs to taxpayers, and at great political peril. In 2012, SNAP benefits cost \$75 billion. With an additional \$4 billion in administrative costs, SNAP accounted that year for fully 80 percent of farm bill expenditures. As I write, congressional renewal of the farm bill is mired in partisan politics, largely because anti-government Republicans in the House of Representatives insisted on cutting SNAP benefits far beyond what House Democrats, the Senate, and the president initially deemed acceptable.

How is it that SNAP, a program intended to relieve hunger, came to dominate farm bill legislation, usually understood to aim at support of industrial agriculture? Much of *Breadlines* is devoted to a close analysis of how Depression-era aid to the poor ended up many decades later coupled to support for the production of industrial farm commodities—corn, soybeans, and cotton (but not, please note, fruits and vegetables).

As Poppendieck makes clear, today’s Republican critique of SNAP—that it is not an appropriate role of government, is too expensive, induces dependency, and encourages fraud—is old news. Such criticisms date back to the first Elizabethan poor laws, of the early 1600s. Adapted virtually intact by the early U.S. settlers, these laws aimed to relieve hunger and misery, of course, but also to preserve the social order and maintain a

workforce willing to work for very low wages. The laws managed these multiple objectives by giving the poor barely enough food and other necessities to prevent people from starving on the streets or rioting.

In the United States, welfare policies soon acquired an additional function, one that has grown in importance over the years: mobilization of political support. Political leaders of both major parties exploited—and continue to exploit—issues of cost, dependency, and fraud in SNAP as a means to gain power. They, like the framers of the poor laws, appear to view the poor as inherently unworthy, lazy, deceitful, and morally inferior, rather than as unwitting victims of inadequate education, personal catastrophe, or rapidly transforming economic systems.

Grounded in history as they are, the themes of *Breadlines* could not be more current. The book thoroughly explains the background of government involvement in food assistance and why some politicians care more about cost and fraud than relieving hunger. It also reveals why Poppendieck is the leading sociologist of American food assistance. *Breadlines* is extraordinarily well written and researched. Poppendieck dug into the records of the 1930s commodity distribution agencies, the USDA, the *Congressional Record*, manuscript collections, oral histories, personal letters, and preliminary draft reports buried in the National Archives and other anachronistic institutions that still provide access to words originally written on paper. For the modern history of food assistance, that depth of research might not be possible. Early drafts and scraps of paper are less likely to be preserved in electronic form.

Poppendieck's epilogue is a masterful exposition of the complicated post-1970s history of U.S. food assistance. Some of this material summarizes major points in her two subsequent books, both also classics: *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Viking, 1998) and *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Poppendieck is an eloquent writer, careful about sources, thoughtful, critical, yet deeply compassionate in her views of humanity.

She begins her update with a startling idea. The interesting question, she says, is not why food assistance is under attack, but why SNAP has survived. Even today, this program is “more nimble, more flexible, less hampered by excessive reporting requirements and punitive error rate sanctions, and less stigmatized because of the conversion to EBT [electronic benefits transfer]” (p. 280). Poppendieck cites several compelling reasons, among them the benefits of SNAP purchases to groups in society other than recipients. Ironically, the share that benefits farmers or even agribusiness is

small and greatly overshadowed by the proportion of SNAP dollars that goes to food product manufacturers and food retailers.

She also cites the importance of skilled advocacy by anti-hunger groups. This brings us into some of the knottier issues affecting current SNAP policy, among them the higher prevalence of obesity—and its health consequences, such as heart disease and diabetes—among the poor. Such problems, virtually unknown in the 1930s, now dominate arguments about how to improve SNAP. To public health advocates, the use of SNAP benefits to buy sugar-sweetened drinks, for example, means that taxpayers are subsidizing the beverage industry as well as obesity.

Obesity, Poppendieck points out, has created an unfortunate rift between anti-hunger and anti-obesity advocates, groups that should be natural allies. Healing this rift, she says, must be a first priority for SNAP advocates. This point alone makes *Breadlines* essential reading. Hunger, Poppendieck argues, is a societal problem that cannot be addressed without also addressing other correlates of poverty. Additional policies to reduce income inequities are essential: an adequate minimum wage, tax credits, subsidized housing, health care, child care, job training, and treatment of substance abuse and mental health problems. And, I might add, an agricultural policy that supports health objectives.

This linkage of food assistance to broader social issues makes *Breadlines* an unusually important work of scholarship. It has much to teach us about the historical basis of today's politics of hunger, welfare, and agriculture policy. Janet Poppendieck deserves much praise for writing this book and bringing it up to date, and so does University of California Press for producing this most welcome new edition.

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