

Giles, David Boarder. *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed People: Food Not Bombs and the World-Class Waste of Global Cities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021. 299. Softcover, \$28.95.

In A Mass Conspiracy to Feed People: Food Not Bombs and the World-Class Waste of Global Cities, David Giles examines the “entanglements between capitalism’s wastes, urban transformation, and political resistance” (p. 4). Giles’ work is an ethnographic report of six years of participant observation research and collaborative work with Foods Not Bombs (FNB) in Seattle with additional insights gleaned from his engagement with FNB in San Francisco, New York, and Melbourne. He also draws from his more than ten years of volunteer work with FNB in additional sites. FNB is the mass conspiracy he explores. FNB conspires to feed people primarily with food taken from dumpsters, often prepared in squatter kitchens, and most often distributed in violation of local ordinances.

The first section of the book addresses the concept of abject capital. Giles explores those ways in which the surpluses of capitalism are discarded in dumpsters as waste. He refers to the disgorging of commodities with intact use value as the “bulimia of late capitalism” (p. 38). When commodities become waste and are placed in dumpsters, they are stigmatized (the process of abjection) and become untouchable. The disposable of usable items, in particular food, is contrasted with the growth of the homeless and hungry particularly in communities like Seattle where development into world class cities has been accompanied by displacement of the poor and the growth of homelessness.

Cities striving toward world class status work to banish the dispossessed into places far from view of the public. Here the public refers to the socially acceptable, i.e., the prosperous, tourists and the employed. These are the servants and beneficiaries of capitalism. They play the game and are rewarded. They are the public that are wooed and protected by city officials and

corporate executives. The homeless, the hungry and “rough sleepers” (p. 50) are to remain at the margins. FNB challenges the normal operation of capitalism, by using discarded food (most often rescued from dumpsters) to feed the homeless (a “counterpublic” p. 251) in public spaces much to the chagrin of local businesses and city officials.

For Giles, FNB is a mass conspiracy that exposes the bankruptcy of an economic system that disposes of useful commodities as a means of maintaining scarcity and the prices scarcity demands. By bringing the disposed into public spaces, FNB challenges the authority of capitalism and the government structures that support it. As a leaderless, ephemeral, transnational movement, it defies the ability of authorities to destroy it. By meeting the needs of the hungry, it perpetuates itself through time and space.

This is a well-crafted book and an excellent ethnography. Giles provides good introductions to each section. He does a nice job of tying local events to international systems. The ethnography is strengthened by a good use of photographs and extensive sidebars quotations drawn from FNB volunteers and those who benefit from its work. The reader gains a good understanding of the process through which food is obtained, prepared, and distributed. Through detailed description Giles provides us insight into the sights, smells, textures, and existential challenges encountered in world of FNB. This includes a detailed recipe of Glory Soup (p. 203), typical fare for those taking advantage of FNB meals. Giles makes good use of the works of philosophers, political activists, and social theorists to frame the work.

This book is appropriate for upper division undergraduate and graduate classes on social movements. It would be an excellent supplementary text for courses addressing issues of social justice. I would include it as a recommended reading for graduate classes on ethnographic methods. It is a must read for social activists looking to address equity issues in a neo-liberal,

capitalist world. Kudos to Giles for providing such an excellent blueprint for ways in which the detritus of capitalism can be used to address the ills of the system.

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