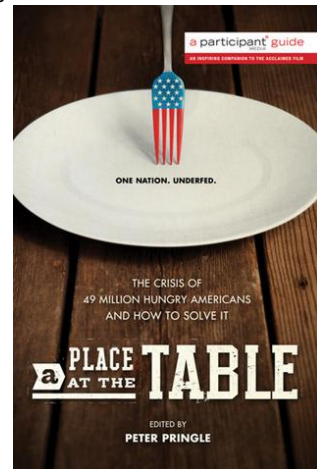


Peter Pringle, (Ed.), **A Place at the Table: The Crisis of 49 Million Hungry Americans and How to Solve It**. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013, 301 pp., \$13.50 (paperback).

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In the context of the 2008 financial crisis and its subsequent recession, issues such as hunger and poverty have become major political and public concerns. In the United States, food insecurity had been worsening before the latest recession, and the economic crisis triggered more increases in food insecurity (Food Research and Action Center, 2010). To emphasize the severity of such trends, mainstream media outlets such as *USA Today* and BBC News have focused their attention on poverty and hunger in the United States. Recent popular documentaries such as *Hunger Hits Home*, *A Place at the Table*, and *Poor Kids* have additionally brought the issue of U.S. food insecurity to the center of public attention. Accompanying one of these documentaries is a book titled **A Place at the Table: The Crisis of 49 Million Hungry Americans and How to Solve It**. Edited by researcher and former journalist Peter Pringle, the book features a series of essays on the key issues raised by the documentary. The essays are authored by environmentalists, food/nutrition experts, antihunger activists, and Americans who have firsthand experience with hunger.



A Place at the Table is not a theoretical book. Nor is it a communication book, even though some of its features can define it as a communication work. As the companion to a popular documentary, the book is mainly a call for action against hunger. However, the scholarly community can benefit from exposure to this work, especially in the context of scholarship that aims at social change. The book consists of 20 chapters grouped into four parts: “Part I, On the Front Lines of Hunger,” “Part II, Feeding the Hungry,” “Part III, Beyond Feeding the Hungry,” and “Part IV, What You Can Do About It.” The following discussion summarizes each part and its major ideas.

Part I reveals the dynamics of U.S. hunger. The book devotes the greatest amount of attention to this part, which is composed of Chapters 1 through 9. Because of the variety of topics covered in the nine chapters, this portion of the book appears disorganized. In fact, in most of the chapters the focus is not on hunger but on issues relevant to features and practices of the U.S. food system that contribute to hunger. An array of topics is incorporated into this part: school lunches, food stamps, farm subsidies, unhealthy eating, “food deserts,” and so on. For the purpose of clarity, this review organizes the nine chapters into three thematic categories.

The first category involves the policy side of hunger in the United States. Included in this theme are Chapter 1 (“Witnesses to Hunger” by scholar and antihunger leader Mariana Chilton), Chapter 4 (“A

Top Chef Goes to Washington" by celebrity chef Tom Colicchio), Chapter 5 ("Money Where Our Mouths Are" by environmental advocate Ken Cook), Chapter 6 ("Food Stamps: Once We Had It Right" by food sustainability advocates Gus Schumacher, Michel Nischan, and Daniel Bowman Simon), and Chapter 9 ("The ABCs of School Lunch" by sociology scholar Janet Poppendieck). Each chapter analyzes a facet of the U.S. food system and recommends policy improvements. Among the food policy recommendations are including the hungry in food security policy dialogue (Chapter 1), funding healthy food in schools (Chapter 4), investing more in nutritious food through subsidizing small farmers (Chapters 5 and 6), eliminating food sales to schoolchildren by encouraging "universal free school meals" (Chapter 9).

The second thematic category in the first part relates to the industry/business side of hunger. Similar to the essays in the first theme, the chapters included in the second one encompass topics that go beyond hunger. However, all the essays in this thematic category analyze the role of industry and business in food consumption. Included in this category are Chapter 3 ("The Grocery Gap: Finding Healthy Food in America" by food researchers Allison Karpyn and Sarah Treuhaft), Chapter 7 ("Today's 'Eat More' Environment: The Role of the Food Industry" by food studies professor Marion Nestle), and Chapter 8 ("The New Hidden Persuaders: The Digital World of Food Marketing to Children and Teens" by social psychology professor Jennifer L. Harris). The three chapters in this category touch on topics such as the necessity of food businesses to spread into areas where they have traditionally been lacking (Chapter 3), the impact of agricultural policies and Wall Street pressures on increasing the industry's role in food consumption (Chapter 7), as well as the tactics that food companies use on children to increase sales (Chapter 8).

The last thematic category in this part of the book relates to hunger at the ground level. Included in this category is Chapter 2 ("Local Leaders: Colorado"), written by Colorado pastor Bob Wilson and teacher Leslie Nichols. Interestingly, this is the only chapter in the book's first part written by people who have directly experienced or observed hunger on a daily basis.

While the first part of *A Place at the Table* captures hunger and its related facets, the second part demonstrates how hunger is addressed currently. This section of the book consists of the next five chapters: Chapter 10 ("Feeding America in Times of Change" by Matt Knott, interim president/CEO of Feeding America, the largest food bank in the United States), Chapter 11 ("Faith and Food" by economist David Beckmann and food researcher Sarah Newman), Chapter 12 ("The Oregon Food Bank" by food bank manager Sharon Thornberry), Chapter 13 ("Hunger in New York City: What Local Government Can Do" by former national correspondent Josh Getlin and food policy leader Scott M. Stringer), and Chapter 14 ("Getting Off the Anti-Hunger Treadmill" by food campaigner Andy Fisher). Essentially, these essays describe the methods used to alleviate hunger and food insecurity. Specifically, Chapters 11 and 14 describe initiatives across the United States that address food insecurity. The remaining chapters in this section focus on the institutional aspects of dealing with hunger. Chapter 10, for instance, argues that even though food banks distribute significant quantities of food to food insecure Americans, without strategic partnerships with "nonprofit, government, corporate, and strategic philanthropic sectors" (p. 142) such charities cannot effectively fight hunger. In opposition to this argument are the remaining two institutionally focused chapters (Chapters 12 and 14). These chapters capture the larger dimensions of the hunger issue and argue that food assistance alone does not provide a long-term solution to hunger.

Chapters 12 and 14 are the only essays in this part that do not view hunger as an isolated issue, but situate it within the larger issue of poverty.

Situating hunger within the context of broader dynamics is also a topic present in Part III. This part goes beyond the problem of hunger and the current tactics for fighting it to propose ideas for the future. The emphasis here is on visions for tackling hunger more effectively. Part III consists of Chapter 15 ("Childhood Hunger: A Battle That Can Be Won" by childhood antihunger organizer Bill Shore), Chapter 16 ("Beyond the Charity Myth" by food policy expert/leader Joel Berg), and Chapter 17 ("The One-Word Strategy for Ending Hunger: Mergers" by food activist Robert Egger). Several directions for the future are offered in the three chapters. Chapter 15, for example, deals with the idea that childhood antihunger efforts that are based on cooperation between policy makers, nonprofits, and business leaders need to be a priority for the future. A similar notion of multiactor initiatives is proposed by Chapter 17, which argues that through their mergers "nonprofits in America—whether they fight hunger, celebrate art, build homes, or lift spirits . . . have the ability to completely redesign the machine" (pp. 225–226) that promotes social injustices. Contrasting such visions of multiactors organizing as a solution is the message from Chapter 16, which argues that society-wide actions can be successful only when coordinated by the U.S. government. Such an argument distinguishes Chapter 16 from the rest of the book, which avoids an analysis in which the government alone is considered to be more efficient in fighting hunger than other relevant actors.

The final part of the book is where the reader can truly distinguish the social change character of *A Place at the Table*. Part IV consists of three chapters: Chapter 18 ("The Accidental Activist" by environmental activist Kelly Meyer), Chapter 19 ("Seven Steps to Ending Child Hunger by 2015" by the Food Research and Action Center), and Chapter 20 ("Directory of NGOs"), which presents a directory of NGOs whose efforts aim at ending hunger in the United States. This part has the clear agenda of encouraging readers to act on what they have just read. In Chapter 18, Meyer tells the story of how she initiated a program that teaches gardening skills to schoolchildren. Chapter 19 delineates seven antihunger steps that readers can support. The final chapter directly tells readers what organizations to refer to so that readers can start participating in the antihunger cause. This kind of information accounts for an aspect of the book's character that is practical. The task here is to ultimately inspire readers and support them in taking action.

A Place at the Table does not have an explicit communication focus. However, the communication aspect can be seen throughout. Indicative of this is the book's major goal: to communicate the hunger message. The book rests on the assumption that the American public is not informed enough about the significant scale of the problem. Thus, the book communicates the need to know and care. Another way in which communication finds its place in the book is through the focus on organizing efforts to promote food system change. Almost all the chapters are written by food activists and community organizers. In their discussion of organizing their activities, these essayists illustrate arguments for and against specific strategies of public intervention design and implementation—a main topic of some communication scholarship. The communicative focus can also be seen through the idea of dialogue. The chapters are written independently from one another, but they vividly participate in a discussion. Taken as a whole, the chapters signify opposing discourses and ideological systems related to food organizing and promoting

action against hunger. Thus, without intentionally taking part in a debate, the chapters participate in an indirect confrontation of discourses and ideologies, a confrontation that contributes to the critical understanding of hunger and its solutions.

References

Food Research and Action Center. (2010). *Hunger and Poverty*. Retrieved from <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/hunger-and-poverty>