

## “In the detritus of the political present”: A review of *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed People*

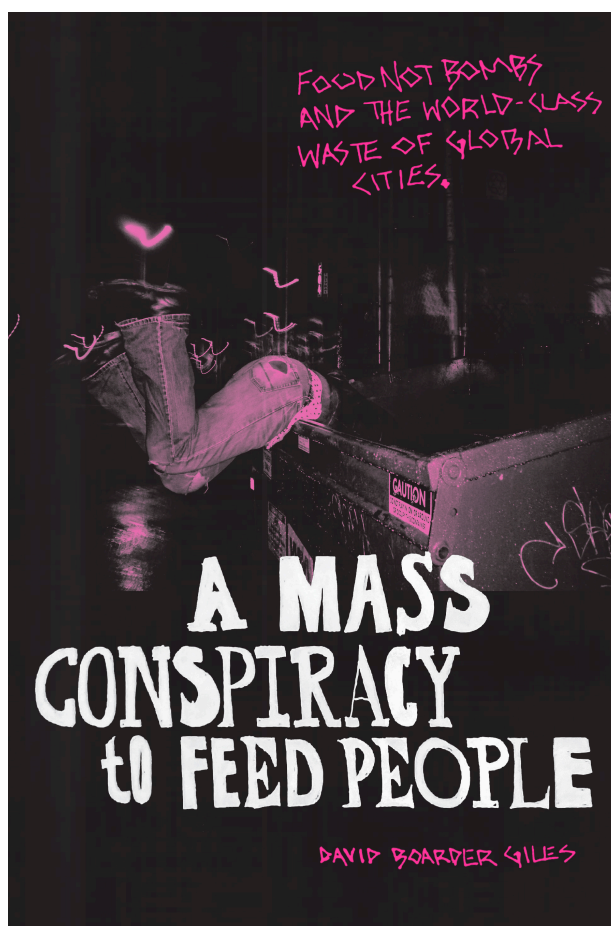
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Book reviewed: Giles, D.B. (2021) *A mass conspiracy to feed people: Food Not Bombs and the world-class waste of global cities*. Duke University Press.

More than a few social theorists, over the past two centuries, have argued that the contradictions (and nightmares) of the capitalist present produce the ingredients for capitalism’s own undoing. While Marx and Engels are perhaps most famous for their rousing contention, in the *Communist Manifesto*, that the bourgeoisie produces (above all else) its own grave-diggers, they are certainly far from alone in engaging that problematic. Indeed, the critical question – at least for many within the vast domain of radical social and political thought – is not really *if*, but *what* and *who*: not whether the contradictions are accumulating, but *what* precisely those pertinent contradictions are, and (perhaps most importantly) *who* those grave-diggers will be. Anthropologist David Boarder Giles, in his recent book *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed People*, is hardly so grandiose in his language, and he certainly does not frame his account in this way. His work is not concerned with eschatology, and it can’t be accused of identifying a singular subject of history. Giles is, however, concerned with precisely these kinds of questions, which have animated so many before him. And he finds his answers (and ingredients) in quite unlikely places: in the squatted homes of “world-class cities,” amongst the homeless and unemployed, and – perhaps most strikingly – in the dumpster. In Giles’s more poetic words, a “more radical world is...not only possible, *but it endures in the detritus of the political present*” (p. 231, emphasis added); “the churn of late liberalism’s aggregations and disavowals creates,” according to Giles, “the interstices for assembling the otherwise” (p. 223).



Of course, this might all sound fairly abstract, so it is important to briefly zoom in. Giles’s more explicit, and grounded, objective in *A Mass Conspiracy to Feed People* is straightforward enough: he aims to develop an anthropological account of Food Not Bombs (FNB), with a particular focus on its operations in Seattle (where he conducted the bulk of his fieldwork) as well as several other global and globalizing cities –

Melbourne (Australia), New York, San Francisco and beyond. As the uninitiated quickly learn, FNB is an activist organization that serves free meals to those in need – the homeless, the unemployed, the vagrant, the expelled – and one that has done so with astonishing consistency for over 40 years across the United States and internationally. It is also, in Giles's words, something of a "motley crew," differing from "most meal programs" in crucial respects (p. xv). Whereas other food assistance programs are often "hidden" away in "basements and other marginal spaces," FNB insists on sharing their food "in public view," often leading to clashes with municipal authorities (p. xv). Whereas other programs might shy away from explicitly political orientations, FNB embraces an anarchist ethos. Whereas other programs often operate according to a strict hierarchy, FNB has reproduced itself for decades without much of a rulebook or any centralized leadership. And finally, whereas other programs might subsist on the donation of "fresh" food, FNB subsists off of the "shadow economy of wasted food," which, at times, requires its participants to dive into the trash in the name of their "global plot to give things away" (p. xiv and p. 1).

Still, as Giles himself is quick to point out, this is not "just a book about FNB" (p. 3). It is, rather, a book about capitalist waste, the violent making and reproduction of global cities (see, for context, Sassen, 2001), and the forms of mutual aid and care required to ensure the bodily metabolism of those that have been thrown out and abandoned by the metabolic churn of contemporary forms of capitalist urbanization. Put differently, this is a book that moves dexterously across levels of conceptual abstraction and between geographies, wagering that if we are to make sense of the contradictions of the present – and to grasp some of the ways in which they might be resolved – we must consider how capitalism "manufactures scarcity through waste-making" in general; how global cities create "world-class waste and massive displacement" in particular; and how those dynamics produce "discarded surpluses and displaced people" within specific geographies (like Seattle, Melbourne, New York, and San Francisco) as well as "novel forms of political organization and nonmarket economy" in their wake (p. 5). It is this easy theoretical and empirical movement that is this book's greatest strength. "Waste" becomes a conceptual thread

that is used to weave together complex arguments: to demonstrate capital's reliance on "uncommodities" that serve as the "ontological precondition of scarcity, [and as the] ineluctable substrate of market exchange and capitalist value" (p. 46); and to describe the making of "nonmarket counterpublics" within several global cities, which are constituted by people that have been banished from those cities' "market-publics" and forced to subsist on the "latent commons" left behind by revanchist gentrification and elite urban consumption (see p. 80 and 85; see also, Smith, 1996). Giles has, in other words, conducted an ethnographic account that is "in/of the world system" (p. 18), and which also has much to say about capitalism and capitalist waste in the abstract.

And yet, in Giles's haste to weave together this narrative through the motif of waste, and to account for commonalities – between not only Seattle and Melbourne, but gentrification, unemployment, and food waste as well – salient distinctions arguably fall from view. For example, at various moments in *A Mass Conspiracy*, we find passages that swiftly sketch the "surpluses" produced by the contemporary global city. We encounter "[s]urplus food abandoned by retailers. Squatted homes and low rent kitchens overlooked by the real estate market. [And a] surplus population abandoned by labor markets and underserved by social welfare agencies." This is, after all, the "raw material" that helps to make FNB (p. 80). And Giles is certainly aware that not all of these people, places, and things are "wasted" in the same way. (He distinguishes, crucially, between "abject mobile capital" and "abject spatial capital" (p. 112).) Still, in such passages – which appear at various points in the text – the specific dynamics that determine whether something (or someone) is rendered as waste by capital and/or the neoliberal state are left under-theorized, and ultimately obscured. So too are the specific forms of governance that different kinds of waste demand, and the widely divergent capacities of different kinds of waste to structure subsequent rounds of urban capital accumulation. One is even, perhaps, left to wonder if all the processes described in *A Mass Conspiracy* – which come together to make FNB – are best conceived in relation to the category of waste at all. The stretching of "waste" into so many domains of contemporary political and economic life seems to both reveal and conceal.

These are not so much criticisms of Giles's work, however, as avenues for future exploration and theoretical specification. And it is a testament to the book's originality and intellectual sophistication that it opens up several more. For example, for readers of *Commodity Frontiers* it is perhaps notable that *A Mass Conspiracy* gestures toward, but does not directly address, the non-city, raising the question of the relationship between global city-making, waste, and the geographies of *extended urbanization* (see Brenner, 2019). Indeed, the non-city looms in *A Mass Conspiracy*, functioning largely as an absent presence structuring the making and unmaking of the global cities that Giles concerns himself with. We hear of the gentrification of Occidental Park in Seattle, which hosts the "aesthetically impressive office complex for Weyerhaeuser, a timber company that is one of the world's largest private owners of commercial forestry land" (p. 109, emphasis added); of the "recent, broke arrival[s] to the city" that engage with FNB, presumably streaming in from other cities and hinterlands alike (p. 99, emphasis added); and of the networks of flexible accumulation and migration that the global city – as the command and control center of neoliberal capitalism – both presupposes and produces. (And this is to say nothing of the zones of intensive agricultural production that remain offstage, but which surely produce FNB's scavenged food in the first instance.) Future work, therefore, might build on Giles and engage directly with the socio-ecological waste produced in and by the operational landscapes of the global city, and trace the shaping force that such waste exerts on the historical-geographical evolution of the planetary urban tissue. That is, of course, much easier said than done. But Giles's mammoth undertaking in *A Mass Conspiracy* is as good an inspiration as any.

Finally, if the preceding paragraphs have largely tracked Giles's engagement with *what* questions – following his attempt to establish what exactly the socio-ecological contradictions of the present are (or at least some of them) – we would do well to close by reflecting more explicitly on his engagement with the question of *who* can get us out of this mess (and *how*). As noted, Giles finds political hope in those "minor" economies made out of the detritus of neoliberal capitalist urbanization – and in the collective worlds forged by the homeless and unemployed, by "punks, students, hippies, Quakers, vagrants, itinerants, and other radicals"

(p. xv). And he suggests that the actions of FNB's "motley crew," in particular, have wider relevance for political thought and action today. This is because they underscore the "complexity, hybridity, and already existing diversity of our political and economic systems" (p. 252). Groups like FNB demonstrate, for Giles, that our prevailing political and economic regimes "have interstices" – that they produce them – which allow for more than alterity and opposition, but for enduring "illiberal" assemblages as well (p. 221). In this sense, Giles provides a map of the fault lines of the present and identifies (at least some of) the heterogenous actors already cobbling together a different kind of future. And yet, this too leaves several fundamental questions on the table – questions of tactics and strategy in particular. For one, it remains unclear how the "counterpublics" produced by these actors might turn into something more – how these "motley crews" might grow beyond the "interstices." Surely capitalists and global city makers are not going to simply acquiesce in the face of minor economies – so how do we make them major?

This is the question of *how*, and it is further complicated by the approach to the state offered by FNB – as inspiring and important as their work is. In Giles's telling, FNB was (and is) formed in relation to the state; "from its earliest days, [FNB] has emerged from the fringes or minorities of urban market-publics in response to efforts by municipal agencies to remake public space" (p. 180). For Giles, FNB thus demonstrates that state authority can never be total; that resistance exceeds state power, reorganizing the operations of the state while still being structured by them. Nevertheless, FNB itself is also quite explicitly anti-statist, accentuating the problem of how their interstitial and prefigurative politics of de-commodification and democracy might take hold beyond the margins. As the geographer Christian Parenti has argued, "the modern capitalist state does not have a relationship with nature, it is a relationship with nature" (Parenti, 2015, p. 830), and it has certainly functioned alongside and in the interests of capital in its waste-making endeavors. But we can just as surely say that the state maintains some relative autonomy and room for maneuver. Indeed, this relative autonomy is exemplified in Giles's recognition that "FNB's actions [have] sometimes bounded, sometimes provoked or intensified the state's efforts to control food distribution" (p. 182). As

such, the state appears to be a critical resource for those concerned with making a better world, on a broad scale.

Giles, for his part, does not offer many reflections on this front – nor should he. His project is a very different one. He is telling the story of FNB, waste, and the global city, and he is largely uninterested in giving recipes to the literal cook-shops of the future. But in a world in which the detritus continues to pile up, strategic questions of how to get out of this mess – of how to take power and generalize democratic modes of existence – seem only to grow more urgent.

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