Article

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‘Good morning Metro shoppers!’ Food insecurity, COVID-19 and the emergence of roll-call neoliberalism

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Abstract

From April 2020 to December 2021, the Canadian federal government earmarked $330,000,000 through the Emergency Food Security Fund to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 global pandemic. These funds were disbursed through a handful of national and regional emergency food and food justice agencies to smaller front-line organizations for the purchase of emergency food provisions and personal protective equipment, and to hire additional workers. We theorize these dynamics within the broader processes of neoliberalization and argue that the Canadian federal government was conscripting food justice and community development organizations into its efforts to address dramatically increasing rates of food insecurity across the country through charity emergency food provisioning. Within Peck and Tickell’s stylized conceptions of the destructive (roll-back) and creative (roll-out) moments of the process of neoliberalization, we frame the crisis of COVID-19 as exposing a form of recalibration (roll-call) neoliberalism. We focus on this dynamic specifically within the context of household food insecurity in Canadian communities and argue that the federal government’s funding regime during the global pandemic effectively directed food justice organizations (and by extension, the populace in general) away from

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a more ambitious social change agenda towards the more acceptable strategy (in neoliberal terms) of emergency food provisioning services.

Keywords
COVID-19, food charity, food insecurity, food justice, global pandemic, neoliberalism

Introduction – good morning Metro shoppers

In the days leading up to Thanksgiving in 2020, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appealed to Canadians on Twitter to buy a few extra things at the grocery store to donate to their local food bank. The 41-second video shared widely on social media begins with Trudeau speaking to people in a Metro supermarket, a key player in Canada's food retail oligopoly, over the store's intercom system: 'Good morning Metro shoppers. What a pleasure to wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving. It's the Prime Minister encouraging you all that as you're thankful this weekend . . . please consider donating to the Ottawa Food Bank' (Trudeau 2020). Trudeau then shops the aisles, pays for the groceries and deposits them into a grocery cart destined for the Ottawa Food Bank. The text of the Tweet reads, in part, 'This long weekend, let's continue to be there for one another – it's the Canadian way' (Trudeau 2020).

The glossy production and upbeat score of the video underline its implicit framing: food insecurity, the 'insecure or inadequate access to food because of financial constraints' (Polsky & Garriguet 2022), is a relatively straightforward problem that can be solved by the generosity of individuals buying and donating food purchased through their local corporate grocery chain. Though just as the commodity obscures its social and ecological relations of production, so too does Trudeau's appeal belie the politics motivating it. The deeper, contradictory interpretation is of course jarring: A man with actual access to the sundry policy tools to end food insecurity chooses instead a performative, tokenistic act that further normalizes and prescribes a fundamentally neoliberal, corporatized and charitable approach to addressing food insecurity. The social media post, ultimately a throw away in the endless churn of online content, nonetheless, exemplifies the federal government doubling down on a very neoliberal, three-part conception of food charity during the global pandemic: the notion that (a) individual acts of kindness, (b) in concert with benevolent private enterprise and (c) a robust emergency food provisioning non-profit sector can solve food insecurity.

Indeed, during the pandemic, the federal government earmarked $330,000,000, in four separate tranches, for emergency food through the Emergency Food Security Fund (EFSF). These funds were distributed to six national/regional organizations 'that have an established network and distribution system for food aid and providing food to those in need' (Government of Canada 2021c: n.p.). Specific details regarding which local organizations the dollars were eventually distributed to and how (and where) they were spent are stubbornly scarce (see Table 2 for available details).[1] However, the Government reported that the funds were used to 'purchase food and other basic necessities; buy or

rent equipment and materials; transport and distribute food; access new distribution centres; hire temporary help to fill volunteer shortages; [and] implement biosecurity measures' (Government of Canada 2021a: n.p.). In other words, funding from the EFSF was primarily used to support food banking in Canada during a time of escalating rates of food insecurity.

On the face of it, this may seem like the logical, even ethical, intervention to make on behalf of those struggling to feed themselves during an unprecedented global pandemic. The calculus seems simple: when people are hungry, give them food. Yet after 40 years of food banking in Canada, the evidence is overwhelmingly clear – food banks do not solve food insecurity, nor are they particularly effective at feeding those in crisis (Tarasuk et al. 2020). Prior to the pandemic, more people than ever before were living with food insecurity in Canada (Tarasuk and Mitchell 2020). The pandemic only compounded the problem: just a few months into it, before the dollars of the EFSF were disbursed, the number of those living with food insecurity had risen by 39% (Statistics Canada 2020). National-level statistics are not yet available to determine whether the EFSF was effective at reducing spiking rates of food insecurity over the course of the pandemic.[2] However, the 40-year track record of charitable food suggests the investment will likely have had little impact. Food bank visits increased 20.3% from March 2019 to March 2021 (Food Banks Canada (FBC) 2021c). However, what is clear is that the intervention was extraordinarily effective at (a) signalling the federal government's preferred response to food insecurity and (b) recruiting the non-profit sector in Canada into the work of charitable food distribution during an acute crisis.

In what follows, we situate the federal government's strategy for reducing food insecurity during the global pandemic within the broader 40-year history of neoliberalism. We draw on broad themes and local-level examples as well as our own efforts to trace federal pandemic funding to address food insecurity in Canada. More specifically, we make the case that prioritizing corporatized charity as a strategy for attending to the deepening crisis of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a subtle – though important – evolution in the process of neoliberalization. Building on Peck and Tickell's (2002) widely cited stylistic conceptions of roll-back and roll-out neoliberalization, we identify a contemporary expression of neoliberalization: *roll-call*, an (attempted) cultural and political economic recalibration of, in this case, the food justice non-profit sector in Canada. We define food justice organizations as those explicitly motivated by broader social transformation through food systems work.

This article emerged from a community-based action research project focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on local food systems and community-based responses to these disruptions. Led by our commitments as politically engaged ally scholars dedicated to working with our immediately proximate communities, the project was grounded in Peterborough, a mid-sized community in Ontario, Canada. However, the project drew our attention across Canada, and beyond, and was informed by partnerships with researchers and food system advocates across Canada concerned with the impacts of the global pandemic on our local food systems. Our immediate concern for the project was to provide useful and real-time research and analysis support to the organizations and networks we collaborate within Peterborough. This opportunity to strategize with them

as the global pandemic descended on our part of the world led to the development and refinement of our observations about the shifting character of neoliberalization.

In the following section, we briefly summarize neoliberalization as conceptualized, in particular, by Peck and Tickell (2002). Next, we outline the role that neoliberalization has played in co-producing food insecurity and responses to it, through a discussion of the rise of food banks in Canada. After this, we draw on our observations from and beyond Peterborough to introduce and discuss the features of roll-call neoliberalism, which we define as a cultural and political project that seeks to (a) recalibrate civic expectations through (b) reconfiguring state priorities in order to (c) realign the politics of the third sector with those of the state. Roll-call neoliberalism is, in short, a strategy in the politics of containment. As the contentious politics of movements for racial justice, reconciliation, abolition of the police and climate justice permeate the food justice movement, there has been a structural shift in the politics of (some) third sector food in Canada, and beyond. The strategy of roll-call neoliberalization is to absorb these critiques (endemic to the crises of capitalism) while realigning the third sector into more politically palatable interventions. Beyond contributing to a body of neoliberal theorizing, this research attempts to make sense of the Federal government's response to food insecurity during the global pandemic and make space for the voices of those who are on the front lines of addressing food insecurity.

The moments of neoliberalization

While 'defining neoliberalism is no straightforward task' (McCarthy & Prudham 2004: 276), and debates continue about its details (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Peck & Tickell 2002), it is the case that neoliberalism seems to be everywhere (Harvey 2007; Peck & Tickell 2002). David Harvey (2007: 22) provides a useful summary of neoliberalism as:

> [A] theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade.

From its 'starkly utopian' intellectual origin epitomized by the politics of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney in the 1980s, to the more 'technocratic form' of the Washington consensus of the 1990s, neoliberalism is deeply woven into our contemporary political, economic and cultural fabric (Peck & Tickell 2002: 381). It is not a stretch, therefore, to suggest that neoliberalism sets the political, economic and cultural backdrop for how governments are responding to the acute crisis of COVID-19.

It is worth underscoring, as Harvey (2007) does, the nefarious character of neoliberalism. He argues that neoliberalization has failed on its own ostensible terms: Four decades of neoliberal policy have done little to re-energize global capital flows, though it has been profoundly effective at concentrating capital and deepening socio-economic inequity. In this respect, Harvey (2007) echoes Smith's (1996) sentiment of the 'revanchist' aspect of neoliberalism. As Harvey (2007: 29) puts it, neoliberalism is, in the final analysis, a project of reclaiming and maintaining dominance:

> Neoliberalism has not proven effective at revitalizing global capital accumulation, but it has succeeded in restoring class power. As a consequence, the theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has worked more as a system of justification and legitimization. The principles of neoliberalism are quickly abandoned whenever they conflict with this class project.

Nearly 20 years ago, Peck and Tickell (2002) observed how this chameleonic character is achieved by demonstrating that neoliberalism is in fact a *process* of *neoliberalization*, a dynamic and ever-evolving cultural, political and economic project. They draw a useful stylized distinction between two broad movements of neoliberalization: the roll-back and roll-out phases.

The first, roll-back, temporally linked to the 1980s, was a reaction to the Atlanticist post-war census and the welfare state. The political epigones of this first wave of neoliberalism, including Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney, championed an era of deregulation and dismantling, '*destruction and discreditation*' (Peck & Tickell 2002: 384, emphasis original) of Keynesian interventions, collectivist institutions and public investments. During this era, the (western) state retreated from the commitments of the Keynesian state through significant divestment from public institutions and programmes (Peck & Tickell 2002). Governments recast crucial social supports and services as frivolous, and justified deep cuts to social programmes under the guise of deficit reduction. This was enabled through the broader cultural and ideological project of neoliberalization that ate away at notions of collectivist sentiments and recast the possessive individual 'in the image of a brutal reading of competitive-market imperatives' (Peck & Tickell 2002: 385). Gibson-Graham (2006) usefully illustrates such a reordering of priorities:

> While some types of economic activity are seen as essential to social survival, and therefore necessitous of intervention, others are viewed as frosting on the social cake. Though it may be widely recognized and lamented that child-care and its low wage providers are in difficult economic straits, policymakers will remind us that unless we take care of manufacturing, we are all up the creek. (p. 107)

The legacy of roll-back neoliberalism persists. Since the mid-1980s, a mass proliferation of third sector organizations has emerged to attend to all manner of social, ecological and cultural concerns arising in the face of abdication by the neoliberal state. Raising money for everything from cancer research and safe streets to school supplies and housing, the so-called third sector continues to attempt to patch the many holes in the tattered remnants of the social safety net.

By the early 1990s, the contradictions of neoliberal excess threatened to derail the project, so the processes of neoliberalization adjusted focus to 'the purposeful *construction and consolidation* of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations' (italics original, Peck & Tickell 2002: 384). After a decade of breaking down the welfare state, the principals of neoliberalism began building back institutions and processes infused with the logic of efficiency, possessive individualism and market orthodoxy. While the roll-back posture of neoliberals largely ignored the emergent complex social issues that they were creating – poverty, food insecurity, social isolation and the like – the nascent formulation refocused on these issues through the responsiblizing and

Table 1. Summary of distinctions between two phases of neoliberalization.

Roll-back	Roll-out
1980s–1990s	1990s–2000s
Destruction and discreditation	Construction and consolidation
Reaction to the welfare state	Reaction to contradictions of roll-back
E.g. restructuring and cuts to public supports	E.g. reframing of need as crime, dependency, laziness

punitive lenses of crime, welfare dependency and unemployment (Peck & Tickell 2002). The shift here is notable – while the retreat of the state produced a good deal of poverty and food insecurity, the governance logic of roll-out neoliberalism recast these issues as individual failings as opposed to failings of the state or the result of deliberate retrenchment (see Table 1). Consistent with Guthman's (2008) view of this roll-out state as more 'intrusive' (p. 1173), Peck and Tickell (2002: 395) observe:

> Yet while zones of deeply impacted poverty and social exclusion may have been no-go areas for neoliberals during the 1980s, in its roll-out guise neoliberalism is increasingly penetrating these very places, animated by a set of concerns related to crime, worklessness, welfare dependency, and social breakdown.

At the same time, as budgets for universal public programmes were cut and funds reanimated (at least partially) as government grants, the non-profit sector entered a period of professionalization (Alkon & Guthman 2017; Incite! 2017). The shift from the principle of universal support that underpinned Keynesian state interventions to a new paradigm of artificially imposed scarcity introduced the distinctly neoliberal logic of competition into the non-profit and charitable sectors. And yet, as Alkon and Guthman (Incite! 2017: 13) explain, the roll-out phase included a proliferation of non-governmental organizations charged with filling the gaps left behind by the state's retreat – despite having to operate with fewer resources (see also Incite! 2017; Roy 2004). As Alkon and Guthman (Incite! 2017: 13) put it,

> Roll-out neoliberalism is also seen in the increasing array of community groups that have cropped up in attempts to fill the holes in services left by a shrinking state (Guthman 2008c). For instance, food justice organizations have taken responsibility for the provisioning of food in low-income communities and communities of color, inadvertently helping justify the dismantling of [public] food assistance programs.[3]

Third sector organizations were brought into direct competition, forced to 'out-perform' each other as demonstrated through a growing number of technocratic outcome and impact performance metrics. In taking up the work abandoned by the neoliberal state within a context of intense competition for scarce funding dollars, food organizations must, perversely, implicitly argue that they can outperform the state and for-profit organizations in programme delivery (Alkon & Guthman 2017; Ilcan & Basok 2004). However, when organizations 'trumpet their own abilities to do it better' (Alkon &

Guthman 2017: 13), they also justify and reinforce the neoliberal logic underpinning the state's abdication of responsibility.

Put differently, the tendency is for food non-profit and charitable organizations to inadvertently normalize state retrenchment by adopting and performing the political subjectivity of neoliberalization in their attempts to meet the needs of their communities (see Bondi & Laurie 2005). In this context, government's narrow preference for service provision and quantifiable outcomes directs the work of the third sector towards politically palatable and measurable outcomes achievable within the short term (Ilcan & Basok 2004). While this approach to the complex issue of food insecurity is perhaps successful for non-profit sector organizations in terms of making appeals to prospective funders, it leaves the more ambitious political agenda of social transformation off the table. As Julie Guthman puts it, 'organizations may go for the low-hanging fruit in their program goals, never reaching for the stuff that really needs picking' (Guthman 2008: 1245). In this way, 'neoliberalization incorporates, co-opts, constrains and depletes activism' (Bondi & Laurie 2005: 395). This is not to say that all third sector organizations deliver this performance uncritical of the structural conditions that narrow their political repertoire. Indeed, as we discuss below, the ascendance of food justice organizations – those explicitly motivated by broader social transformation through food systems work – emerges in part out of a critique of food charity. Food justice organizations have substantively shifted the terrain of third sector food systems work in recent years – though, as we will discuss, consistent with the recalibration of roll-call neoliberalization, this work has been (perhaps temporarily) disrupted.

Neoliberalization and food banking

Perhaps unsurprisingly, extra-state infrastructure to address food insecurity solidified within the non-profit and private sectors in Canada during the roll-back phase of neoliberalism. Emulating a US model to address rising rates of food insecurity, Canada's first food bank opened in Edmonton in 1981 to provide *temporary* measures to support people struggling within the compounding context of high rates of inflation, recession and scaled-back federal unemployment and provincial social supports (Collins et al. 2014; Suschnigg 2012; Wakefield et al. 2013). These interventions were ostensibly intended to be short-term stop-gap measures of addressing the violent results of neoliberal logic. And yet, by the mid-1980s, over 75 food banks had opened across Canada (Riches 1986). Thus began the normalization and institutionalization of the charitable food banking model in Canada (McIntyre et al. 2016; Suschnigg 2012; Tarasuk et al. 2014).

If the roll-back phase of neoliberalism led to the establishment of food banks, emergency food programmes, and the non-profit sector in general, then the roll-out phase of neoliberalism resulted in the proliferation of the sector. According to FBC, over 770 food banks and 4750 food agencies experienced over 1.3 million visits in March 2021 alone (FBC 2021c), evidence of both epidemic food insecurity and food banks' utter limitations in a country of 4.4 million food-insecure people (Tarasuk and Mitchell 2020). Wakefield et al. (2013) observe that, in addition to expanding in number, food banks are growing in size, institutionalization and complexity. The staggering propagation of charity food in Canada highlights the perversity of neoliberalized attempts to

solve social issues – as Arundhati Roy (2004: n.p.) puts it, 'It's almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs'.

While food banks are now pervasive, only about one-fifth of food-insecure households actually turn to them, choosing more often to ask friends or family for financial support (Tarasuk et al. 2020). This reluctance may derive from food banks' well-documented shortcomings, including unpredictable and short-term relief; inability to consistently provide sufficient, fresh, nutritious, culturally appropriate food; lack of dignity in participation; and surveillance of participants (Collins et al. 2014; McIntyre et al. 2016; Suschnigg 2012). These limitations no doubt stem at least partially from food banks' dependence on ad hoc, unpredictable and discretionary resources – namely, volunteer labour, personal donations, corporate donations of unsaleable food, and now, temporary federal pandemic funding – to meet the formidable challenge of addressing citizens' survival needs.

Despite Canada's status as a signatory to various international agreements confessing a legal responsibility to guarantee the right to food (Rideout et al. 2007), by the time the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in 2020 – as Canada was about to mark its 40-year anniversary of food banking – a record 4.4 million (2017–2018) were estimated to be living with food insecurity in this country. Households most affected included those living on low incomes, identifying as Black or Indigenous, renting their homes, living in Canada's northern territories and headed by lone parents. Most households (65%) living with food insecurity were supported primarily with employment income, an indication that jobs are insufficient for many. However, most people supported by social assistance (60%) were food insecure (in Nunavut, this rate was as high as 93%), an indication that social assistance rates are woefully inadequate (Tarasuk and Mitchell 2020).

Through a neoliberal sleight of hand, the immediate symptom of food insecurity (i.e. not having enough food) overshadows more fundamental, systemic causes – especially food's primary and almost global treatment as a commodity that must be bought and paid for. Of course, one cannot buy what one cannot afford. Researchers, Statistics Canada and some food charity organizations identify *low income* (rather than food insufficiency) as a key driver of food insecurity (FBC 2021a; Polsky & Garriguet 2022; Tarasuk and Mitchell 2020). Valerie Tarasuk (2017) reports that 'Severe food insecurity is almost non-existent among higher income households, but the prevalence rises sharply as adjusted household income falls below $30,000'. It isn't surprising then that food banking has proved ineffective at lowering rates of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al. 2020). Researchers and advocates instead call for universal income-based responses from government (Collins et al. 2014; FBC 2019; Swift & Power 2021; Tarasuk 2017). Evidence that universally accessible cash transfers conditional only on low-income status, such as the existing Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors, reduce food insecurity rates is compelling (Tarasuk 2017).

However, interventions that seek to address the root causes of food insecurity do not align with the miserly political economic ideology of neoliberalization. Instead, a neoliberal fixation on symptoms is expressed through state disinterest in funding third sector advocacy, research and education pursuits (Ilcan & Basok 2004). Ilcan and Basok (2004) use the term 'community government' (p. 130) to describe 'the ways in which the contemporary politics of government has come to define, shape, and orient communities

(for example, volunteer communities) such that they engage in activities that attempt to responsibilize certain groups of citizens for particular purposes and ends' (p. 130). These authors see volunteerism as an extension of governmental reach where state surveillance of the service operations and constituencies of voluntary agencies moulds these organizations into service-providing soldiers of the state and their volunteers as responsible-citizen trainees.

Within this logic of neoliberalism, the persistence and escalation of food insecurity provides increased opportunity for celebratory commendations, photo ops and Prime Ministerial social media posts heralding volunteers, community donors, corporate donors and the state for their efforts and generosity in supporting the charitable food system. The cultural and political capital afforded those who trade in the optics of charitable food is so compelling that Poppendieck's (1998) words from 1998 still resonate, 'if we didn't have hunger, we'd have to invent it' (294).

Closely linked with the political spectacle is the political economy of charitable food – a system which funnels capital back to corporate grocery oligopolies through charitable donation tax breaks, free waste disposal, promotional materials and the unpaid labour of repackaging surplus food for distribution (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005). Indeed, researchers have observed a veritable corporate takeover of charitable food in Canada, and elsewhere (Fisher 2017; Livingstone 2013; Riches 2018). For example, Mendly-Zambo and colleagues' (2023) examination of the relationship between Walmart Canada and FBC suggest that the former's influence has effectively served to silence the latter on matters of tax rates and structures, wages, unionization and other structural interventions that reduce food insecurity (see also Azadian et al. 2022). It is perhaps not surprising that the executive of the Board of Directors of FBC entirely comprises representatives from the corporate sector (Mendly-Zambo et al. 2023).

Reacting to the roll-out

In recent years, critics have emphasized the urgent need for renewed commitments from the federal and provincial governments to rebuild the social safety net. As mentioned above, some scholars focus on the relationship between income and food security, and call for a reintroduction of more robust income stability programmes as a means of reducing food insecurity (Collins et al. 2014; Riches 2018; Swift & Power 2021; Tarasuk 2017). Within this scholarly and activist ferment, broader critiques of the food system have developed, expanding the focus of those concerned with food (in)security beyond the food (in)security-income nexus.

Community food security, for example, is a notion that brings into focus food production, human rights and food system, environmental and agricultural sustainability, within the context of more just and equal food distribution (Corrigan 2011; Engler-Stringer 2011; Wakefield et al. 2013). Food sovereignty, a movement originating among peasant farmers in the Global South, insists on peoples' right to healthy, culturally appropriate food; sustainable, ecological means of production; and the ability of people to determine their own food and agricultural systems (Desmarais 2007; La Via Campesina n.d.). These and other emerging perspectives can be broadly characterized within the food justice paradigm. While food justice is itself an emergent term, it can be usefully

summarized as an approach that focuses on ameliorating the *structural* causes of socio-ecologically produced inequity – colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism – within the food system, and beyond (see, for example, Alkon & Agyeman 2011; Gottlieb & Joshi 2013).

While there is not yet a full accounting of the extent to which food justice has permeated the Canadian context, we know that the paradigm is widely embraced among scholars and the third sector. Early scholarship in Canada documenting the emergence of food justice perspectives focused on movement actors' resistance to globalization and efforts to democratize food system planning (Levkoe 2006; Wekerle 2004). More recently, ally scholars have emphasized confronting structures of dominance – colonialism, white supremacy and patriarchy – as normative ambitions for food justice activism (Kepkiewicz et al. 2015). Beyond the academy, health organizations (Dietitians of Canada 2016; Ontario Dietitians in Public Health 2020) have led calls for enhanced state intervention that moves beyond food charity. Organizations like Nourish, FoodShare and Black Creek Farm,[4] meanwhile, are forging new directions in food justice. Their work centres issues of equity and justice, and repoliticizes the entrenched issue of food insecurity and unequal food access in ways that depart dramatically from the sanitized narratives of charitable food. FoodShare, in particular, has been increasingly vocal on a variety of social/racial justice issues. As an example, they recently issued an open letter calling on all levels of governments to commit to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The letter read, in part, 'These continued delays reveal a government that is guilty of continuing to perpetuate genocide . . . Implement the Calls. End boil water advisories. Stop the genocide of Indigenous peoples' (Sinclair & Taylor 2021).

What we find in the food justice movement, then, are third sector organizations that reject that politics of postponement. These organizations distrust a status quo that has simply reproduced the conditions of food insecurity for the past 40 years. In the process of enacting a *different* kind of politics, they are actively reframing food insecurity within its broader structural origins of colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism while calling on governments to substantively overhaul their approach to the unequal distribution of food. However, what we find in the state's response, put in high relief during the global pandemic, is a politics of containment that seeks to realign the sector to the neoliberal principles of charity, corporate benevolence and individual responsibility.

COVID-19 and roll-call neoliberalism

By May 2020, just 2 months into the pandemic in Canada, food insecurity had increased by 39% (Statistics Canada 2020). Given that Canada's 40-year neoliberal approach to food insecurity has served to generate a patchwork of over-worked, understaffed and volunteer-reliant non-profit and charitable sector organizations – evidence that the charitable sector has indeed been experiencing a four-decade emergency – it isn't surprising that the shock of COVID-19 initially sent the non-profit sector reeling as experiences of food insecurity soared even higher. And yet we see non-profits and civil society more generally being summoned to report for food insecurity management duty, in an expression of neoliberalization that we are calling roll-call neoliberalism.

Since the beginning of COVID-19 in Canada, the state has made significant investments, in a variety of registers, designed to support people and industries to withstand the disruptions of the global pandemic. We focus briefly on two portfolios of investment here – those related to income stability and food access. These investments reveal the roll-call character of state support during the pandemic and underscore the ongoing revanchist and responsiblizing character of this latest instantiation of neoliberalization.

To the federal government's credit, its investment in income stabilization was swiftly implemented, broadly administered and generously provided as far as income supports go. This prompt reaction at the pandemic's onset targeted the income needs of many demographics: those who had lost employment because of the pandemic (Canada Emergency Response Benefit – CERB), students (Canada Emergency Student Benefit – CESB[5]), parents (top-ups to Canada Child Benefit – CCB[6]) and lower income households (through a one-time increase to the Goods and Services Tax Credit – GST).

CERB, the most wide-ranging of these pandemic supports, provided recipients with $2,000 monthly, with overall payments amounting to $74 billion from 15 March to 3 October 2020 (Government of Canada 2021a). While more investigation is required, Statistics Canada suggests that such pandemic income supports may have been a key factor for a drop in food insecurity from 12.6% in 2017/2018 to 9.6% in September to December 2020 (Polsky & Garriguet 2022). Importantly, however, CERB and Employment Insurance together excluded about 1.4 million of the 'unworking' population (whose support falls primarily under provincial jurisdiction) largely because they were already unemployed before March 15 but ineligible for Employment Insurance, had not earned at least $5,000 in wages in the previous year or had recently quit a job (Power & Swift 2021). So, the poorest and most vulnerabalized were left further behind.

The discrepancy between CERB and provincial social assistance supports is marked. For instance, in Ontario, the $2,000 a month provided by CERB for a single person contrasts sharply with the 2020 monthly amounts available for social assistance recipients, that is, $1,169 from the Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) and $733 from Ontario Works (OW) (Income Security Advocacy Centre 2020).[7] As the COVID Economic and Social Effects Study (CESES) team at McMaster University found in their survey of approximately 800 Ontario adults from August to December 2020, social assistance recipients experienced food insecurity struggles at a much higher rate than CERB recipients (see Figure 1). Startlingly, they reported often not having enough to eat at a rate *5 times as high* as CERB recipients and experiencing days without food at a rate *4.6 times as high* (Ferdosi et al. 2021).

The food security of some groups, such as many social assistance recipients, clearly did not benefit from the federal government's pandemic interventions. Indeed, tying benefits to employment histories made this impossible. We see then, the responsiblizing, revanchist character of the earlier described phases of neoliberalization is consistent within its roll-call instantiation (see Table 3).

In addition to income supports, the Government of Canada deployed multiple tranches of money designed to address food insecurity. These included $50 million to the Surplus Food Rescue Program to facilitate the movement of surplus food to people in need and $25 million to Nutrition North Canada to increase subsidy rates in northern communities to increase food access (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) 2020).

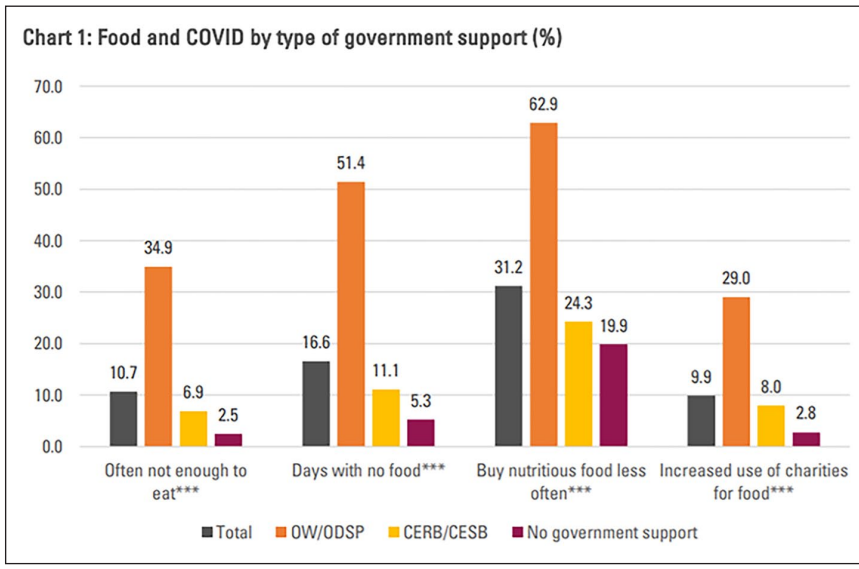

Figure 1. Indicators of food insecurity in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Ferdosi et al. (2021).
*p<.10**p<.=10**p<.=001

In addition, three rounds of $100 million each announced in April 2020, October 2020 and August 2021, and a subsequent round of $30 million announced in December 2021, for the EFSF were allocated to six broad-based food organizations to distribute primarily to food banks, as illustrated in Table 2 (AAFC 2021a). In August 2021, AAFC reported,

> So far, the Emergency Food Security Fund has supported more than 4,700 local food initiatives across Canada, with over 1,050 initiatives directly supporting Indigenous organizations and communities. The fund has helped to serve safe, healthy and culturally diverse meals to millions of Canadians. (AAFC 2021d)

However, publicly verifying the safety, nutritiousness and culturally diverseness of the funded food remains almost impossible, since specifics surrounding the ultimate destinations and applications of these significant public funds are conspicuously unavailable. Scant information appears on the websites of the federal government and the six designated funding organizations. In October 2020, the federal government reported on the distribution of $262,789 from four of the organizations (AAFC 2021b). FBC, seemingly the most transparent of the recipient organizations, reports that their COVID-19 Response Fund supported 4,751 communities in all provinces and territories with the distribution of over 34 million pounds of food (FBC 2021b).

Our attempts to get finer-grained detail on where and how the dollars from this significant public investment were spent have thus far been unsuccessful. In response to our request for more information, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Table 2. Distribution of federal Emergency Food Security Fund.

Organization recipients	April 2020 (millions)	October 2020 (millions)	August 2021 (millions)	December 2021 (millions)
Food Banks Canada	$50	$18.50	$25.84	$30 yet to be allocated to specific organizations
Community Food Centres Canada	$49.2 for these four organizations	$8.90	$15.00	
Second Harvest		$8.90	$25.00	
Salvation Army		$8.85	$8.16	
Breakfast Club of Canada		$18.50	$25	
La Tablée des Chefs	$0.8	$1.34	$1.00	
Reserve funds	–	$5.00	–	
Indigenous Community Support Fund	–	$30.00	–	
Total	$100	$100	$100	$30

Source: AAFC (2020); AAFC (2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

referred us to the six recipient organizations (see Table 2). Our requests to the recipient organizations fared no better. Of the six organizations, four insisted that they were unable to share any information related to how or where the dollars were spent and two provided scarcely little more. This of course raises questions regarding transparency around what kinds of community-level organizations received funding, how much they received, what the funding was used for and what impact this may have had. At this point, we await the results of our request through the Access to Information Act for the names and types of funded community organizations, the amounts distributed to them, the eligibility requirements for them to access funding, the specific types of programmes and projects that the funding was used for and the impacts of this funding for the communities of these community organizations. We hope to receive this information in the performance reports submitted by the lead recipients, as well as any other pertinent reports prepared by AAFC regarding those performances.

Even without a visible trail, we can see in the investments a particular focus on emergency food provisioning that underscores the government's preferred strategy of attending to food insecurity through food charity, corporate benevolence and compliant organizations in the third sector. It is likely that, when (or if) the money is fully traceable, nearly all of it will be found to have ended up in the coffers of Canada's grocery retail oligopoly. Recall that the funds provided through the EFSF were, in part, meant to enable food organizations to 'purchase food and other basic necessities' (Government of Canada 2021c: n.p.), and that the recipient organizations, along with corporate food retailers, were on the task force that set the ground rules for the EFSF programme in the first place. As Azadian et al. (2022) have demonstrated, this kind of overlapping leadership structure has undoubtedly resulted in a corporate-friendly agenda within the charitable food sector. The investment in Nutrition North, meanwhile, helped to prop up a widely criticized and thoroughly ineffective programme which operates through a direct corporate subsidy to commercial food providers in 128 isolated communities across

Canada (see Galloway 2017; St Germain et al. 2019). A lack of pre-subsidy food costs makes it difficult to determine the impact of this investment in lowering costs for residents, but the Auditor General found uneven results on ensuring costs across food items (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2021).

We are concerned that the material and ideological corporatization of charitable food in Canada was explicitly incorporated into the fabric of the state at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic through the development and implementation of the EFSF. The Auditor General's report on the EFSF notes that AAFC struck a task force to develop the criteria for which organizations would receive EFSF funding.[8] The task force comprised 'large not-for-profit organizations, food retailers, and government' (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2021: 12.31) and included the six organizations that were subsequently given anywhere from $3 million to $94 each. Given the influence the corporate sector has over charitable food, and the extent to which corporations benefit from the 'hunger-industrial-complex' (Fisher 2017), this arrangement lies bare the extent to which neoliberal logic underpinned the government's emergency food strategy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The injection of these funds during a period of acute food insecurity crisis imposed a structural incentive for food justice organizations to shift the focus of their work. The state, having leaned on the third sector for over four decades, was all too eager to off-load the responsibility for attending to a once-in-a-generation catastrophe to third sector organizations. To be clear, the state could have used this virtually unprecedented moment in history to re-evaluate its (failed) strategy of responding to food insecurity. Instead – perhaps not wanting to waste the opportunity in crisis – the state chose to double down on food charity through investments to third sector actors, some of whom have become increasingly pointed in their critique, and increasingly vocal of their displeasure with charitable food. And, given the response to our request to the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, it appears that the federal government disbursed these public funds without any expectation of accountability or transparency.

As the second round of $100 million for the EFSF was announced, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Marie-Claude Bibeau, underscored the neoliberal parameters of these investments:

> Our Government is providing additional support to food security organizations, whose extraordinary volunteers and workers are continuing to give their time and energy to help ensure Canadians across the country have access to food. I'd like to thank all Canadians for the generosity they have shown. As the need increases over the holiday season, I encourage all of us to help in whatever way we can. Every donation made will help make life a little brighter for Canadians in need during these challenging times. (AAFC 2020)

As summarized in Table 3, the fiscal constrictiveness generated by roll-back neoliberalism and the reallocation of responsibility emblematic of roll-out neoliberalism have not ended, but are now accompanied by roll-call neoliberalism's renewed inducement for citizens and third sector actors to assume responsibility for social welfare by dangling the carrot of unprecedented investment.

Table 3. Summary of distinctions in neoliberalization.

Roll-back	Roll-out	Roll-call
1980s–1990s	1990s–2000s	2020s
Destruction and discreditation	Construction and consolidation	(Re)calibration
Reaction to the welfare state	Reaction to contradictions of roll-back	Reaction to contradictions of roll-out
E.g. restructuring and cuts to public supports	E.g. reframing of need as crime, dependency, laziness	E.g. funding for charitable responses; commendations for volunteers; calls for citizens to purchase from corporate food retailers to donate to food charities

Roll-out neoliberalization on the ground

Research conducted on the experiences of households and community food organizations during the pandemic further illustrate the state's failure to address the needs of those most marginalized, while interpolating food organizations – through funding opportunities and discursive encouragement – into attempting to assume this neglected responsibility. At the start of the pandemic, an existing, systems-change food justice network in Peterborough, Ontario – the Peterborough Food Action Network – deliberately reprioritized local emergency food provisioning by gathering together regularly to try to reconcile community needs with available food resources. Surveys with organizations within and beyond the network revealed that, during the first wave of the pandemic, they saw increases in food insecurity, in addition to housing insecurity, overdoses and suicidal behaviour among the people they serve (Martin et al. 2021). As organizations faced more need, some also diverged from their regular practices by providing more emergency-based and targeted supports, collecting more participant contact information and changing eligibility criteria. Organizations reported the toll accumulating on overburdened staff and volunteers and the need for more sustainable funding for staffing beyond the pandemic to meet their mandates. Although they witnessed more understanding in the community of the existence of food insecurity and a willingness of community members to respond at a local level, some were also keenly aware of a further entrenchment of an inadequate charity model. Some indicated their desire to go beyond covering for the inadequacies of state supports to advocating for more adequate and sustainable ones. This organizational respondent explained how a lack of state support compounded additional pandemic challenges for their clients:

> Most clients feel left behind because they are on Ontario Works or Disability [provincially funded income assistance programs]. Their mode of transportation was limited (buses). Most programs that were offered only by volunteers shut down leaving them without any options.

Similarly, several low-income interview participants who were social assistance recipients noted the lack of state support. One person receiving ODSP explained,

> I mean, they gave what, 2000 a month CERB benefits for people who needed it because they lost their job. We got that a hundred dollars [Ontario's discretionary COVID-19 Emergency Benefit for social assistance recipients which ended in August, 2020] for a couple of months. And we had to, I had to, as I said, I had to get a social worker because calling I never got it. I had to get a social worker to send in statements saying what things cost and why we required it.

In response to questions about ending this $100 monthly pandemic top-up for ODSP recipients in August 2020, Premier Doug Ford used the neoliberal dialect of individual accountability:

> [T]he best way to help people in Ontario Works or ODSP, if they're healthy and they're able to work, [is] get them a job, help get them a job. (Quoted in Raymond 2020)

Overall, we see roll-call neoliberalism at work at the national, provincial and local levels, wrenching organizations and individuals alike back into line, and in doing so, helping to normalize the pathologies of neoliberalism and responsibilization through a celebration of simple survival.

Conclusion

The dramatically increased acuity of food insecurity in the face of the disruption of COVID-19 can be considered a 'normal accident' of neoliberalism' (Prudham 2004: 343). Decades of state divestment, shirking of international right-to-food obligations and general irresponsibility in the face of growing food insecurity resulted in an already-inadequate and anaemic social support system, primed to fully collapse at the slightest shock. Writing in an environmental register, Prudham's (2004: 345) analysis remains relevant in this present context: 'neoliberalism generates endemic risks . . . by building organized irresponsibility into regulatory systems . . . while the actual circumstances of the "accidents" are indeed important, these must not obscure the systemic production of probabilities that they will occur . . . .' Over the past four decades, the neoliberal state has produced conditions within which the probability of escalating food insecurity is a near certainty.

Alkon and Guthman (2017) contend that 'a more vibrant, diverse food activism depends on understanding the ways that neoliberalism constrains political possibilities, and that this theoretical undertaking can help create space for other forms of food politics to develop' (p. 12). Indeed, understanding neoliberalism requires thinking about it *in relation to* historical moments, as Peck and Tickell (2002) so usefully illustrate. For four decades neoliberalism has played a significant role in co-producing food insecurity and responses to it, as we illustrate through our discussion of the rise of food banks in Canada. The first moment, roll-back neoliberalism, dismantled Keynesian, collectivist and public institutions and investments, and in doing so, birthed the non-profit sector response in general and charitable food sector response specifically. The second moment, roll-out neoliberalism, dictated professionalization/efficiency/outcomes measurement to discipline those whom roll-back neoliberalism had devastated and the organizations trying to assist them. Growing food movements actively resisting the overtures of roll-out

tactics are now being met with an invitation and inducement to return to charity models, especially food banking. Although the last decade or so has seen organizations shift away from the charity model, they are beckoned back into line with dollars and discourse, in keeping with a specific expression of neoliberalization, which we identify as roll-call neoliberalism. Overall, the pandemic has underscored the adaptability of neoliberalization. If roll-back neoliberalism quashed public institutions, and roll-out neoliberalism pointed a finger at those most affected, then roll-call neoliberalism smiles and says, 'you can fix it- our way'. Here we see a kinder, gentler state absorb civic critiques by 'rescuing' the nation from the problems that the state itself created. Roll-call neoliberalism operates as a cultural and political project that seeks to (a) recalibrate civic expectations through (b) reconfiguring state priorities in order to (c) realign the politics of the third sector with those of the state. Essentially, it demands that civil society actors fall in line with the state's assignment for them to address food insecurity.

In responding to this crisis within a crisis, the state has sought to reconfigure a third sector growing increasingly dissatisfied with, and critical of, the approach to food (in) security in Canada. This (attempted) social (re)regulation of risk, though, simply reproduces a failed strategy – food charity does not materially impact rates of food insecurity. More importantly, though, the state's interventions to address food insecurity seek to (re) establish the rules by which food insecurity ought to be dealt with. That the strategy of food charity is ineffective is beside the point. What is notable is that the state called on the third sector to assume responsibility for administering food charity, and the sector obliged. Whether this structural shift in the sector endures remains to be seen.

We recognize the utter luxury of theorizing around moments of neoliberalism amid heightened suffering and tireless community-based attempts to reduce it. Furthermore, we recognize the counsel of Edge and Meyer (2019) that those engaged in food justice work be careful around 'villainizing' particular food security responses:

> [. . .] our findings suggest it may be helpful if the spirit and discourse of advocacy efforts avoided 'villainizing' well-intended organizations working to support those in need on a charitable basis, or stigmatizing individuals who prefer or face less barriers acquiring food through food bank sources. (Edge & Meyer 2019: 83)

Finally, our critique is not meant as a totalizing discourse within which everything is reduced to neoliberalism. Instead, our intention is to take on the call to understand how neoliberalism functions and to highlight how collective action breaks through and succeeds – but importantly – how it is imperiled by roll-call moments. Our goal here is to add to the chorus of voices demanding food justice – supported by interventions such as living wages, adequate social assistance or a basic income guarantee, affordable housing and measures to address structural racism, patriarchy, colonialism and ableism – while providing sharpened tools with which to better dismantle the prevailing structural forces forestalling the realization of more equitable food systems.

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Notes

1. Through the Access to Information Act, we have requested the names and types of funded community organizations, the amounts distributed to them, the eligibility requirements for them to access funding, the specific types of programmes and projects that the funding was used for and the impacts of this funding for the communities of these community organizations. At this point the results of this request are pending.
2. However, an Auditor General's analysis of the EFSF revealed that the organizations' own reporting was not all that useful: the six organizations were asked to rate their capacity to provide healthy, nutritious food and lowered food insecurity in supported communities as an outcome of EFSF, but a lack of criteria and documentation requirements for responses means that their mostly positive responses have little meaning (see Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2021: 11–12).
3. It is worth noting here that, unlike in Canada, there is a history of federally funded food support programmes in the US context (see, for example, Landers 2007).
4. Nourish is a food justice collective promoting food access, food literacy and civic literacy in Peterborough, Ontario. FoodShare is a Toronto-based food justice organization that supports community food programmes and uses advocacy and education to increase food equity. Black Creek Farm is a food justice-focused urban farm in (a racialized, high needs) Toronto (neighbourhood) that is committed to making change through food and skills-based learning.
5. Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) was a pandemic support of up to $1,250 every 4 weeks from 10 May to 29 August 2020 for post-secondary students, and recent post-secondary and high school graduates who could not find employment because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Canada 2021c).
6. Canada Child Benefit (CCB) is a monthly income-tested tax-free payment to families with children under 18 years old.
7. At the time of writing, these rates have not changed. Stagnated incomes combined with rising costs of food, housing and fuel along with the end of some pandemic benefits could be predicted to propel food insecurity rates much higher.
8. In the course of this work, the six recipient organizations were asked to rate their capacity to lower rates of food insecurity; however, the AG found that 'the lack of criteria and documentation requirements for responses means that their mostly positive responses have little meaning' (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2021: 11–12).

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