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We're coming to you from Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs in Providence, Rhode Island. I'm Sarah Baldwin. In this episode of Trending Globally: Politics and Policy, we'll look at the politics of hunger around the world and right here at home. I'm joined today by Michelle Jurkovich, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Watson Institute.

Michelle's research focuses on hunger, food security, and economic and social rights. She completed her PhD in political science from the George Washington University in 2014 and is currently finishing her first book manuscript on international anti hunger advocacy. Hi, Michelle. Thanks for coming today.

It's a pleasure to be here.

I've heard it said that the world produces enough food to feed everyone. And we see food aid programs all over the place. Why don't the people who need it get it? Whose fault is hunger?

I think one of the great challenges for the hunger issue area is that there is no clear understanding of who is ultimately obliged and who is ultimately responsible for providing for the roughly billion people in the world who are hungry. And so you have this interesting and puzzling issue area, where it is not a technical problem. You have enough food in the world. The world produces more than enough in terms of agricultural supply than we need. But people who need the food often can't afford to buy it.

So you have this puzzling relationship where you have a solution to a problem but the inability to solve the problem, in part because there isn't a clear understanding among society of who should step in and help to fill the void if people are unable to feed themselves.

Has any country in particular figured this out?

Perfectly, no. So hunger in many ways is one of the great truisms of life. As long as there has been humanity, there has been hunger. But certain countries have done better than others. So for example, Brazil, with Fome Zero under Lula's Bolsa Familia cash transfer program. It was a conditional cash transfer program. Has been remarkably successful in reducing hunger rates in a relatively short period of time. And the way that it did this was to say, we recognize that there is a gap between the lowest price that food can sell for and still turn a profit for producers and the highest price that the poorest in society can afford to pay for that food.

And the state will come in-- the state, by which I mean the government-- will come in and help to fill that gap. And

they'll do that through providing cash transfers into bank accounts so that people can use this money, which is taxpayer provided, to buy the food that they need to make sure that their families can have a healthy and nutritious diet.

Interesting. But can we just back up for a second, because in thinking about this conversation, I started to look at hunger statistics. And I saw numbers not only for hunger but for extreme hunger and malnutrition and chronic undernourishment. And that reminded me of an article you published recently in which you said, we can't properly measure hunger until we can define it. So do you mean we don't even know what hunger is?

I think one of the-- yes. So one of the profound challenges in responding to hunger has been deciding precisely what hunger is such that we would know what we need to solve and such that we would be able to measure when that number got to zero. And so here's what I mean by that. We can conceptualize hunger in quite a varied way. So when we say hunger, we could mean that you must be dealing with starvation that is so bad that the body is emaciated. Or we could mean we are not OK with people going to bed hungry even one night a week because they're unable to afford the food that they need to have.

These very different understandings of what constitutes hunger, and you would get different measurements depending upon which definition you were using. So within the UN, one of the interesting things that is happening recently is after the Millennium Development Goals, one of which was to half the number of people who are hungry, the proportion of people who are hungry, we now have Sustainable Development Goal Two, which is to eliminate hunger. But if you look--

Yeah, zero hunger.

Right, zero hunger. Which in and of itself is kind of an interesting departure in the way that we look at aspiration in setting these goals, because I honestly don't know anyone who thinks that we will actually achieve this goal. It's interesting to set goals if you don't intend to keep them. But this aside, we have zero hunger, sounds like a great idea. And then you look to see, well, what are the statistics that will be used to determine if we meet this goal? Ah, and there it's very murky.

So here, then, we have a great many different indicators, a great many different statistics, all which point to a very different sure of where the world's hungry are and how profound the problem is. And this is largely because these different statistics reflect fundamentally different understandings of what hunger is, so whether we're using stunting as an indicator or we're using a survey method known as the Food Insecurity Experience Survey that is looking at how people react to questions about missing meals and worrying about missing meals, you get a very different image of who's hungry in a given country.

And instead of dealing with that question, which is how severe does this hunger need to be before we can normatively say, no, that is something as a United Nations we're not willing to accept. Because we haven't dealt with that question, that definitional question, we're not able to agree upon a metric, a single indicator that could measure that.

What is the relationship between hunger and malnutrition?

Well, that's a good question. So in the US case, for instance, we eliminated the word hunger from our hunger statistics domestically in 2006. And we supplemented it with the word food insecurity or food security, which is, I think, a much more sterile way of talking about an otherwise very politically contentious problem.

Do you think it was a political decision?

I think it had-- so the rationale that was given at the time was, we cannot use the word hunger, because hunger reflects a physical-- it's a feeling that the body has in response to a lack of food which we can't measure. And so we'll use a different word, which can more accurately convey this concept. But in the process of doing that, one of the side benefits is it creates a much more sterile, politically sterile way of understanding what is a rather politically shocking reality for a developed country, which is we have a 14% hunger rate.

Right. I was going to bring up, I know you study international aid programs, but let's talk about hunger in America. 14% of the US population is hungry.

Yeah.

That's right? But I don't really recall hearing it discussed in any of the presidential debates, and now that we are looking at a new presidential administration, I don't see any reason to think that it's going to be at the top of anyone's list there. And yet, it's such a primal basic human affliction slash need. What do you see in the future?

Yeah, I think it's disheartening but not surprising that we very rarely talk about hunger in America. And it has-- I don't believe it ever came up in any of the general presidential debates. It did come up a couple of times in the Democratic primaries, but I don't believe it came up in the general debates. And in part, I think that the reason for this is that hunger is not visual. It is also class--

Do you mean visible? Do you mean we can't see it by looking at someone?

Exactly. So you can be both obese and hungry. You can be both obese and malnourished. So obesity may reflect that your body is getting more than it needs in terms of raw calories or calories of the wrong sort, but it doesn't

mean you're getting the protein that you need. It doesn't mean you're not anemic. It doesn't mean you're getting all the vitamins and minerals that you need.

It doesn't mean you're nourished.

It doesn't mean you're nourished. And so what often happens, and this is not unique to the United States but in fact is something we're seeing happen in Mexico and in Egypt and around the world, is that obesity rates are rising but as are malnutrition rates. So it isn't that you can look into a population, and if you see people that do not look skeletal, thus we can say there is no hunger. And because of that, because there isn't a visual connection I think with Americans, it's easy to forget the issue is there. And one of the reasons it's easy to forget is because it is not an issue that is experienced outside of a single socioeconomic class.

And this is problematic. So if we think about issues that do get attention in politics-- so if we talk about, say, certain other public health problems like AIDS, these are conditions which can move out of the lower class. And in that way, they can attract attention from elites. Hunger doesn't have that-- it's not fair to say that's a benefit, but hunger does not have that characteristic. For which reason, it is very easy if you are an elite in any capacity not to see or think about hunger as a problem, and so it gets sidelined.

So food is not a right.

So that's a fascinating question. So food is a right. Food is a human right codified in international law. So it is included in the Declaration of Human Rights. It's included in the Covenant on Economic, Social, Cultural Rights. It's included in CEDAW and in the Commission on the Rights of the Child as well as the voluntary guidelines on the right to food from 2004. And even the US, actually, signed on to that one.

But there's this interesting disconnect between you may have a right to food codified in international law, but what constitutes a right, what that actually means to people may be very different than what's on paper. So in international law, national governments are obliged to ensure that the people inside their countries have access to food if they're unable to afford it or grow it themselves. The problem is that you can have a law, but if societies themselves do not actually demand that the state make good on that promise, then they won't.

And so for instance in 2014, Obama signed into law a new farm bill, which included substantial cuts to the Food Stamps Program that we have domestically. There was almost not a single protest in response. In fact, many people probably don't even know that it happened. And in part, this is because in the United States context, I don't think it's clear to Americans that the state is obliged-- and again, when I say the state, I mean the government-- that the government is obliged to do anything to respond to hunger.

Even though it provides education, or--

Right. And so you have this interesting gap. So I don't think that there is anyone, Republican or Democrat, who thinks that hunger is a good thing. I think there is a universally shared consensus on the moral principle that hunger is bad. People shouldn't starve. It's morally wrong that children go to bed hungry. But there is all the world of difference between having this moral principle, hunger is bad, and having a clear understanding in society of who is supposed to do anything about that moral bad. And the reason that matters is that if you don't know who is supposed to do anything about this moral bad, it's very challenging for activists to actually shame, leverage shame or blame on any particular actor when you see this phenomenon happening.

So we can all agree that hunger is bad. But if we don't know who is supposed to do anything about it when we see these rates of 14% hunger in the United States, that doesn't necessarily mean anything to the American people about, ah, we should shame the state and say, this is inappropriate that this many people should be hungry. Now, you raise education, which I think is a fascinating point of comparison. So let's run a thought experiment. In the United States, let's say you have an eight-year-old child.

And we can put the eight-year-old child in any state in the United States we would like to. And let's say there was no public school for that child to attend.

Outrage. That's not OK.

Right. You would expect that the population would respond saying, the state failed. This is not acceptable. The state is obliged to provide a public option. Now, you could be a member of the Tea Party. In the US, you could probably even be a libertarian and still believe that taxpayer funds should go towards a universal public option for education. Now, you could say that those funds should be able to go through vouchers to go to charter schools, and you could say that there shouldn't be a federal Department of Education, that it should be left to the state.

But there is no active debate about taxpayer money supporting public education for that eight-year-old child. So if education isn't there, we would know that the state had failed. But if you ask, who should feed that same eight-year-old child dinner? Ah, then the hands go up. Some say, well, his parents, if they worked harder, shouldn't they be able to pay for it themselves? Or the church. Don't they have a soup kitchen? Or had he gone to school, or she, then they would have at least gotten lunch.

But again, the provision of of lunches is tied to actually attending school, which is the primary objective, not feeding.

I think that because it is sort of universally unacceptable, I don't think anyone, if there's-- I mean, I personally have a visceral reaction to thinking about that. I'm grateful every day that I am not hungry. And so because there is no

actor to blame and because it's so basic a need, food, that I and many people I know respond instantly to the nutty bar at the checkout line or when I buy coffee and the wrapper says, by this bar and feed a child. To me, that's such a basic sounding transfer of food to person in need that I often do that or I round up.

And many people I know do that as well. And I've heard you say that it's a little more complicated than that. And I hesitate to find out more, but I think as responsible people, we should know more. Can you explain a little bit about what that's?

Yeah, so the United States has a very complex relationship with how we look at the overlap of public and private responsibility for several of our economic and social rights, but food being one of them. So you're right that if you pay attention in the course of the day, you will often find canned food drives, you'll see signs for the food bank, you'll buy produce that tells you that if you buy something, they will help donate to food banks in the US, or they'll feed a hungry child or these sorts of things. The problem with these approaches is that it reinforces that responding to hunger is something that can be or should be left in the realm of the private sphere, meaning you individually or you as a community are the actor who is responsible for ensuring your community is fed.

And that may sound great. And I think it may make us feel better to know we're doing something in the short term. But what it does allow is for this to kick the can down the road this question of, no, what if actually the state is obliged to step in here? So think again, running with a thought experiment, how would we react if we had a similar way of dealing with education in the US, where it was if you will do a bake sale to try to fund a school teacher. I mean, this would be an absurd way of looking at what is a big problem and dealing with it in these kind of to some extent offensively small gestures to what is the gravity of the situation.

And it's puzzling even more so because feeding people would be a far cheaper thing to do than many of the other responsibilities we take for granted like educating children, which costs about--

Is that right?

Yeah, so we spend about \$12,000 per student per year in terms of taxpayer support for education, which is fantastic. I'm at all suggesting we don't do that. In fact, I wish we could spend more. But we could feed people for far less, and we don't. So that's what makes this puzzling, is that we don't not believe that governments should be involved in feeding people because it's too expensive.

We're willing for the government to do other things that are more expensive. And it's not that feeding people is a far more lofty thing than educating them. In fact, at least if we were to think of how human rights theorists look at this problem, they would say the reverse. Actually, feeding people is a basic right even beyond educating. It gets to this complicated relationship that society has with how you construct responsibility over time. And they take it for

grantedness, I think that we have for what the state is responsible for now that we never would have thought of a couple hundred years ago.

And my hope is that similarly, if you look into the future, you'll see a more progressive view in state responsibility to food down the line. But that isn't where we are today.

And even you mentioned earlier that there's some discussion among Republicans about food stamps having a time limit?

Right. And I think also this goes to again this basic point, which is we have not as a society decided who is responsible for ensuring that a person who cannot afford to feed themselves and their families has enough to eat. Because we can't answer that question, whether it's churches or it's states or it's well, the individuals has to work harder, or it's whoever it is, the private sector, it means that we have these debates in part within one of our political parties about how-- very well. If the state must get involved, they'll be involved in a very temporary way.

So two years is what some in the Republican Party have been proposing as a time limit for food stamps. But again, run in your mind this thought experiment. Well, what would happen if we said the same thing about education? So you can receive public school. You can go to public school from second to fourth grade. But by then, doggone it, if you can't afford to have a private tutor, then that's it. No more education for you. I mean, that would be an absurd way to look at it.

And the reason that's absurd is because we understand educating children as a fundamentally important public good. We believe that the benefits that come from educating that child are worth it to society to foot the bill. But yet, ironically, we don't hold that same logic with feeding that same child or that adult, which often is challenging I think for me to wrap my mind around, but it is true.

But I think you're breaking it down in a really important way. And some things have existed for so long that we don't see them anymore, and we think that's the way they are. And of course, we're going to buy the candy bar that feeds the child and feel like a difference has been made. And I think that's why the work you're doing is so important. It's making this visible. And so what should we do instead of giving the \$5 on top of our grocery bill?

Should we become activists? Should we make more noise with our elected officials? How do enough people come together to make hunger as basic a right as education? I mean, not hunger. Food. Food security.

Right. I think fundamentally, what I would want the take home message to be is that there is very little about the way that governments work and about the way that we deal with complex and chronic social problems in the United States or in any other country that doesn't change over time and that isn't a result of a lot of work on the

part of societies to answer these very challenging questions which are, what do we expect is our fundamental rights to people, and what are we willing to do as a society to ensure that people have access to these rights? And so the takeaway to me is, we don't assume that hunger is with us forever. There will always be hungry people with us.

I appreciate the tendency to do this, but empirically, we can look across time and say, no, actually. There are countries that have done quite well or at least have done better than others in reducing hunger rates. And the way that that tends to work best is when governments are willing to increase their social safety nets. And then that means on our end, well, if we care about evidence, if we care about looking out into the world and saying, we don't just care about a shared moral objective, which is that people are fed, but we also are willing to look at the research and see how are they best fed? What are our best case examples?

Then we would say, well, evidence suggests investing in a social safety net is important. Now, this is important domestically, but this is also important internationally, because it means we have to ask ourselves, well, how do we approach hunger outside of our borders? And if the way that we approach it is either-- this is one of the challenges through programs like Feed the Future or other US approaches to hunger-- if we say, well, if we only grow more food, or we invest more only in agricultural development, or we provide commodities, whether they are particularly useful in that particular context or not, where we are again skirting this question, which is, who do we think is responsible for ensuring that people are fed?

And then, when we answer that question, how do we ensure that responsibility? I think that'd be my main takeaway point.

How did you become interested in hunger?

So I am from Fresno, California. Have you been to Fresno, California?

I have not.

Fresno is a lovely place. So I'm fifth generation on one side of my family, fourth generation on the other. I went to college there, born and raised. Fresno is fascinating for a great many reasons, one of which is it has one of the highest rates of agricultural production. So when you drive through the skirts of Fresno, what you see is incredible agriculture. And not just we do a lot of grapes, so you will see a lot of vineyards, largely for raisins, but we also have almonds, peaches, a lot of oranges, nuts, vegetables, et cetera, such that 46% of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the US were grown in Fresno county.

Oh, my gosh. I did not know that.

So we are big agriculture, very big with agriculture, but at the same time have one of the highest rates of concentrated poverty in the country. So what you have side by side is hunger growing up right alongside all that excellent agriculture. And so being from Fresno, it is impossible to look at hunger and think it is anything but a political problem, because it certainly isn't a supply issue. And yet, knowing that it can grow up alongside abundant agriculture in a wealthy, developed country in a county that is very religious that is extremely generous to each other, has a vibrant civil society, and yet still can have these high hunger rates is what drew me to the field of political science generally and to studying this topic.

Fascinating. I'm going to ask you a question out of order. What is 14% of the US population? How many people is that? And of the 14% of people in America who suffer from hunger, how many are kids?

Yeah, a lot. And so estimates here will vary. And it varies by states. And this is one of the things that's very interesting to me is if you were to look to see which states tend to have-- so the problem with statistics however we present them is that they wash out variation. And so if I say that 14% of Americans are hungry, that doesn't mean we know who they are or where they are. But if you were to actually dis-aggregate and say, OK, where are the hungry? You would see, generally-- and this is as we talk about hunger internationally, it's more than a third usually are children-- but if you look domestically and you try to break down the data, you see that disproportionately the south actually has more than its fair share of hunger.

And often, and this extends all the way up into Ohio, Ohio has a very high hunger rate. Often these are states which are red, which is interesting, because you look at it and you say, huh, the states where you would most benefit from increasing the social safety net for food are also the states where politically that is the least popular idea. But yes, so it is.

Another question I have is, does food insecurity-- this is a very naive question-- does food insecurity have implications for national security?

Yeah, I mean I think we could conceptualize food insecurity in a few different ways. I become a bit hesitant, because I don't tend to think that we should only-- and I know you're not asking this-- but we shouldn't only worry about hunger if it affects our national interests. There are certain factions that see food security in that light. So the argument would go something like this. Oftentimes in cases of domestic instability, we will see food riots preceding domestic instability. Thus, if we want to have more stable countries internationally-- so people could think of Venezuela here and what's going on in Venezuela-- we should encourage increased food security to make sure that domestic environments are more stable.

And that's certainly true. If you take a more holistic view of what is in the national security or national interest, to me it is that people are provided for at least in the most basic way. And so to me, yes, without a doubt. Being

provided for in the most basic way. If that is something that's fundamental to the idea of America, to the most important ideals we want to export, then you cannot separate hunger from that.

Michelle, thank you so much for coming in and talking with us today. It's fascinating, and I think your work is so important and I want to go now and get back to your book manuscript.

Well, it was a pleasure. Thanks very much, Sarah.

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