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## Food not Bombs: A Radical Organization?

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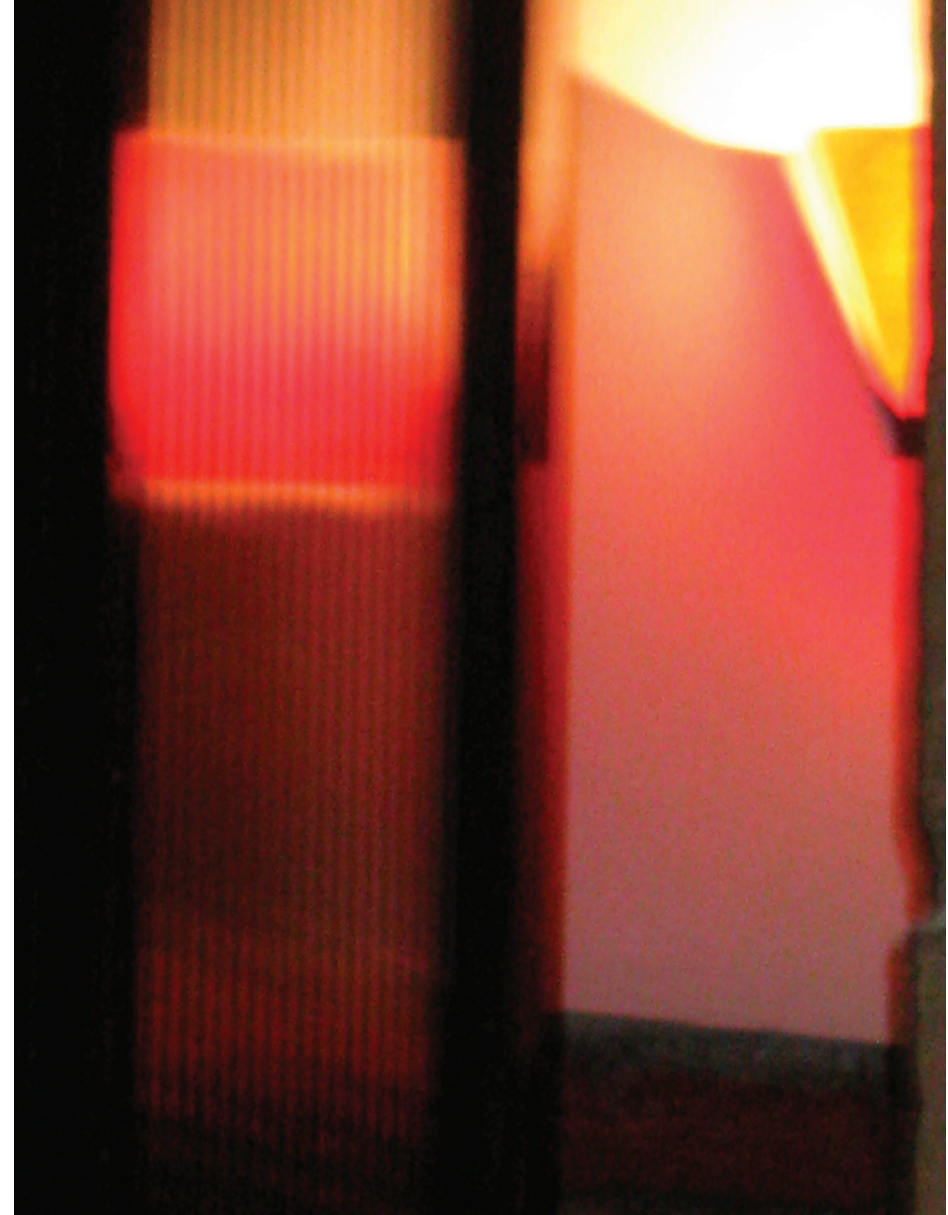
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# FOOD NOT BOMBS: A RADICAL ORGANIZATION?

emily rojer

FOOD NOT BOMBS (FNB) IS AN ORGANIZATION THAT NON-VIOLENTLY PROTESTS GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES ON MILITARY TECHNOLOGIES, SPECIFICALLY NUCLEAR WEAPONS. FNB'S BELIEF IS THAT MILITARY EXPENSES ONLY CREATE PROBLEMS, AND THAT MONEY WOULD BE MUCH BETTER ALLOCATED IF IT WERE USED TO ERADICATE POVERTY AND HUNGER IN THE UNITED STATES. HOWEVER, DESPITE FNB'S NON-VIOLENT MANTRA, THEY ARE OFTEN CLASSIFIED AS A RADICAL OR EXTREMIST GROUP. WHY COULD THIS BE? THROUGH ORIGINAL RESEARCH, THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTIONS OF FNB, FOCUSING ON GROUP MEMBERS, ACADEMIA, AND THE MEDIA.

## USES OF

### "NON-VIOLENT"

1 in newspapers

18 in primary sources

20 in academic sources

## THE FOCUS

of my research is on the social movement organization Food Not Bombs (FNB). This organization non-violently protests government expenditures on military technologies, specifically nuclear weapons. FNB's belief is that military expenses only create problems, and that money would be much better allocated if it were used to eradicate poverty and hunger in the USA instead. In this regard, FNB uses food that would be thrown away from grocery stores to produce low-cost, healthy vegetarian and vetgan meals. This food is served for free, mainly to homeless people, but FNB does not discriminate by class. Often this donation is done in settings like public parks, but occasionally it is used more dramatically, such as serving food on government building steps or in high-traffic plazas. This has led to arrests and has contributed to FNB's label as a radical group.

I find FNB so interesting because of its unique approach to solving the issue of hunger and starvation. I like how the organization not only takes action against local (and ultimately the national) governments, but also actively works toward reducing hunger on a personal level. It also is intriguing how it spans both the broader anti-war and anti-poverty social movements.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

As I began my initial research about FNB, I ran across several words in my scans of materials. Noticeably, in some of the newspaper articles I glanced at (especially the ones not found through an academic website) FNB was regarded as anarchic and even terroristic. However, in the academic articles I skimmed, the group is sometimes termed as anarchic, but in a much less revolutionary way. I want to know, when looking

at the language used in various sources, is there a difference between the way that the media, the academic world, and the group members perceive Food Not Bombs? If so, what is the difference?

By reading several different types of articles about or by FNB, I gained a clearer understanding of the organization. I believe that looking at the diction used to describe FNB from various types of sources will reveal how both the members and wider society view FNB, and if there is a difference. I think this is important because it can show how well FNB is meeting its goals, or whether the media publicity is more sensational than the truth. This paper can give both scholars of FNB and members themselves a better idea of FNB's perception in the USA.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little existing literature solely about Food Not Bombs. However, in the literature that does focus on it, the works often state that FNB is one of the largest and most prominent anti-capitalism and anti-poverty social movement organizations. In fact, FNB has over 400 chapters, located throughout the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia.<sup>1</sup> FNB started as an anti-nuclear protest group but quickly became an organization dedicated to feeding the hungry to eliminate violence. “Food Not Bombs has chosen to take a stand against violence and hunger; we are committed to non-violent social change by giving out free vegetarian food, thus celebrating and nurturing life.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the lack of academic sources, newspaper and magazine articles about FNB abound. There are reports on both sides of the issue, some describing FNB as a militant anarchic group, and some defending their right to serve food in public places. My paper aims to both give the reader a comprehensive overview of the organization, something that is lacking in existing literature, and to examine the written perceptions of the organization from various sources.

Food Not Bombs chapters around the world are operated autonomously. However, they all have core beliefs that tie them together. First, and most apparent, is their dedication to serving free food to the poor in highly visible public places. FNB tries not just to replicate cycles of charity by giving away free food, but to invite those eating to also contribute to the gleaning (gathering), cooking, and distributing of food “thus creating mutuality.”<sup>3</sup> As scholar Dylan Clark discusses, food has a strong cultural element to it: “Food practices mark ideological movements: eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, race, genders, ideologies, and the practice through which these discourses are resisted.”<sup>4</sup>

In particular, the types of food and food sources FNB uses represent an affinity to the punk culture. First, FNB serves only vegetarian

or vegan foods, both for practical reasons (meat spoils very easily and has a higher potential for food poisoning) and for ideological reasons (meat is seen as a ‘violent’ food source). Clark argues that, “In the daily praxis of punk, vegetarianism and veganism are strategies through which many punks combat corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental collapse.”<sup>5</sup> Second, FNB gathers its food from grocery stores that would otherwise throw away the “imperfect” food. This is important to the organization for keeping food costs down, and to reduce waste. FNB strongly believes that it is a tragedy to throw away food when so many go hungry. The punk culture views “rotten” food (that which is past its expiration date, day-old baked goods, and food in dented packaging) as way to “de-commodify” their diets.<sup>6</sup> For FNB chapters across the world, food plays an important role in the ideological and community-building experience.

FNB chapters, when serving food, do so to express their political views. One aim is to make poverty visible, to the point where officials and community members cannot ignore it anymore. A main goal of FNB is to give visibility to the hunger problem in the US—to refuse to hide the poor away, which has often ended in conflict with authorities.<sup>7</sup> FNB’s core belief is that food is a right, not a privilege, and that when governments fail to provide this basic human right FNB has an obligation to correct that failure. However, many local governments do not appreciate this mentality. In San Francisco alone FNB members have been arrested over 1,000 times for defying public food laws, and chapters in Florida have faced more and more restrictive laws.<sup>8</sup>

Intertwined with their goal of making poverty visible is this desire to counteract common myths about the poor and homeless. “Antipoverty activists resist continuing downward pressure on social assistance and demand from the local state a public space for cooking and advocacy for the poor to empower their claims as a self-sufficient and self-empowering community.”<sup>9</sup> When FNB

encourages the homeless to become involved in the preparation of the food, it is proving that the homeless are able to be a part of an organized movement and are capable human beings. It also gives the homeless or poor a way to become self-sufficient: “The slogan adopted by FNB, people feeding people, communicates the energy of the people wanting to provide material needs for themselves and others, and their independence from government handouts.”<sup>10</sup> This independence manifests itself in the food collection process, and especially in the serving.

Besides showing independence, serving food is used to educate the public and officials about FNB’s cause. Often they have pamphlets and other educational materials at meal servings, and encourage people eating to attend meetings. This is often done in not just in public places but also outside city capitols and legislative buildings. “The politics of visibility for FNB is not only the politics of making poverty visible... But also the politics of making *resistance* visible.”<sup>11</sup> FNB uses the principle of non-violent direct action to make their resistance known.

The concept of non-violence is not the same as pacifism; while practicing members agree not to do any violent acts, they organize events that will arouse mass attention and provoke authorities. In this way they have public sympathy on their side, which will hopefully lead to public pressure on the government in favor of their goals. The roots of non-violent activism are not deep: Gandhi was the first person who showed that this type of activism can be organized and used *en masse*.<sup>12</sup> However, this activism has the potential flaw of merely achieving visibility, which Cortwright warns against: “To be politically effective, nonviolent action must be able to challenge power. Symbolic protest is not enough. One must also confront and undermine oppressive power with forceful action.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite this commitment to non-violent action, FNB has been depicted in some sources as a radical, anarchic, and terroristic group. Keith

McHenry, one of the founders of FNB, was listed by the U.S. State Department as one of America’s 100 most dangerous people.<sup>14</sup> In 2005, FNB found a defense document that listed “terrorist” organizations under surveillance, of which FNB was considered a “threat.” Evidence from the document suggests FNB was secretly infiltrated by local police, US department of defense agents, and the FBI.<sup>15</sup> But why would an organization centered on serving food as political protests against government military spending be labeled as terroristic...especially in light of their commitment to non-violence? Heynen asserts, “The longstanding association of anarchism with violence is obviously at the root of such infiltration and surveillance, but so too, one can reasonably assume, is the very notion of mutual aid, the real heart of anarchism. Why else would the FBI devote resources to tracking individuals... intent on sharing

food in public places?”<sup>16</sup> FNB is not anarchic, at least not in terms of creating an anarchic state as one of their political goals; they do share some characteristics with the culture. Anarchist political culture characteristics include: shared forms of decentralized and/or horizontal organizing, broad cultural expression in areas like art, music and diet, and shared political language revolving around resistance to capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not strike me as enough reason for the FBI to become involved. Perhaps part of the reason FNB was under surveillance after 9/11 was due to media portrayal of the group, which I examine next.

## METHODOLOGY

To answer my research question I had to analyze three different types of sources: media, first person accounts, and academic publications. As a clarifying note, although FNB is now a global organization I have only analyzed American

sources. To find media sources I went through the academic website *LexisNexis* to find articles of reputable status. I simply chose the first four sources that appeared and had over 350 words. To get first person accounts I used three different types of sources. First, I analyzed the book entitled *Food Not Bombs*, which was written by two of the original founders of FNB. This book is intended as a guide for all new chapters and members, so I assumed that the views expressed would be common or familiar to all the different chapters. I also used an interview transcript with another founder, Keith McHenry, as

a primary source. Lastly, I went to a FNB meeting and interviewed the founder of the local Easton chapter of FNB about her experiences. As for my academic sources, I found them through various academic databases such as JSTOR or WorldCat. These are all published works in sociology journals or dissertations.

First I will explain how I conducted the interview portion of my research. I found the contact person for the local Easton chapter of FNB through the official Food Not Bombs website. I emailed Eleni Burd several times regarding FNB, and drove to a meeting in Easton in October. The interview lasted around an hour, and was

a general fact-finding mission. I was interested in seeing how she viewed the organization, as a very active member. Since the interview took place outside, I recorded her responses in a notebook. Eleni is a 22-year-old college student who, along with a fellow student, began the Easton chapter of FNB. She was very helpful in giving me the demographics of the group, the type of people they served, and their group identity. All the members in the Easton chapter were college students or in their twenties, which fits the concept of biographical availability used to explain involvement in social movements. The term refers to the amount of ‘biographical’ things a person has to consider, such a house, job or children. Often, because they do not typically have many biographical assets (and so have much less to lose), students are much more likely to join social movements.

To analyze all the sources, I created a chart in Microsoft Excel. I chose sixteen different words that I had seen as being descriptors of FNB, *before* I started reading any of the sources. This is important because I did not want one type of source to skew my perception of the organization, and therefore skew which words I chose. I studied the diction used in the types of sources because it seemed to be the most concrete and replicable way to study the tone and perception of the different groups when referring to FNB. Diction also is a good indicator of the frames used by the different types of sources in describing the same group. Framing is the process by which groups give context to a set of events, stories, and ideas. Frames enable people to locate, perceive, and identify occurrences within their life and in the grater world, and affect how people reading the sources conceptualize FNB. As I read through each source that fit into one of the three categories, and discussed FNB explicitly, I simply tallied the number of times each descriptor was used on the appropriate chart.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

My research aimed to find out if there are differences between the perception of FNB from the media, academic world, and group members. I conclude, after charting the diction in various articles for each type of source, that the main difference in the perceptions is what the group actually aims to accomplish. Important to notice is how effectively the group's main tenets came across in the different types of sources. For all references to tables, please look in Appendix A.

### Media Perception

The media's perception of FNB was much tamer than I anticipated. As shown in Table 1, none of the articles mentioned the word "terrorism" or "anarchy" or "radical" when discussing FNB. In fact, the most frequent words used were "meals" and "homeless"/ "poor." While those are to be expected, since they are the most obvious elements of FNB, they appeared with the highest frequency by far. More surprising, the newspaper articles barely touched on the political reasons *why* FNB was serving food.

### Member Perception

The primary sources, as shown in Table 2, had much more emphasis on the political agenda of FNB, which is not surprising. The word with the most frequency was "non-violent" (which was only mentioned once in one news article). The next most-used words include "meals", "protest" and "vegetarian". In contrast to the newspaper articles, every source mentioned "military," "spending," and "poverty" (FNB's main political issues), while only half the newspapers did. Only one primary source used the words 'terrorism' and 'anarchic', but these were in response to questions about the group's perception as those things, not as a descriptor. The same goes for the word "radical"—the two sources that used this word were using it to describe what could be construed as radical. For example, Butler describes how gleaning food is no longer socially acceptable: "Therefore, it is a radical political act in today's society to recover

large amounts of food in an organized and consistent manner and to feed the hungry the edible part."<sup>18</sup> The overall perception one gains from this analysis is that participants in the movement do not see themselves as radical or anarchic, but as a non-violent social movement group dedicated to their cause.

### Academic Perception

Lastly, the academic group was surprisingly split, with some sources viewing FNB as very anarchic, and others never mentioning the word (see Table 3). All of the sources discussed "poverty," and most frequently cited the "non-violence" approach of FNB. No groups used the word "terrorism" and the book that discussed FNB as being the most anarchic also described them as "radical." Interestingly, only one source mentioned "military" and "spending" (and mentioned each once). And in this source, the emphasis was on capitalism over military spending: "FNB has a 'profit before people' understanding of [how] capitalism [works]."<sup>19</sup> This is very different from the member perception, where every source mentioned military spending. The academic sources—which were varied in sub-topic and type—did not discuss one of FNB's primary political concerns (in fact, the concern that started the entire organization!). This disparity causes me to wonder whether FNB does not do an effective job at communicating its goal of reducing military spending, or if the academic community prefers to focus on the anti-poverty side of the organization.

## CONCLUSION

The difference in perception of FNB between the media, members, and academia dealt more with the important components of the group rather than the "radicalness" of the group, which was what I first anticipated. However, this anticipation was caused early on in my research, when, while looking through Google.com, a good number of informal sources seemed to label

Food Not Bombs as more radical. When I began my actual research, though, I decided to not use these informal groups since I had no way of knowing why or where these views came from—for all I know, they are being funded by Boeing or Bank of America. I decided to examine newspaper articles that came through LexisNexis, which ensured that the article came from a respected source, and also that it was more likely to have reached a wide audience than a potentially random website or blog.

Also, while this paper

serves to cover some of the gaps in the existing literature, I did not have the time or ability to collect more sources, which would have strengthened my data. In particular, I struggled to find academic sources that dealt exclusively or even substantially with FNB. As for newspapers, I did not do a random sample of articles, nor even analyze articles from past years, due to the sheer complexity. I hope this paper can guide anyone else who is interested in studying FNB in more depth, and they can build on what I have begun.

Through my research I discovered that the emphasis put on aspects of FNB differed between the media, members, and academic commu-

nity. Although that in itself is unsurprising, the aspects the academic community emphasized were. About half the sources I read labeled FNB as an anarchic political group (which the primary sources did not assert), and the other half did not, contrary to my initial predication (that the media would be the most sensational). Also,

interestingly, the academic world seems to focus exclusively on the anti-poverty element of FNB, instead of the anti-military platform. This leads to a potential question for future research: how effectively does FNB communicate *both* of its goals — anti-military spending and anti-poverty/hunger? Another question that I found intriguing

is that when looking at older newspaper sources (from the early 1980's) the headlines were much more sensational and filled with accounts of arrest. Studying the change in media perception could prove to be very interesting.

## THE OVERALL PERCEPTION ONE GAINS FROM THIS ANALYSIS IS THAT PARTICIPANTS IN THE MOVEMENT DO NOT SEE THEMSELVES AS RADICAL OR ANARCHIC, BUT AS A NON-VIOLENT SOCIAL MOVEMENT GROUP DEDICATED TO THEIR CAUSE.

## APPENDIX A.

Article:	free	vegetarian	protest	anarchic	terroristic	non-violent	homeless	military	spending	global	movement	meals	war	poverty	community	radical	Description of material and page amounts	Year
Food Not Bombs	2	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	1	1	6	1	2	0	0	673 words	2010
Monroe Park: Plan Leaves Out Homeless	2	2	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	1	4	1	4	1	0	500 words	2010
A Turkey-less Feast	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	474 words	2010
Food, With a Side of Helping	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	1	3	2	1	1	0	357 words	2010

Article/Interview:	free	vegetarian	protest	anarchic	terroristic	non-violent	homeless	military	spending	global	movement	meals	war	poverty	community	radical	Description of material and page amounts
Food Not Bombs: An Interview	1	2	4	1*	3*	2	1	2	1	0	2	6	1	1	2	0	A Magazine interview, around 3 pages long
Food Not Bombs	2	3	2	0	0	11	0	1	1	0	0	1	3	2	1	1*	(1 chapter entitled Politics, 10 pages)
Personal Interview	2	2	2	0	0	5	3	1	2	0	1	2	1	2	4	1*	In-person interview with a local chapter: 1 hour of talk time

Article:	free	vegetarian	protest	anarchic	terroristic	non-violent	homeless	military	spending	global	movement	meals	war	poverty	community	radical	Description of material and page amounts
Cooking Up the Raw and Rotten: Punk Cuisine	5	1	6	6	0	14	3	0	0	1	1	3	2	6	3	2	20 page article, focusing on food as an expression of punk culture (FNB main SMO examined)
Local Activism	0	7	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	3	9	1	11	4	0	15 page article
Talk Does Not Make Rice	0	2	1	0	0	4	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	0	60 page undergraduate thesis on FNB and another SMO
Tearing Down the Streets	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	small section on FNB, around 6 pages