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Cooking Outside of States and Markets: Food as a Common

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What Role Does Food Play in the Political Work of Food Not Bombs?

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Abstract

Food Not Bombs (FNB) is a global social movement, which gathers food deemed to be waste, cooks it, and gives it away to whoever wants to eat it. The movement is focused on challenging poverty, hunger, and war through a theory of mutual aid, instead of charity. My library-based research project is exploring the role food plays in this work and if the theory of the commons can be applied to FNB.

Background: What is Food Not Bombs?

Since 1980, Food Not Bombs groups across the world have gathered food deemed waste and shared it as a way of protesting war and poverty. They are driven by the question: With so many hungry people in the world, why is food thrown away and money spent on war? Food Not Bombs seeks to demonstrate collaboration and action amongst members of a community. FNB groups have faced state violence and repression through anti-homeless campaigns.

Background: Theory of the Commons

Our lives are filled with commons. Commons are produced and used by biopolitical labor, democratic, and impervious to control by the market or state. Languages, social relations, software codes, and natural resources are examples of commons. Commons provide spaces outside of the state and market, and political philosophers Hardt and Negri posit the commons as an important component of social change. Diverse groups can unite and produce new lived realities through the commons.

Discussion

Food is a product created by private companies and regulated by the state, which inhibits it from serving as a common. However, it is discarded from these relations as waste and then recreated as a common by Food Not Bombs. This occurs through the democratic methods and labor of participants.

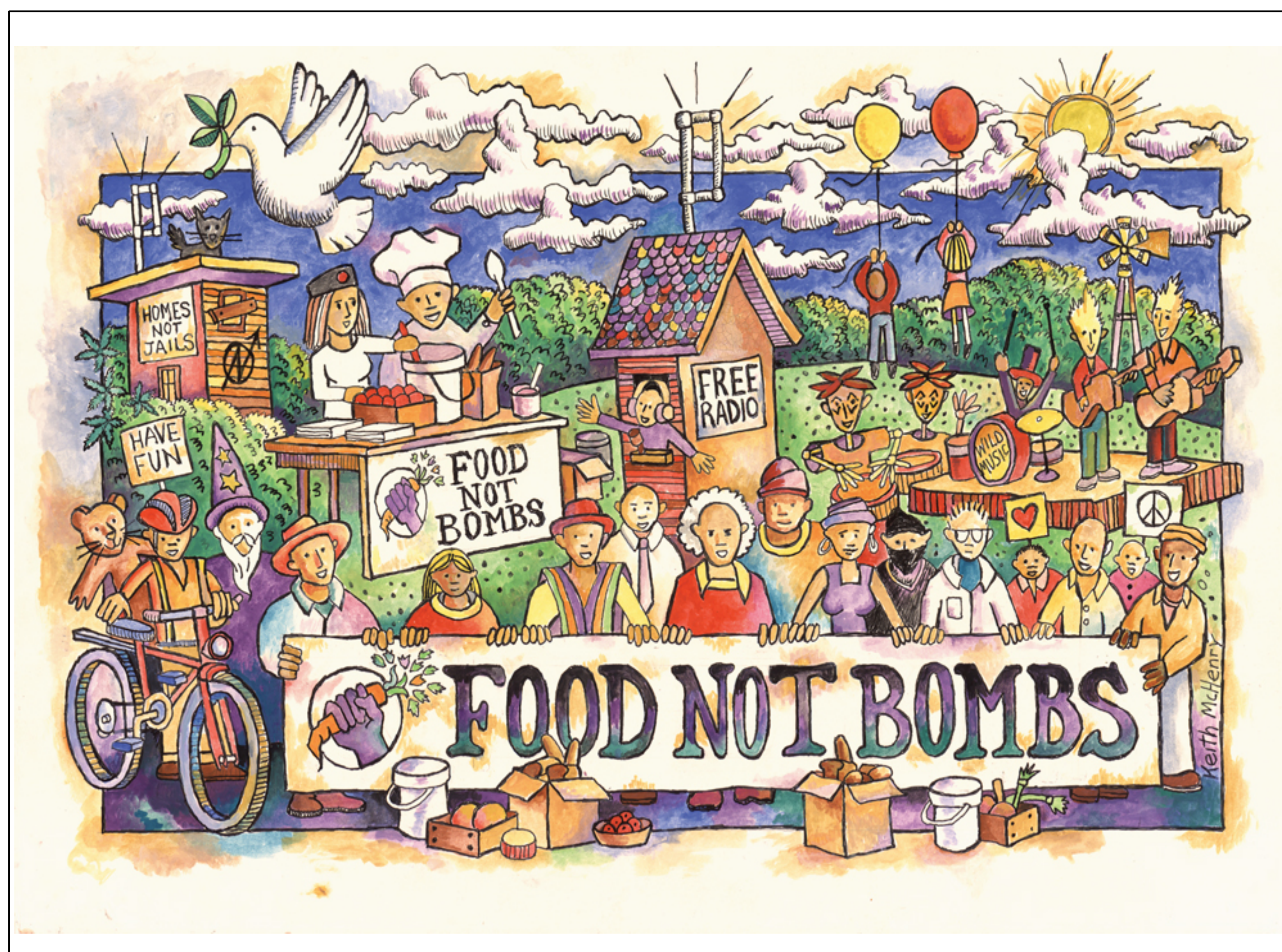
Food serves as a common through:

- *Imagining new ways of being:* FNB groups are participating in new social relations through food. Food is the focal point through which democratic participation and non-hierarchical interactions occur in gathering, cooking, serving, and eating it.
- *Serving as a medium for political statements:* Serving food outside brings the political nature of FNB social relations into the public sphere.
- *Serving as a method for direct action:* Publically engaging in new social relations through food intervenes in the physical reality of the world.

Conclusion

Food Not Bombs accomplishes important political work within a social movement setting. It serves as a different form of direct action than traditional forms of protest by seeking to intervene immediately in people's lived realities, specifically by meeting their immediate needs. Additionally, relying on waste from the systems it critiques is a powerful political statement.

However, it means the movement is only physically reactive. How can FNB produce alternative systems, as it produces alternative social relations? How can the movement's ideals, theories, and methods be applied to the work of building new structures? What would a Food Not Bombs farm look like? A bank? An electronics manufacturer? Important work has been accomplished in Food Not Bombs' 35 years, but larger scale, structural change is more necessary than ever. How can the theories behind FNB be applied to everyday work?



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