

The German “Tafel” – a sustainable way of dealing with food affluence?

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Introduction

The main idea of “The Affluent Society” (Galbraith 1958) was that highly industrialized societies were experiencing a fundamental shift from scarcity to affluence. If there are more people suffering from too much of the ‘wrong’ than from insufficient food supply, the socio-economic problem of how to deal with affluence is more important to society than that of poverty. Over the last fifty years production and consumption dynamics have expanded – with lots of socio-ecological consequences. Nowadays, accelerated by globalization processes, both affluence (a larger variety of food) and problems of poverty and exclusion are growing. An indicator is the recent rise of a special social movement in Germany called “*Tafel*”, which we might literally translate as (dinner) table. It collects excess food and distributes it to people unable to satisfy their demand via the market. So it functions similar to food banks and food pantries that we find in most European countries. However, food banks are represented by their own organization (www.eurofoodbank.com). In Germany, the first local *Tafel* initiative was founded in 1993, and now there are about 850. Furthermore, there are lots of local initiatives that work in the same way without calling it *Tafel*.

Taking these developments into consideration, we need a new understanding of affluence: it is *ambivalent* because it refers to wealth and prosperity as well as to more or less unintended consequences, like waste and exclusion from wealth; and it is *relational* because it can only be understood adequately in relation to scarcity, necessity, and excess. That is why from a sustainability point of view affluence is to be understood as a challenge for creative new policies. I will refer to an ongoing (qualitative) research project¹ about the *Tafel* asking whether it really is such a creative option for dealing with affluence or just a symptom of unresolved affluence problems.

A contribution to socio-ecological sustainability should achieve both less excess food and less social exclusion. Obviously the real problem of the *Tafel* concept is that what it seeks to overcome is a precondition of its own existence. I will first present the study, then introduce some findings, and conclude by discussing the prospects of sustainable *Tafel* work.

¹ The paper is based on a study funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) for a two-year period starting April 2008.

Study design and objectives

The conceptual vantage point of the study is contradictory observations made by contemporary social theory that are associated with the notions of consumerism and social exclusion. Whereas the former must presuppose widespread prosperity, the latter indicates that many are excluded from participating in social wealth.

On the one hand, there is the consumerism thesis prominently advocated by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). It claims that social actors are increasingly oriented toward consumption in contrast to the former dominance of work. This involves a basic attitude that extends to all areas of life, ranging from shopping to intimate relationships: “Consuming Life” (Bauman 2007). Bauman uses the term shopping to describe the typical mode of action in postmodern, “fluid” society. From an environmental point of view, the problem with this is that this mode relies on the permanent availability of an abundance of consumption options. They can never be and, as a range of options to choose from, are not supposed to be realized in their totality. Nevertheless, energy and resources must be expended for their production and distribution, and the inevitable waste has to be disposed of. In social regard, the constant need for making individual choices in the face of real and/or desired options, according to Bauman, results in a permanent sense of uncertainty. Moreover, the individualistic quest for the fulfillment of desires leads to the erosion of solidarity and the loss of the ability for collective action.

The second observation relating to current trends of exclusion only seemingly poses an antithesis to the first one. This second observation states that more and more people are being excluded from work and consumption to such a significant extent that they are far from being able to participate in the consumerist way of life.² While, on the one hand, an abundance of consumer goods is being produced, a growing number of people are becoming redundant with regard to the socio-economic processes of generating and consuming this abundance. In this sense, people, too, are becoming ‘abundant’: they are neither needed in the workforce nor do they play a significant role as consumers. In the German social science debate, the notion of the ‘superfluous’ has emerged to denote this status.³ Frequently, they are also referred to as ‘surplus populations’ or in terms of exclusion (cf. Castel 2000, Kronauer 2002). Bauman (2004) speaks of outcasts, of “wasted lives”, or of excessive or (mostly) redundant people for which society has no use.

² Of course that does not mean that they are free of consumerist orientations. Bauman sees an additional problem here. People who are unable to keep pace are not free from pressure to do so but experience an even greater urgency to keep up with the crowd.

³ At the same time, the term has become a discursive political weapon on the part of activists who call themselves “The Superfluous” (<http://die-ueberfluessigen.net>).

Against the backdrop of those social analyses, a new actor has now entered the social stage who combines both sides of the coin in a specific way: the *Tafel*. They collect excess food, which consumers have chosen to leave on the shelves, in order to distribute it to those who are greatly restricted in their ability to enter and exercise choice in markets. In so doing, they forge a link between abundance and the ‘superfluous’, between the two sides of excess, of superfluity that are debated: a plenitude of things and options (affluence, abundance), on the one hand, and a mass of people that are no longer needed for work and consumption (‘superfluous’, ‘excessive’, excluded people), on the other.

From a sustainability perspective, the question occurs whether such an approach provides a suitable foundation for tackling environmental and social problems. A sustainable practice would have to accomplish two things. On environmental grounds, excess food would have to be reduced just as social exclusion would demand reduction on social grounds. The object of the research therefore is to trace the connections from the production of affluence, through distribution by *Tafel* initiatives, to the recipients at the receiving end and to inquire into the influence *Tafel* work has both on the production of affluence and on processes of exclusion.

On methodology

The research will be conducted testing a combination of network research and qualitative, case reconstructing methodology. The advantage of network approaches lies in their ability to reveal connections between highly heterogeneous entities. However, in the process, drawing boundaries often proves difficult. This is where case reconstructing methods, which enable sequentially reconstructing structures, are beneficial. This combined research approach I call procedural methodology (Lorenz 2009). It employs the well-proven methods of grounded theory (Strauss/ Corbin) and objective hermeneutics (Oevermann 2000), on the one hand. On the other, it relies on actor-network-theory, more specifically on the procedural model developed by Bruno Latour in his political ecology. Reference to Latour is expected to permit broadening the set of “actants” and including the “agency” of things in the analysis. For it is food itself that moves along the “chain” donor – *Tafel* – recipient and demands certain treatment. The material arrangements at the food outlets also influence concrete interactions. Data sources are primarily unstructured interviews (especially donors, *Tafel* activists, recipients), participant observation (e.g. campaigns, events), and documents (e.g. websites).

State-of-the-art of *Tafel* research and aspects concerning their development

1. So far my empirical research has focused on the work of *Tafels*, the *Tafel* movement, which relies mostly on volunteers, and the recipients.⁴ To date, there has been little research in Germany on *Tafel* initiatives.⁵ In my judgment, this is also true internationally. Although *Tafel* initiatives today are occasionally referred to in texts concerned with poverty or civil society, they are usually not an object of research in their own right. So far, they are also absent from social movement research⁶ even though they perceive themselves as a movement and are viewed as such by the media.

2. The idea of collecting excess food in order to provide support to people in need originated in the USA in the 1960s. In Europe, the first food banks were established in France in the mid-1980s. Today, they exist in most European countries and are also organized at the European level.⁷ In Germany, the first *Tafel* was founded in 1993 and was modeled after City Harvest in New York. Following a smaller boom in the late 1990s, *Tafel* initiatives have expanded in recent years and currently total approximately 850 local initiatives. That includes only the *Tafel* initiatives officially acknowledged by the *Bundesverband Deutsche Tafeln e.V.* (the German federal association of *Tafel* initiatives). In addition, there are initiatives operating under different names but according to the same collecting principles. This may occasionally lead to local competition for scarce food resources. For this reason, we may expect an end to quantitative growth since the federal association is attempting to restrict further expansion.⁸

3. ‘Qualitative growth’ is presumably more important today: The *Tafel* initiatives are engaging in ever new activities. Whereas the initial focus was on collecting excess food and distributing it to social institutions and also directly to private recipients, today they are involved in a vast array of activities, which can vary considerably locally. Considerable creativity is displayed on the *collecting side* where ways of acquiring food or funding have been developed that to some extent clearly depart from merely collecting surplus food. For instance, in grocery stores

⁴ In a next step, donors and other actors will be included to a larger degree.

⁵ Relevant in this respect are a published dissertation (Normann 2003), an investigative report by a sociologist based on participant observation that provides manifold insights into *Tafel* work (Selke 2008), as well as a collection of articles of an interdisciplinary nature and also based on practical experience (Selke (ed.) 2009; cf. Lorenz 2009a in that volume).

⁶ Cf. my article in *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* (Lorenz 2009b).

⁷ Cf. www.eurofoodbank.org. Compared to food banks, *Tafel* initiatives have stronger regional roots and are directly involved in distributing food to recipients through their own local outlets. Otherwise, there are but gradual differences. For an overview, see the investigation conducted by the student assistant to my project Dana Tegge (<http://www.tafelforum.de/index.php?id=42>, April 2009).

⁸ “In principle, we are delighted about any interest in the *Tafel* idea. Owing to the existing *Tafel* density in Germany, establishing new *Tafel* initiatives ought to be limited only to certain regions.” (www.tafel.de/der-bundesverband/mitgliedschaft, 2.6.2009 – translation from German) Since the name “*Tafel*” is protected under German copyright laws, the federal association is capable of such regulation. However, it has only indirect influence on similar initiatives operating under other names, for instance, by entering sponsoring agreements with large food retailers requiring the latter to supply only to official *Tafel* members.

consumers are asked to donate some of their groceries on-site to the *Tafel*. That can take the shape of a one-time campaign or of a long-term arrangement by setting up permanent collecting boxes at grocery stores. The scope of activities is also being expanded on the *distribution side* as well. That may include advisory services (e.g. legal advice on issues related to unemployment or housing, credit counseling), second hand offers (most notably, clothing but also household appliances or furniture), special services for children and youth (e.g. school breakfast), warm meals (“soup kitchen”), language classes for immigrants, publication of street papers, aid in finding medical help, cooking courses, and even raising vegetables in own *Tafel* gardens or composting projects. There is no clear-cut dividing line between the well-known traditional forms of aid, such as soup kitchens,⁹ and the new forms of providing support that have emerged from civil society or areas of social work. They are often realized in cooperation, for instance, with schools, churches, and not least with a variety of sponsors.

4. The establishment of *Tafel* following the U.S. model of charity brings differences to fore, for instance, compared to the environmental movement. So far, collaboration with environmental associations or actors taking a critical stance on globalization, such as Attac, has not been evidenced; churches and interest groups representing the socially disadvantaged are more likely partners for cooperation. The work of *Tafel* for the most part relies on cooperation with large and small businesses. Sponsors and supporters, such as McKinsey Consulting, Daimler AG, and the large German grocery retailers (Metro, Rewe, Lidl, etc.) provide the resources. The *Tafel* initiatives attract much applause from the business world. Businesses supporting them benefit by saving disposal costs, also taxes, and through image building. However, they are also attracted by the seemingly simple and effective scheme for providing aid that the *Tafel* deploy: Take an already existing surplus and distribute it to those who lack sufficient market access and hence cannot be expected to act as consumers capable of competing and enhancing sales. Simplicity and effectiveness are appealing both economically and in terms of resonance with the general public. Public events involving *Tafel* representatives, sponsors, celebrities from the worlds of media, culture, sports, and politics are part of the “business”, locally as well as nationally. For example, the German Federal Minister of Family Affairs acts as patroness to the *Tafel* in Germany. *Tafel* activists often describe their work as resembling common business tasks, for instance, in the area of logistics, and they mostly refer to recipients as “customers”.

⁹ For some deeper historical insights about providing food aid to poor people from Antiquity to the Middle Ages all the way up to post-war Germany see Teuteberg (2009) and the investigation conducted by the student assistant to my research project Susanne Hilbert (<http://www.tafelforum.de/index.php?id=42>, April 2009).

5. This social movement is therefore very business friendly and aims more at winning broad public approval than at nourishing an oppositional public sphere. Although criticism is directed at German social policy, especially for state cutbacks in social services in the course of labor market reforms in recent years, their own work may have conflicting effects. For their services are based on charity and can easily give rise to a situation in which such services compete with the social services provided by the state on the basis of social rights even though this is not the intended goal. Public agencies have already made attempts to cut back on social services with reference to the additional services provided by *Tafel* initiatives. Although so far such advances have been successfully averted in the short-term, in the long-term existing *Tafel* services can be expected to figure into social policy considerations. *Tafel* activists argue that it would be irresponsible to refrain from helping until political improvements have been achieved. While such reasoning is plausible, the situation would require simultaneous political mobilization in order to attain such improvements. Yet, looking back at sixteen years of *Tafel* in Germany little has happened along those lines.

6. To an even lesser extent has there been any explicit criticism on environmental grounds. Although a number of local *Tafel* websites emphasize the problematic nature of a “throwaway society”, excess food, in fact, is for the most part perceived from the angle of representing new, idle resources. There is outrage over the fact that poverty coincides with producing and discarding surplus food. Distributing this surplus to the poor in itself already appears to be the solution to the problem since it provides a sensible way of preserving food from being destroyed. On the other hand, the consumption-driven *production* of affluence is not subject to criticism. Only in a few isolated cases are there signs in my interviews with *Tafel* activists that their work has led to curtailing surplus food. Retailers’ attention may be drawn to overly wasteful practices, motivating them to calculate more closely and in a less wasteful manner. At the same time, this amounts to fewer resources being available to *Tafel* initiatives. As *Tafel* initiatives rarely bring up environmental problems associated with affluence on their own, this raises the question whether such concerns merely reflect demands that are wrongly imposed from the outside by the researcher. The answer is that, first of all, there is nothing wrong with *academic inquiry* into the sustainability of a practice even if the bearers of such practice fail to do so on their own. Second, viewed from a structural vantage point, the rarely explicit and mostly unsystematic criticism of affluence encountered in *Tafel* practice testifies to the fact that such criticism is a part of that practice, albeit a difficult one. The difficulties lie in the internal contradictions of that practice, which will be addressed in the following.

Discussion and prospects

At the outset, I argued that *Tafel* work would be sustainable on environmental grounds if it led to less excess and on social grounds if it resulted in less social exclusion. The difficulty is rooted in the fact that *Tafel* work relies on the state it seeks to overcome. This bears the danger that *Tafel* initiatives may turn out to be part of the problem more than part of the solution. Referring to contemporary social analysis, the problems were introduced as a consumerist understanding of society, on the one hand, and the exclusion from participation, most notably, from work and consumption, on the other. *Tafel* initiatives are a particularly interesting phenomenon since they emerge at the interface of these two trends of societal development and promise to deal with both sides of the problem. While they provide an opportunity for developing solutions to socio-ecological problems, they run the risk of solidifying and legitimizing the two trends. Handing excess food to the needy also provides an acceptable channel for disposal. Moreover, people are virtually called upon to produce and consume ever larger quantities to make more available for a “good cause”.¹⁰ In this way, the needy are provided for and are allowed to be grateful. Yet, they still have not come any closer to gaining autonomous access to work and consumption.

Socially, the *Tafel* initiatives are introducing the conception of private charity modeled after the U.S. example to the more strongly state-based German welfare system. As their rapid spread demonstrates, this has evoked considerable social response. This development quite evidently corresponds with discourses prevailing in society since the 1990s that take economic action to be the measure of all action – even social aid is thought to be better provided through businesses and private initiatives. The so-called financial crisis may have dampened the vigor somewhat as well as the optimism that has fueled *Tafel* growth. To what extent an increase in the number of recipients can be expected due to growing unemployment and to what degree business involvement in sponsorship might possibly decline is difficult to foresee at the moment. At any rate, it has happened before that *Tafel* initiatives in certain regions have denied new recipients access because of demand exceeding food supply. Nonetheless, the more successful the *Tafel* concept based on sponsored charity turns out to be and the more extensive the spread, the more it will compete with claims resting on social rights. As a result, social exclusion is more likely to be administered and reinforced by civil society commitment rather than reduced this way. Social exclusion would be counteracted only if the *Tafel* work growing out of civil society would strengthen civil society’s ability to address problems and, in so doing, would involve the people on the receiving end in the process. This would require

¹⁰ Consider the collecting boxes in grocery stores mentioned above, which establish a moral incentive to buy more.

adopting a critical distance toward both the state *and* business . And it would ultimately demand empowering recipients by supporting them in gaining more competencies, more rights, and more opportunities for social participation. The current scheme of distributing food alone will not accomplish this. Therefore, further sociological observation of how the *Tafel* initiatives enlarge their range of activity is called for. What activities and cooperations are being newly established? And according to what criteria are decisions in this respect made? Are they about sustaining the success of the organization? Or are they actually about empowering recipients of *Tafel* services in the long-term.

From an *environmental* viewpoint, *Tafel* work also must be met with skepticism as long as excess food is mainly perceived as a yet unutilized resource to be tapped for future distribution. For in this case there is little interest in surplus reduction. As long as patterns of production and consumption are not critically questioned and advocates of such criticism do not stand up to businesses and the general public in voicing their concerns, there will be no reduction of surplus food. Cooperation between environmental and consumer initiatives could be promising in this respect, but such collaboration is currently not in sight. Promotion of second hand schemes also could be an environmental option.¹¹ Here, too, it will ultimately depend on how *Tafel* work is further developed. The same kind of questions must be asked: When entering new areas of activity, is securing resources for distribution through the organization the main driving force or is a lasting cutback in the wasteful use of resources and energy the chief objective?

The increase in *Tafel* organizations, heightened public attention, and its growing political significance bring to fore both internal tensions and alternative interpretations by other actors – political, economic, scientific, and from the media – that will influence future *Tafel* development. It is their position at the interface of social and environmental issues, of exclusion and affluence that makes them an especially interesting actor. Do they reject the wasteful, affluent throwaway society? Might they even stand for disappointment with consumerism’s promise of happiness and for a new solidarity that strives to fundamentally realign itself socially and environmentally along a sustainable conception of prosperity? The proposed necessity of transforming *Tafel* work underscores the need for a closer examination of the changes in the range of *Tafel* activities. Only in this way can it be empirically assessed along which path the *Tafel* is proceeding and whether the chosen path can claim to be sustainable.

The *Tafel* stands at the crossroads. The important decisions that need to be made should not be left up to them alone since this kind of social movement itself is only a symptom of far

¹¹ Note the former name of a major U.S. organization engaged in charitable activities of the *Tafel*-type: “Second Harvest” (which in the meantime has become “Feeding America”) (<http://feedingamerica.org>).

reaching societal changes and because it would be overwhelmed by having to tackle the task on its own. Especially the ideas and the roles assumed that go beyond the simple practice of collecting and distributing are perhaps the ones that pose the most important challenges of the years to come. It is a matter of society engaging in a process of achieving a political understanding of what the existence of the *Tafel* means to society and what kind of *Tafel* work can be considered socially desirable and significant.

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