

## BOOK REVIEW —

**Food Justice**

Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi

(MIT Press, 304 pp., \$27.95)

*By Megan C. Bourke*

Environmentalism in the United States has evolved from its original focus on natural resources and the factors causing their depletion and deterioration to its more modern focus on environmental justice. The Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972 established the importance of pollution prevention and control, and for two decades regulations have targeted activities detrimental to the land, water, and air. In the 1990s after disasters in Bhopal, India, and Alaska's Prince William Sound, and following a study in 1992 by the EPA's Environmental Equity Workgroup that found that racial minority and low-income populations were disproportionately exposed to pollutants and other hazardous conditions, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898. This order shifted the environmental debate from protecting natural resources to how people and communities — specifically minority and low-income communities — endure those actions taken against the environment.

It is from the disparities mentioned above that Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi build their case for food justice, a concept that I will argue is the next iteration of the environmental justice movement. The concept introduced

in their book by the same name is as vast as it is new, leading the authors to model its definition after the definition of environmental justice: the fair distribution of the benefits and risks of our current food system to all those involved, from the land owners, growers and pickers, to manufacturers, sellers, and consumers. The authors find examples of food justice violations in the fields where migrant farm workers go without proper housing and healthcare as well as in school cafeterias where students are exposed to unhealthy food and dismal eating conditions.

Gottlieb and Joshi, both of Occidental College, are well versed in environmental- and food-related justice issues. Gottlieb, who has authored numerous books on land use, food systems, and the urban environment, is the director of Occidental College's Urban Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI). Joshi serves as the director of the National Farm to School Program in UEPI's Center for Food and Justice. The authors' combination of academic research and hands-on organizing experience lend *Food Justice* both credibility and a comprehensive understanding of the food system in the United States today. However, the book suffers from a lack of effective organization. Policy alter-

natives play second fiddle to chapters of numerous, albeit illustrative, anecdotes. The relative “newness” of the topic may have inhibited the authors from offering recommendations, but their reticence hollowed out the book. Nonetheless, for what the book lacks in concrete policy alternatives, it succeeds in educating its readers about the next installment of environmental justice. If a reader is interested in food policy or curious about a potentially growing grassroots movement, *Food Justice* is a great introduction. The interested reader will appreciate the intricacies of a food system that otherwise risks being regarded as simply a superficial avenue to launch Food Network chefs into celebrity and transform farmers’ markets into weekend destinations.

Gottlieb and Joshi introduce the concept of food justice in the book’s introduction with a story about a group of New Orleans schoolchildren who, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, came together to better their school system. The Rethinkers, as they were called, chose to focus their attention on “school food and the school cafeteria environment” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, 2). Aided by an adult activist, the Rethinkers educated themselves about the local shrimping economy and its difficult recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Empowered by their newly found knowledge, the Rethinkers advocated for local and nutritional food to be served in school cafeterias. Not only would “buying local” bring fresh and healthy food to school cafeterias, it would help to reinvigorate the New Orleans economy. Through their press conferences, the Rethinkers caught the attention of school district administrators, and as new schools were constructed their recommendations were implemented. The authors use the Rethinkers’ food system journey – from curiosity to education to advocacy to results – to frame their discussion of food justice and how ordinary people can change a food system out-of-control.

*Food Justice* is presented in

two sections. The first, entitled “An Unjust Food System,” breaks the system down into its component parts, including growth, production, access, and consumption of food. Further, this section discusses the history of food system-related politics as well as the globalization of food production and consumption. The most fascinating aspect of this section is the vastness of the concept of food justice. Gottlieb and Joshi begin with detailed accounts of the unjust working conditions of (mostly unauthorized) farm workers and the despicable treatment of animals in concentrated animal feeding operations (or CAFOs). They explore the food deserts in urban areas that leave low-income and minority populations with the choice between fast food and processed food from the corner store. The section ends with a discussion of how globalization influences what people eat more than the traditional culture of a community or country.

While Gottlieb and Joshi are rich with stories about how the food system has treated many unjustly, it is difficult for them to move beyond reporting on these hardships. Some of their statistics are staggering:

*“A 2009 study documented exposures to two pesticides within 500 feet over a twenty-five year time frame that resulted in as much as a 75 percent increased risk for Parkinson’s disease” (26).*

*“A 2007 study noted that more than half a million Chicago residents, primarily in African-American neighborhoods, had limited or no access to a full-service food market” (41).*

Other details are not so surprising given the background knowledge most readers will bring to the subject matter. Gottlieb and Joshi’s audience has likely read Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and knows that Walmart opts for cheaper prices and regional dominance rather than employee benefits

and high-quality products. Such exhaustive review of the food justice baseline is unnecessary. The chapters lack thematic organization beyond their subjects' place in the food system sequence. To have to wait until the second section of the book for policy alternatives to correct for the reported injustices is tedious.

The authors excel, however, in presenting a well-rounded picture of how food justice — and more prevalent food injustices — touches our daily lives. The importance of eating locally, aided by farmer's markets and community-supported agriculture programs, is driven home in the chapter entitled "The Food System Goes Global." Gottlieb and Joshi reveal how trade policies, and ways to circumvent them, can drastically change a country's food culture. For example, China bans the import of potatoes, so when PepsiCo decided to take on the potato chip market in China, it had to begin its own potato growing business. PepsiCo was able to "glocalize" its products, including green tea potato chips, in order to be profitable, and its success actually "contributed to a shift in the Chinese diet" (102). PepsiCo proved that there was a market for potato chips in China and its marketing genius should not be condemned, but Gottlieb and Joshi point out that the "restructured global food system...eliminated the sense of place associated with food grown and food consumed" (103). Eating locally, according to Gottlieb and Joshi, is not only good for a local economy and healthier for its consumers; it allows a community to maintain its sense of place, its identity, and its traditions in the face of overwhelming forces of conformity.

If readers expect the second section, entitled "Food Justice Action and Strategies," to provide policy recommendations to further the food justice agenda, they will be disappointed. Instead, the authors continue to share stories, and leaving readers to tease policy recommendations from the endless examples of food justice programs around the country. For

example, farmers' markets have struggled to serve low-income populations, so one farmers' market in Los Angeles began to accept federal food stamps and the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons. The authors end the story there, but I found myself scrawling in the margins, "So what?" The next logical sentence should have suggested that an expansion of food assistance programs and payment options at alternative food sources would help low income populations access fresh, local produce. Creating access to healthy food is one of the hallmarks of food justice. Having glossed over this point, the authors bypass a higher level that, I would argue, could add further dimension to their work.

The authors do not take the next logical step of turning their examples into policy recommendations, but perhaps this is because they believe the movement has not matured enough for broad-based policy recommendations. Though farm workers are better able to organize and many cities have attempted to attract grocery stores into their food deserts, Gottlieb and Joshi call on food justice advocates to attempt to take their successful strategies from the local market onto the national stage. The authors seem to indicate that the next step in food justice is a national campaign, one that is not quite ripe for launching.

In the meantime, food justice is making smaller and more local strides. In the chapter called "A New Food Politics," the authors profile smaller movements in the food justice policy realm. The most fascinating of these movements includes the development of food policy councils at the local level, which unite urban planning with food justice. Gottlieb and Joshi present the idea of "foodsheds" and how local governments, just as they mind the "origin and end-of-pipe destinations" of local watersheds, should be aware of how a community receives and accesses food (201-2). Concepts of urban redevelopment, transportation, economic

development, and health and nutrition are all the purview of food policy councils, which aid local governments as they attempt to broaden their understanding of food access networks. The book highlights policy councils in Knoxville, Tennessee; Hartford, Connecticut; Los Angeles; and Toronto. Because food policy councils embark on very similar tasks as legally required planning commissions, councils of this nature could probably be established in many urban areas to better address food concerns. To extend the duties of a planning commission, or even establish a food policy subcommittee, would aid communities as they embark on food justice activities. Again, the authors never verbalize this recommendation.

The concept of food justice, while broad, is not difficult to understand. It seems to be the next logical step in the environmental justice movement. Whether food justice is a movement unto itself, however, is a question to be posed as food

policy evolves. As Gottlieb and Joshi reveal in chapter 4, even President Obama asked proponents, “Is this a movement?” (79). As Gottlieb and Joshi prove, food justice has not quite made its way to the national stage.

Though lacking comprehensive policy recommendations, *Food Justice* provides undeniable proof that the food system is in a time of upheaval and innovation. The grassroots changes that have been implemented over the last decade are immense, and the authors expose a system that logically fits into the modern progression of the civil rights and environmental justice movement. The grassroots nature of the changes, however, seems to suggest that to be successful, food justice may not have to reach that national stage but instead the local stage. It may be that the federal government’s hands-off approach to food justice is the best thing for the fledgling movement since, well, sliced bread.

## References

Gottlieb, Robert, and Anupama Joshi. 2010. *Food Justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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