Ideals Cannot Be Bought: The Potential of an Intersectional Food Justice Movement

By Jessa Mae Orluk

Editors’ note: Food justice is often conceptualized primarily in anthropocentric terms: the right of all people to access healthy, sustaining food. In this DifferenTakes, Jessa Orluk moves beyond this people-centered vision of food justice. How does food get to our fork? What do these processes mean for social justice? Orluk looks at the importance of worker and animal rights to just food production, health and the environment, as well as at distribution systems that uphold social justice values. She makes the case for cross-movement action for visionary food justice.

— Anne Hendrixson and guest editor, Timothy Pachirat

A few years ago, Whole Foods grocery stores began a values-driven advertising campaign. A series of ads proclaim “Values Matter” and “Eat Like an Idealist.” They imply that at Whole Foods you can buy food that has been grown, packaged and sold in a way that inoculates their products against any moral impurity. They sell ethical food.

Whole Foods is just one of a number of companies vying to make a profit from morality. Morality costs money in the age of capitalism. Consumers with financial means seem eager to buy their ideals.

In the past ten years, U.S. consumers have grown increasingly concerned about where food is coming from and how it is grown. According to agricultural law professor Neil Hamilton, the rise in consumer demand for organic, humane and local food is a “Post-Industrial Food Democracy.” Its power rests with consumers who have the socioeconomic ability to ask questions and demand answers from industrial food producers about animal welfare, food safety and labor rights. A similar line of thought holds that moral value not only creates more satisfaction from food, but is a way to avert environmental crises and end the exploitation of human and non-human beings entrenched in the industrial food
It transforms buying groceries into a form of activism. A more accurate name for this phenomenon might be “Consumer-Led Oligarchy.” Labels like organic, humane, or local allow only a small group of consumers to vote with dollars. Ironically, members of the oligarchy hope to overcome the limits of capitalism and consumption by acting as ethical consumers. But can they?

Much like other consumer-led “solutions” proposed by mainstream environmentalists, the burden of consuming ethical food is shifted from the system of food production to the individual who buys food. Instead of indicting capitalism, mainstream solutions use capitalism to indict the individual. They ignore economic and geographic barriers to accessing food. What if you can’t afford your ideals?

This approach also obscures the true problems in our food system: exploitation of human and non-human animals, destroyed ecosystems, and a failure to make nourishing food accessible to large portions of the population. The system can be disrupted to address these ills, but it will not come from a consumer-led oligarchy. Change will come from community organizers for social and environmental justice willing to innovate cross-movement strategies for food justice.

**What is Food Justice?**

While the phrase food justice is relatively new, the movement has been quietly growing for the past half-century. Alongside the rise in the consumer-led oligarchy, there has been an explosion of grassroots activism that uses food as a way to facilitate social justice. Many activists point to the Community Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party as the movement’s genesis. Starting in Oakland in 1969, the Panthers gathered donations from local businesses and used volunteer labor to provide free breakfasts to children in poor African-American neighborhoods before school. By redistributing food for the hungry, the Panthers built community power while exposing how neighborhoods become disenfranchised. Ending hunger was an anti-capitalist act.

La Via Campesina further expanded on the food justice concept when they demanded food sovereignty for peasant and landless workers. The organization is a coalition between local and national organizations in over 73 countries, which represent over 200 million farmers. At the 1996 World Food Summit, the grassroots group pushed for a movement that upholds the “rights of all peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods,” including the right of all people to define their own food and agricultural systems.

While not many contemporary groups fit the anti-capitalist politics of the Black Panthers or La Via Campesina, many embody the idea of food justice they pioneered. The concept of food justice is that access to good food is a human right; it requires social, economic and environmental justice throughout the entire food system. Achieving justice, in this sense, requires addressing unequal access to nourishing food, environmental devastation and exploitation of human and non-human animals. It is one part of a larger push for social and environmental justice.

To realize food justice, activists need to facilitate actions that address a variety of issues at once. By building coaltional work between animal welfare activists, consumers, free speech advocates, and labor organizers, the food system could be transformed. To understand the potential of cross-movement work for food justice, I want to highlight three areas where current organizations are attempting to do this work: human labor, access to food, and non-human animals.

**Human Labor**

Industrial farming operations depend on vulnerable labor. Industrial farm work often involves monotonous and dangerous tasks. The National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act do not cover farmworkers, leaving the workforce open to exploitation. The median annual pay for farmworkers in 2012 was $18,910, which is far below the living wage for a family of two, three, or four. Workers are often subject to wage theft, unpaid overtime, and no benefits like sick days or vacation. Human Rights Watch estimates that between 50 percent and 70 percent of farmworkers in the U.S. do not have citizenship papers, making it easier for farm managers to manipulate employees with threats of...
deportation. For female farmworkers, there is also a high risk of sexual assault and violence on the job that cannot be reported for fear of retaliation from managers.¹⁰

Such working conditions are not confined to farms. Workers in food distribution, retail, and restaurants receive partial coverage under a mish-mash of labor laws; however, wage theft, sexual assault, retaliation, and lack of benefits are common. Organizations like the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC), the Food Chain Workers Alliance, and local workers’ centers are actively organizing grassroots campaigns to demand justice for food workers.¹¹

Many organizations have created food certifications to address the exploitation of human labor on farms. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Agricultural Justice Project and similar organizations use third-party monitoring, often by former farmworkers, to ensure a series of regulations are met in order for the farms to receive their certification.¹²

While the programs have been effective, food certification strategies inherently fall into the exclusive domain of the consumer-led oligarchy. By creating a certification, these programs are encouraging ethical food that is not guaranteed to be accessible to all. Concentrating all their efforts in one area of the food system, they inadvertently make food access unequal. The disparity between intent and impact is an opportunity for cross-movement work. How can labor activists facilitate equal access to nourishing food in their fight to create better working conditions?

**Food Access**

At the heart of food justice is the desire to make good food and good jobs a basic right, not a luxury. Similar to the community survival programs of the Black Panther Party, local organizations are making strides in providing food for those in need while working towards systemic change.

The biggest barrier to ethical food is the price and location. The Regional Environmental Council in Worcester, MA cleared price and location barriers by creating a Mobile Market in 2012. The Mobile Market increases food access for individuals that have benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) or senior coupons by traveling to different locations throughout the city, including the YMCA and the Women, Infants, and Children Center. ¹³

In New York City, the Prison Bus Community Supported Agriculture attempts to increase access by providing transportation from the South Bronx to three prisons in upstate New York. A ticket on the veggie-powered bus costs $50 and can be purchased with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. It includes two spots on the bus, a community-supported agriculture box that contains food from Wassaic Community Farm and the Westchester Food Bank, and milk from the Milk Not Jails project.¹⁴ The project allows low-income families who may have a family member in prison to remain in contact with that person, and to access good food.

Local organizations like the Prison Bus CSA and Worcester REC gain strength from making food access a part of their social justice work. Cross-movement strategies make crossing systemic barriers like price and location a realistic goal that benefits communities.

**Non-Human Animals**

Our industrial food system abuses non-human animals.¹⁵ Chains, whips, small bulldozers and electric prods are used to move animals that are scared or sick. Pigs and chickens are often unable to turn around or sit down in their pens. Dairy cows are kept constantly pregnant, with their calves taken away almost immediately so their milk can be bottled and sold.¹⁶

Political scientist Timothy Pachirat worked undercover in a slaughterhouse for six months to expose working conditions and animal abuse in the plant. He describes how the many hours of repetitive movement desensitize workers to the carnage. The pressure to keep producing, combined with the precariousness of their positions, essentially demands that workers abuse animals. Pachirat details how certifications for humane treatment are often forged and inspectors are duped.¹⁷ His work highlights the interconnectedness of animal welfare with labor issues, food justice, and economic inequality.
Information on what really happens on farms and slaughterhouses is hard to gain. Without undercover work, the public has little information about animal welfare other than what the farms themselves are willing to report. Undercover reports are also essential for labor interests; often when video is turned over to the public to expose animal abuse, labor violations caught on tape are also made public.

Activists working to end Ag-Gag Laws are fighting to keep undercover investigations legal. Ag-Gag laws prohibit digital photography and video recording on animal enterprises without consent of the owner. The bans are a prohibition on undercover reporting. For example, activist Amy Meyer videotaped operations at a Utah meatpacking company from the roadside and was consequently charged with violating the Ag-Gag law. Though the charges were dropped, free-speech activists, animal advocates, and journalists are currently suing the state for infringing on free-speech rights.

Non-human animal abuse and welfare are an emotionally volatile subject for omnivores, vegetarians and vegans alike; yet working towards food justice necessitates an investigation into the rights of non-human animals. Informed conversation needs to happen on a much wider scale to enable cross-movement work between the animal-welfare and animal-rights movements. This is necessary for an effective food justice movement.

The opportunity for collaboration lies in pointing out the connection between abuse of human labor and abuse of non-human animals. It is undeniably easier to mistreat a non-human animal when human employees are being systemically devalued and abused by employers. Food-justice activists have to push the food system to value both human and non-human life.

Cross-Movement Solutions
The elite consumer-led oligarchy is not the alternative to our currently exploitative food system; it only works to promote consumption that increases inequality among consumers. It still exploits people, planet and non-human animals. The food justice movement has the potential to transform this system by utilizing the power of social, environmental and economic justice movements towards one end.

Exactly what that end is has yet to be defined. At the moment, the alternative to our food system exists only in specific goals: increasing food access, ensuring labor rights, promoting sustainable agriculture, regulating animal welfare. Perhaps the biggest potential in cross-movement strategies for food justice is the opportunity to engage all activists in creating a new vision—what does our ideal food system look like? Systemic barriers and complex ethical questions must be discussed and addressed.

We can’t change the world without knowing where we’re going, and we can’t decide on a destination until we include voices in the conversation that often go unheard. This is the radical potential of food justice; we don’t have to just fight the system, we can also create a new one.

Jessa Mae Orluk was the PopDev Environmental and Reproductive Justice Alumni Fellow for the 2014-2015 year. She graduated from Hampshire College in 2014 with a concentration in political ecology. In fall 2015, she will begin studies in agricultural and public interest law at Vermont Law School.

Guest Editor Timothy Pachirat is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the author of Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight (Yale University Press, 2011; paperback, 2013; Korean translation, 2012).
Notes


6. Ibid.


15. Frequently used in critical animal studies, the term ‘non-human animal’ is used to describe sentient beings that are not humans.


