Reform or Transformation?
The Pivotal Role of Food Justice in the U.S. Food Movement

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The global food crisis has pushed the U.S. food movement to a political juncture. A sixth of the world’s population is now hungry—just as a sixth of the U.S. population is “food insecure.” These severe levels of hunger and insecurity share root causes, located in the political economy of a global, corporate food regime. Because of its political location between reformist calls for food security and radical calls for food sovereignty, food justice is pivotally placed to influence the direction of food-systems change. This placement subjects the concept of food justice to multiple claims, definitions, and practices that tend either to affirm a structural focus on resource redistribution, or to dilute its political meaning by focusing on food access. How issues of race and class are resolved will influence the political direction of the food justice movement’s organizational alliances: toward reform or toward transformation. How the food justice movement “pivots” may determine the degree to which it is able to bring about substantive changes to the U.S. food system.*

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Background: The Global Food Crisis, Hunger and Food Security

The global food price crisis of 2008 ushered in record levels of hunger for the world’s poor at a time of record global harvests as well as record profits for the world’s major agrifoods corporations (Lean 2008). The combination of increasing hunger in the midst of wealth and abundance unleashed a flurry of worldwide “food riots” (including in the United States) not seen for many decades. In June 2008, the World Bank reported that global food prices had risen 83 percent in three years and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) cited a 45 percent increase in their world food price index in just nine months (Wiggins and Levy 2008). Despite a brief drop in the food price index, retail food prices remained high through 2010 and into 2011 when the index spiked again to record levels (FAO 2011).

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According to the United Nations World Food Program, more than 90 percent of the world’s hungry—most of whom are peasant farmers—are simply too poor to buy enough food (WFP 2011). Some of the planet’s hungry people live in the Global North, though hunger is measured as “food insecurity” and social safety nets are more readily available. Levels of food insecurity in the United States mirror global patterns; more than 50 million people are now food insecure and one in nine Americans are on food stamps (Nord et al. 2010).

Food insecurity in the United States is characterized by a nationwide epidemic of diet-related diseases that result in an estimated $240 billion a year in health costs (Schlosser 2001) that fall disproportionately on low-income communities of color (Baker et al. 2006). In these neighborhoods, food access is often limited to the cheap, high-fat, high-salt, high-calorie, processed food available at gas stations, liquor stores, corner stores, and fast food outlets (Herrera, Khanna, and Davis 2009; Mamen 2007; Morton and Blanchard 2007; Parker 2005). When available, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products are often of inferior quality and are more expensive at these establishments than in supermarkets and grocery stores (Perry and Harries 2007). Lack of access to affordable, fresh, and healthy food, when combined with preexisting health disparities in regions with high socioeconomic inequality, has led to a dramatic increase in obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, immunity disorders, and hypertension (Alkon and Norgaard 2009).

Dealing with what food-systems analyst Raj Patel (2007) describes as crises of the “stuffed and starved” has produced a wide array of initiatives that, while linked through their focus on food, are largely divided between those who want to preserve the political economy of the existing global food system and those who seek to change it. The former tend to be from government and industry; the latter make up the global “food
movement.” The food movement itself, however, is diverse and subject to social divides.

The Rise and Divides of Food Movements

Even before the onset of the current food price crisis, the decades-long increase in hunger, food insecurity, diet-related diseases—fuelled by low-nutrient, highly processed food—gave rise to social movements for community food security and food justice (Winne 2008), food sovereignty (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010), food democracy (Lang 2005), new agrarianism (Jackson, Berry, and Coleman 1984), food safety (Nestle 2002), anti-hunger (Berg 2008), and Slow Food that is “good, clean and fair” (Petrini 2005). This past decade has seen a boom in documentaries that both attack the industrial agrifoods complex and champion local, organic, sustainable food systems. These titles include Super Size Me (Spurlock 2004), The Future of Food (Garcia 2004), The World According to Monsanto (Robin 2008), Food Inc. (Kenner 2009), and King Corn (Woolf 2007).

These efforts have loosely come to be identified as the “food movement.” Journalism professor Michael Pollan, one of the mainstream media’s prominent food celebrities, asserts that “[t]he food movement coalesces around the recognition that today’s food and farming economy is ‘unsustainable’—that it can’t go on in its current form much longer without courting a breakdown of some kind, whether environmental, economic, or both. . . .” For Pollan, the food movement is “splintered” in its origins, “[unified] as yet by little more than the recognition that industrial food production is in need of reform because its social/environmental/public health/animal welfare/gastronomic costs are too high” (Pollan 2010).

This recognition leads to calls for quality, environmental sustainability, and safety of food (e.g., fresh, organic, local) as well as for the reaffirmation of environmental values and community relationships associated with halcyon days of a reconstructed agrarian past. These make up what Alkon and Agyeman (2011a) refer to as the dominant food-movement narrative. Grounded in the social base of predominantly white, middle-class consumers, this narrative has become an important reference in the mainstream media. However, it also tends to render the food histories and realities of low-income people and people of color invisible.

An emblematic example of this narrative at work is the ubiquitous food-movement adage to fix the food system by “voting with your fork” (Pollan 2006). This strategy not only takes the access and purchasing power of the predominantly white, middle-class consumer for granted, but also it assumes that our food system can be reformed through informed consumer choice, and ignores the ways working-class and people of color have historically brought about social change.

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But, as one Slow Food leader counsels, “If dinner is a democratic election . . . in many electoral districts . . . there are no polling stations [and] there is only one candidate, the incumbent: fast food” (Viertel 2011). The notion that the food system can be transformed through individual acts of consumption—rather than through lobbying, organizing, boycotts, mobilization, or direct action—fits nicely within the prevailing neoliberal economic rhetoric: that unregulated capitalist markets yield the most efficient allocation of resources (Harvey 2005). The prominence of the privileged in the food-movement narrative, along with its “whiteness” (Slocum 2007), reflects the uneasy dualism between the trend of “quality food” for higher-income consumers and “other food” consumed by the masses (Goodman and Goodman 2007, 6).

On the ground, the food movement’s dominant narrative is, arguably, skin deep. Its widespread growth through farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and high-end organic/“locavore” restaurants and retail chains has also been paralleled by less-celebrated expansions of the community food security movement (CFS), the food justice movement (FJ), and the food-sovereignty movement (FS) over the last ten years. While not rejecting the need for “good,” “real,” sustainable, or organic food, the agendas of these movements are focused on the lack of good food access, social and distributional inequities, institutional racism and classism, and the need to address labor, gender, and human rights in the food system (Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009; Gottlieb and Joshi 2011; Alkon and Agyeman 2011a,b).

These developments suggest that below the surface of its amorphous “splintering,” the food movement is segmented in ways that reflect social hierarchies of race and class in the food system. As we will explore further in this article, this segmentation has important implications for movement-based strategies for food-systems change.

Community Food Security, Food Justice, and Food Sovereignty: Adding Voices, Being Heard, or Forging a New Narrative?

The CFS is a broad-based movement that grew to national prominence with the formation of the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), a nonprofit group founded in 1994. With more than 250 affiliated organizations, the CFSC is representative of the diversity within the U.S. food movement. The CFSC refers to Hamm and Bellows’s (2003) definition of community food security as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (CFSC 2004; 2010). The Coalition supports food-system alternatives by advocating for new business models, cooperative ownership of retail outlets, direct marketing, urban agriculture, community gardens and urban
greening projects, community nutrition education, and community-driven agricultural research (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999). By focusing on community, the CFSC takes the notion of food security beyond long-standing governmental programs that typically focus on individual and household food access (Mooney and Hunt 2009).

The CFS framework also calls for increased funding to safety-net welfare programs such as the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps); school lunch and breakfast programs; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; and food banks (Anderson 1999; McCullum et al. 2004). CFS frames food-system inequities in terms of food production and acquisition rather than structural inequality, resulting in an emphasis on enhancing food skills and alternative means of food access for low-income households, coupled with a Washington D.C.-focused lobbying effort for increased forms of food aid and support for community food systems (Tarasuk 2001; McCullum et al. 2004). Politically, CFS seeks strategic partnerships with government, industry, and major anti-hunger organizations to enhance food security programs, food access, and to promote anti-poverty measures (NAHO 2009). By working actively for government reforms and industry partnerships to improve the “other food” consumed by low-income people, CFS movement strives to mainstream food security into the existing food system.

CFS’s efforts to incorporate food-security issues into the dominant food-movement narrative is not without its contradictions. While the movement has gained political currency with the Obama administration’s initiative for Healthy Food Financing and First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign against childhood obesity, many food activists feel the administration’s staunch support for agribusiness and food retail monopolies (reaching new heights with the Let’s Move/Walmart partnership) goes against CFS’s core principles of self-reliance and social justice:

Imagine if the national answer to the food crisis took the form of a huge, publicly financed flood of corporations like WalMart and Tesco opening up stores in inner city neighborhoods using the exact same economic model they’re using now. We could expect low wages, the destruction of small businesses and local economies, and all of the awful labor and supply chain practices we’re familiar with. . . . [We need] good, living-wage jobs that pay meaningful earnings and teach meaningful skill sets. . . . [Instead] poor urban communities will see their economies tied to the wealth and resource extraction from rural communities with the usual negative consequences for local economies and the environment. (Ahmadi 2011)

The Food Justice movement (FJ) overlaps broadly with CFS, but tends to be more progressive than reformist in that it ad-
addresses specifically the ways in which people of color in low-income communities are disproportionately and negatively impacted by the industrial food system. In their recent book on the movement, Gottlieb and Joshi (2010, 229) describe FJ as a social movement with “multiple layers . . . [of] producers, processors, workers, eaters, or communities,” for whom race, ethnicity, class, and gender issues are at the forefront of an agenda that includes a mix of “producing food, local preference, environment, economic development, healthy food for all, preparing, cooking & eating, and public health & nutrition.”

The food-justice movement emerged from several corners, including movements for environmental justice (Bullard 1994), working-class communities of color dealing with diet-related diseases (Herrera, Khanna, and Davis 2009), critiques of racism in the food system (Self 2003; Allen 2008) as well as critiques of racism in the food movement itself (Slocum 2007; Guthman 2008). Food justice formulates its food-security discourse in the “context of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies” (Alkon and Norgaard 2009). The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, for example, articulates an explicit analysis of structural racism in the food system and a policy platform that includes eliminating “barriers to African-American participation and ownership in all aspects of the food system,” as well as a “re-distribution of wealth through cooperative community ownership” (Detroit Black Community Food Security Network 2010). According to FJ advocate Brahm Ahmadi of the People’s Community Market in Oakland, California:

Food justice asserts that no one should live without enough food because of economic constraints or social inequalities. . . . The food justice movement is a different approach to a community’s needs that seeks to truly advance self-reliance and social justice by placing communities in leadership of their own solutions and providing them with the tools to address the disparities within our food systems and within society at large. (Ahmadi 2010)

In a debate on COMFOOD, a popular food security/food justice list-serve, Hank Herrera, another longtime FJ advocate from Dig Deep Farms in Oakland, California, offers up the following principles:

Food justice must address structural inequity, structural violence and structural racism. Food justice work must result in ownership of the means of production and exchange of food by the people who consume the food. Food justice work is the incredibly difficult work of building new local healthy food systems, not opposing the global food industry. Food justice emerges from the economic justice work of Dr. King and represents the next wave of the civil rights movement. Food justice cannot reproduce systems of power, privilege and capital that create and maintain food apartheid. (Herrera 2011)

As Herrera’s principles suggest, many food-justice activists engaged in the hard, grassroots work of building new food sys-
tems simply do not have the time, resources, or inkling to actively oppose the global food industry. Nonetheless, many see a role for food justice in addressing systemic change by engaging in political and policy processes as well as activism and movement mobilization (Steel 2010; Wekerle 2004).

In its more radical forms, FJ asserts economic democracy for underserved communities of color, including the transfer of ownership, property, and leadership to those most negatively affected by the industrial food System.1 FJ’s radical roots reflect the community work of the Black Panther Party nearly half a century ago. According to Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale:

One of the party’s important lasting legacies is grassroots programmatic organizing such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program which evolved to a point where forty-nine Black Panther chapters and branches in association with many other organizations across the United States were feeding 250,000 kids five days a week each morning before school. We had no government money or War on Poverty money to start the programs—we did it ourselves with donations. (Shames 2006, 12–13)

Accomplished long before community organizing developed its dependence on funding from philanthropic foundations, the Black Panther’s free breakfast program predated the nation’s school breakfast legislation of 1973. Food was part of a much larger program for black liberation and community autonomy as expressed in the October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program. The first point in the program demanded freedom and the power for the black community to determine its own destiny. The last point, invoking the Declaration of Independence and calling for a black plebiscite, was introduced with the statement

“We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace...”

(Shames, 13–14, emphasis added)

The platform was radical not only because it addressed the egregious manifestations of racism, such as underemployment, economic exploitation, police brutality, and a skewed criminal justice system (and suggested black communities might secede from the United States), but because the Black Panthers sought to dismantle the capitalist structures of racism.

The call among many of today’s FJ activists for local control over food and dismantling racism in the food system echoes some of the liberation politics of the Black Panthers. Less common today are the structural critiques of capitalism and racism that were integral to the Black Panther’s political work.

The food-justice movement confronts both the effects of structural racism on the ground and the failure of the dominant social change paradigms to take structural racism into account. Its discourse invokes the notion of a grassroots-driven transition to a more equitable and sustainable food system. Thus, just
as the Environmental Justice Paradigm established at the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 sought to emphasize the issues of race, class, and leadership in the face of the mainstream “New Environmental Paradigm” dominated by middle-class white activists (Taylor 2000; Bullard 2010), FJ struggles to make its voice heard above the mainstream food-movement narrative.

Food sovereignty is another radical trend for food-system transformation based on the notion of entitlement and redistribution of food-producing resources. The discourse is framed by a more radical interpretation of food justice that sees access to food, land, and water as a human right, works for the democratization of the food system in favor of the poor and underserved, and specifically advocates dismantling the present global food system (Patel 2009; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010).

While the food-sovereignty movement has its origins in the peasant struggles for land and livelihoods in the Global South, the call has been increasingly taken up by family farms and the more radical food justice organizations in the United States and Europe. The draft mission statement of the recently formed U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance states as follows:

The US Food Sovereignty Alliance works to end poverty, rebuild local food economies, and assert democratic control over the food system. We believe all people have the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food, produced in an ecologically sound manner. As a US-based food justice, anti-hunger, labor, environmental, and faith-based alliance, we uphold the right to food as a basic human right and work to connect our local and national struggles to the international movement for food sovereignty. (U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance 2010)

The food-sovereignty movement seeks to dismantle global markets and the monopoly power of corporations at local, national, and international scales, and advocates redistributing and protecting productive assets such as seeds, water, land, and processing and distribution facilities. The rights of labor and immigrants figure prominently in this trend, as advocated by the national Food Chain Workers Alliance and the Community to Community Alliance of Washington state. Direct action is practiced by organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Students for Fair Food. Reminiscent of the United Farm Worker (UFW) mobilizations of the 1960s, these groups seek to achieve labor justice and an end to modern-day slavery in the tomato fields through student–farmworker coalitions and national boycotts.

Poverty, hunger, and community demands for healthy food access continually pull low-income communities of color toward food aid and food-access solutions coming from mainstream food security and anti-hunger groups, as well as toward the cheap industrial food solutions offered by low-end food retail chains such as Walmart, Food 4 Less, and Dollar Stores (Holt-
Giménez, Wang, and Shattuck 2011). While anti-hunger and food-security advocates often prefer affordable access to bad food over no food at all, this puts them at odds with food-justice and food-sovereignty groups who distrust these large agrifood corporations (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, 215). Indeed, because they produce poor health outcomes and drain precious local food dollars from underserved communities, the pervasiveness of programs that channel surplus industrial food to low-income people of color could itself be considered an insidious form of racism. They also tend to divert attention from the structural causes of food insecurity and diet-related disease, and can bind local food-security efforts to the very industrial food system that is making their community members sick.

Caught between the urgency of access and the imperative of equity, the food-justice movement shifts, overlaps, and bridges with the efforts of the CFS and food-sovereignty movements, attempting to address racism and classism on one hand while trying to fix a broken food system on the other. This produces a “both/and” food justice narrative in which “...the lack of fresh food access [is seen as] both an equity disparity and a system failure” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, 299).

One difficulty with this narrative—fairly generalized within the food-justice movement—is that it separates the system from the disparity. The food system may be dysfunctional in that it does not serve the better interests of the environment, peasants, family farmers, or low-income people of color, but it is certainly not broken. During the food crisis of 2008, and again in 2010, quarterly profits for the world’s agri-food monopolies (seed and input suppliers, grain traders, retailers) grew by some 80 percent, so the system clearly works well for those who run it (Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009). “Equity disparity” and “system failure” do not sufficiently describe the profound, ongoing systemic exploitation that girds the global food system.

But understanding that racial and class disparities are a structurally integrated part of the present food system does not, in and of itself, resolve the strategic problem of how to proceed—practically and politically. In the following sections, we construct a “regime/movement” framework for understanding food systems and food movements, taking into account the historical tendencies of capitalist food systems and the strategic importance of alliance building to overcome the system/disparity dilemma.

The Corporate Food Regime²

Our food systems are part of a corporate food regime that is performing exactly as a late-capitalist system would be expected: it efficiently creates and concentrates wealth through market expansion, compound economic growth, technological

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innovation, and, increasingly, financial speculation (Magdoff and Tokar 2010; Harvey 2010). In addition to noting the cornucopian abundance frequently associated with the corporate food regime, it is important to recall that it was built over two centuries of violent, global-scale dispossession, and accumulation, a good part of which took place in North America. The regime continues to rely extensively on the direct and indirect appropriation and exploitation of land, labor, and capital, both at home and abroad.

A food regime is a “rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale” (McMichael 2009). The first global food regime spanned the period from the late 1800s through the Great Depression and linked food imports from southern and American colonies to European industrial expansion. The second food regime began after World War II and reversed the flow of food from the northern to the southern hemisphere to fuel Cold War industrialization in the Third World.

Today’s corporate food regime, ushered in by the neoliberal policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, is characterized by the monopoly market power of agrifood corporations, globalized grain-fed meat production, giant retail, and growing links between food and fuel. This regime is controlled by a far-flung agrifood industrial complex made up of huge oligopolies including Monsanto, Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Conagra, and Walmart. Together, these corporations dominate the government agencies and multilateral organizations that make and enforce the regime’s rules, regulations, and projects for trade, labor, property, and technology, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the UN World Food Program, USAID, the USDA, and big philanthropy.

Liberalization and Reform

Like the capitalist economic system of which they are a part, global food regimes historically alternate between periods of economic liberalization characterized by unregulated markets, privatization, and massive concentrations of wealth, followed by devastating economic and financial busts—the costs of which are socialized and paid for by citizens, consumers, workers, and taxpayers. This eventually leads to social unrest, which, when sufficiently widespread, threatens profits and governability. Governments then usher in reformist periods in which markets, supply, and consumption are re-regulated to stem the crisis and restore stability to the regime. In cases where governments are incapable of reform—as witnessed in 2011 in Egypt and other countries in northern Africa—rebellion and revolution can become likely avenues of social change.

Infinitely unregulated markets would eventually destroy both society and the natural resources that the regime depends on for its reproduction. Therefore, while the “mission” of reform is to mitigate the social and environmental externalities of the
reform or transformation?

Corporate food regime, its “job” is identical to that of the liberal trend: preserving the corporate food regime. Though liberalization and reform may appear politically distinct, they are actually two phases of the same system. While both tendencies exist simultaneously, they are rarely ever in equilibrium, with either liberalization or reform hegemonic at any period of time. Reformists dominated the global food regime from the New Deal in the 1930s until our current era of neo-liberal “globalization” in the 1980s. The current neo-liberal phase has been characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the growth and consolidation of global corporate monopoly power in food systems around the globe.

With the recurrent global food crises, desperate calls for reform have sprung up worldwide. However, less than 5 percent of the US$ 22 billion in promised aid to end the crisis has actually been committed, and most government and multilateral solutions (e.g., Feed the Future, Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, Global Harvest) simply call for more of the same policies that brought about the crisis to begin with: extending liberal (free) markets, privatizing common resources (including forests and the atmosphere), proprietary technological “fixes” including genetically modified seeds, and protecting monopoly concentration. Collateral damage to community food systems is mitigated by weak safety nets—including food aid from the World Food Program and U.S. food banks or food stamps. Unless there is strong pressure from civil society, reformists will not likely affect (much less reverse) the present neo-liberal direction of the corporate food regime.

From Coping to Regime Change:
The Pivotal Role of Food Justice

The current food and health crises reflect a socially inequitable and economically volatile corporate food regime. Unless there are profound changes to this regime, it will repeat its cycles of liberalization and reform, plunging neighborhood food systems, rural communities, and the environment into ever graver crises. While moderate food system reforms—such as increasing food stamps or relocating grocery stores—are certainly needed to help vulnerable communities cope with crises, because they address the proximate rather than the root causes of hunger and food insecurity (Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck 2009), they will not alter the fundamental balance of power within the food system and in some cases may even reinforce existing, inequitable power relations. Fixing the dysfunctional food system—in any sustainable sense—requires regime change.

If the history of U.S. capitalism and social change is a reliable guide, we can be assured that substantive changes to the corporate food regime will not come simply from within the regime itself, but from a combination of intense social pressure and political will. Today’s food-system “reforms” and the rush...
of anti-hunger alliances between agrifood monopolies, government, and big philanthropy (Global Harvest, AGRA, AGree, etc.) are attempts to mitigate the negative effects of food price volatility, not end global hunger or substantively challenge neo-liberal control over the food system. Food-system change will come from powerful and sustained social pressure that forces reformists to roll back neo-liberalism in the food system. Much of this pressure could come from the food movement—if it overcomes its divides.

As we indicated earlier in this article, the food-sovereignty movement and some food-justice organizations have a radical critique of the corporate food regime. These groups call for structural, redistributive reforms of basic entitlements, for example, for property, labor, capital, and markets. Other food-justice groups (and some CFS organizations) advance a progressive agenda on the basis of sustainable family farming and rights of access to healthy food. These radical and progressive trends overlap significantly in their approaches, demographics, and types of organization (e.g., CFS, FJ, and FS). While the progressive trend focuses on local ownership of production and on improving the service and delivery aspects of the food system, the radical trend directs more of its energy at structural changes to capitalist food systems. When taken together, both trends seek to change the rules and practices of food systems, locally, nationally, and internationally. In this regard they are two sides of the same food movement. Their strategic alliance could go a long way toward overcoming the food movement’s system/disparity dilemma.

Food-movement organizations are fluid and have different and changing positions on food-system issues such as GMOs, domestic hunger programs, food aid, supply management, land reform, and trade. Depending on their ideology, political awareness, support base, and funding, food-movement organizations will adopt a range of stances and will consciously (or unconsciously) form alliances with groups and institutions across regime and movement trends. While some organizations are solidly neo-liberal, reformist, progressive, or radical, others are much harder to categorize because they adopt politically divergent positions on different issues (for example, a reformist position on labor, but a radical position on GMOs). Some organizations say one thing, yet do another. Rather than ascribing fixity to organizations, an appreciation of their heterogeneous and fluid political nature, coupled with an analysis of their positions on specific issues, can help identify opportunities for alliance building for food-system change.

As the world’s fuel, financial, and climate crises exacerbate the food crisis, the systemic differences between the food regime and food movements will likely deepen. However, unlike the symbiotic relationship between neo-liberal and reformist trends in the food regime, in which the latter helps to stabilize the food regime following a crisis caused by the former, there is nothing intrinsically stable about the relationship between the
progressive and radical trends that will keep them from splitting under pressure. The fragmentation and segmentation of the U.S. food movement already cedes political ground to the corporate food regime, whose reformist trends are busy co-opting food security and its related terms, among them “community,” “organic,” “local,” and “fair.”

Overcoming the present (and future) divisions within the food movement will require strong alliances and the clarity to distinguish superficial change from structural change. This in turn depends not only on clear vision and practice of the desired changes, but also means making strategic and tactical sense of the matrix of actors, institutions, and projects at work within local-global food politics. The dominant food-movement narrative is not only color-blind, but it also does not distinguish between the neo-liberal/reformist trends in the food regime (of which it is unconsciously a part) and the progressive and radical trends of the food movement itself. The challenge for building a powerful food movement is to reach beyond the dominant (and depoliticizing) food-movement narrative to build strategic political alliances and construct a new narrative. But who should reach; to whom; and on what basis?

Addressing this challenge, Gottlieb and Joshi (2011, 232–33) identify FJ as a key political trend within the U.S. food movement and claim it is facing a “pivotal moment” that requires an “overarching theory of food system change.” They call on FJ to organize existing food groups into a larger social movement, to develop a theory of change, an agenda that is both incremental and structural, and to link to other social movements, worldwide.

We agree with this assessment, and suggest that in addition to its pivotal moment, because it is located between, and in many ways also spans, radical and progressive trends within the food movement, the food-justice movement occupies a “pivotal position” (see Table 1: Food Regime/Food Movement Matrix). The way FJ organizations organize, theorize, set agendas, and build alliances will have a direct influence on the balance of forces that will serve to stabilize, reform, or transform the corporate food regime. Following our Food Regime/Food Movement Matrix, if FJ organizations build reformist alliances, the corporate food regime will be strengthened. If they build radical alliances, the food movement will be strengthened. The former scenario will not lead to regime change, while the latter at least opens the possibility of a strong food movement capable of pushing substantive reforms.

On what basis could these alliances be built? The structural exploitation of resources, markets, and communities—at home and abroad—is foundational to the corporate food regime. Racial disadvantages are structured into the corporate food regime, reproducing a hierarchical social structure into our food systems (Winant 2001). The flood of cheap, unhealthy, and fast food into the void left by the exodus of food retail out-
### Corporate Food Regime vs. U.S. Food Movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLITICS</th>
<th>NEOLIBERAL</th>
<th>REFORMIST</th>
<th>PROGRESSIVE</th>
<th>RADICAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>Food Enterprise</td>
<td>Household Food Security/Anti-hunger</td>
<td>Community Food Security/ Food Justice</td>
<td>Food Justice/ Food Sovereignty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main Institutions</td>
<td>USDA (Vilsak), Farm Bureau, Safeway, Kroger, Wal-Mart, Cargill, Monsanto, ADM, Tyson, big philanthropy capital</td>
<td>USDA (Merrigan), Mainstream Fair Trade, some Slow Food, some Food Policy Councils, medium-sized philanthropy, many food banks &amp; food aid organizations</td>
<td>Many CFS organizations, many Food Policy Councils &amp; youth and food justice movements, Community Supported Agriculture, some farm worker &amp; labor organizations, Alternative Fair Trade, many Slow Food chapters.</td>
<td>The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance, many Food Justice and rights-based movements, Some CFS organizations and Slow Food chapters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Corporate monopoly/ technological fixes/ global markets</td>
<td>Self-regulated corporate development/ food aid</td>
<td>Community empowerment/ right to food/ human rights/ labor rights/</td>
<td>Liberation/Entitlement/ Redistribution/Antriracism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODEL</td>
<td>Overproduction, Corporate consolidation, Unregulated markets and monopolies, Monocultures (including organic), GMOs, Agrofuels, mass global consumption of industrial food</td>
<td>Mainstreaming large, low-end retail expansion into underserved neighborhoods, using public resources to extract surplus from the local economy, channeling of commodity surpluses into food aid programs and school lunch, certification of niche markets (e.g., organic, fair, local, sustainable), maintaining northern agricultural subsidies, “sustainable” roundtables for corporate self-regulation, microcredit, conscious consumerism, dietary health education, reliance upon food stamp and food bank programs to alleviate food insecurity</td>
<td>Agro-ecological local food production, economic support for smallholder farms, urban agriculture, alternative business models and community benefit packages for production, processing &amp; retail, solidarity economies</td>
<td>Agroecological family and community-managed agriculture and food systems, regionally-based food systems, dismantling of corporate agri-foods monopoly power, parity, redistributive land reform, community rights to water &amp; seed, democratization of food and agricultural policy, sustainable livelihoods, protection from overproduction and corporate extraction of food dollars, radical inclusion in organizational decision-making processes</td>
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<p>| Table 1: Food regime/food movement matrix. |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/ Ethnic Dimensions</th>
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<td>Food Enterprise</td>
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<td>Household Food Security/ Anti-hunger</td>
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<td>Food Justice/ Food Sovereignty</td>
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**Racial/ Ethnic Dimensions**

- Exclusion of people of color from access to and ownership of land, credit, and public entitlements; lack of access to healthy, affordable food in “food deserts,” exploitation of immigrant labor along the entire food chain, disparities in prevalence of diet-related diseases, displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples in global south, creation of racial/ethnic tensions, creation of immigration laws in global north targeting people of color.

**Class Dimensions**

- High concentration of oligopoly wealth within food system; marginalization of small, medium, and family farms and of locally-owned food retailers; low-wage farm and food sector jobs; destruction of peasant livelihoods in global south; maintenance of global surplus labor through concentration of wealth and control over productive resources.

**Corporate Food Regime**

- People of color comprise a large portion of beneficiaries of food assistance programs, corporate retail expansion into food deserts provides unstable low wage employment for people of color while precluding the establishment of local minority owned-businesses, failure to address structural racism.

**Corporate Food Regime**

- Practitioners (predominantly white) work to improve access to healthy and affordable food within underserved communities (comprised predominantly of people of color) by providing vegetables, garden space and knowledge; practitioners often express widespread mentality of “bringing good food to others” in efforts to include non-whites in the alternative food movement and invoke essentialist constructions of race/ethnicity; reproduction of racial hegemony through domination of spaces by privileged whites; anti-racist/diversity training provided within some organizations.

**U.S Food Movements**

- Development of local non-white-owned food businesses by removing barriers of structural racism such as commercial and mortgage industry redlining and exclusion of non-whites from access to public resources; transfer of organizational leadership to members of underserved communities; strengthening of economic ties between local minority-owned businesses and minority farmers; legal protection of indigenous and peasant livelihoods in global south.

**U.S Food Movements**

- Higher wages and more stable employment for agricultural and food workers; cooperative ownership structures; ability to participate in and engage in leadership roles dependent on possession of cultural and social capital associated with class privilege.

**U.S Food Movements**

- Progressive redistribution of wealth and control over resources; restoration of economic viability of small and medium-sized farms and food businesses through restructuring of agricultural and food policies; strong labor rights.
lets from low-income communities of color is part of the racialized dispossession affecting immigrants and people of color in both rural and urban areas (Minkoff-Zern et al. 2011). For example, the recent drive by monopoly food retailers to gobble up real estate in underserved urban communities follows on this trend (Holt-Giménez, Wang, and Shattuck 2011). These racialized enclosures are no less structural issues than the wholesale dispossession of peasants occurring as a result of the massive global land grabs exploding across the Global South (Grain 2008). Land itself is one basis for local–global alliance building.

Engaging with the structural aspects of food justice requires addressing race and class in relation to dispossession and control over land, labor, and capital in the food system. For reforms to actually reverse the trends of dispossession and concentration—and lead to transformation—they must be redistributive (Borras 2007). This means that FJ needs to build alliances to address ownership and redistribution over the means of production and reproduction, including credit, land, processing, markets, and retail as well as labor and immigrant rights—all areas of dispossession within the food-value chain of the corporate food regime. The most likely partners for these structural alliances are in local and international food-sovereignty movements and other organizations working within the radical trend of the food movement.

Granted, no amount of fresh produce will solve the underlying socioeconomic problems of chronic unemployment, labor exploitation, crumbling public education, land and real estate speculation, and violence visited upon underserved communities of color. But within a historicized framework of structural racism, the centrality of food to a community’s collective cultural identities provides links between racial identity and activism (Pulido 2000). Food-justice activism is an important social change driver that, if allied with other, radical social movements, could seriously challenge the corporate food regime’s structural inequities.

Solving the food crisis requires dismantling racism and classism in the food system and transforming the food regime. This challenges the food-justice movement to forge alliances that advance equitable and sustainable practices on the ground while mobilizing politically for broad, redistributive reforms. This pivotal praxis may yet produce a new, powerful food movement narrative: the narrative of liberation.

Endnotes

1. These demands have a solid material basis. In West Oakland, California, one of the city’s lowest-income neighborhoods, an estimated $65 million per year is spent on food, $48 million of which “floats” out of the community (People’s Community Market 2009). This amount represents some 1,000 potential jobs paying $45,000 a year. Figures are similarly high for other low-income urban communities in which grocery stores have abandoned the inner city for the suburbs
(Mamen 2007). This is one reason many FJ activists prefer the term “food apartheid” over “food deserts,” as the former provides a more accurate description of the political-economic depth of structural racism in the U.S. food system (Ahmadi 2010; Cook 2010; Workman 2010).

2. For a more extensive, global analysis of the corporate food regime and its relation to the global food movement, see Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011).

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