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## Reviews

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**Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change.** by Robert Gottlieb.  
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Robert Gottlieb's new book, *Environmentalism Unbound*, takes us further down the path on which he started us in *Forcing the Spring* (1993). Like that book, *Environmentalism Unbound* is a combination of theory, cases, and appeal, and like that book it succeeds admirably in achieving certain goals yet falls short in achieving its most ambitious goal—creating a new progressive politics centered on a new kind of environmentalism. At the root of his project is demonstrating how “the mainstream environmentalism that had emerged by the 1970s functioned on the basis of the division between work, product, and environment, whether in terms of policy or the advocacy of consumer, occupational health, and environmental movements” (p. 43), and how to go about re-creating a whole environmental movement.

Gottlieb provides an excellent summary of environmental justice policy and politics in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, Executive Order 12898, Title VI actions, brownfields) and pollution prevention policy (e.g., Massachusetts Toxic Use Reduction Act, Pollution Prevention Act, voluntary greening of industry). In addition, he explores efforts to find a new, third way to control pollution, such as industrial ecology, extended producer responsibility, and design for the environment.

The three cases he selects to illustrate new pathways for an unbounded environmentalism are dry cleaning, janitors and commercial cleaning, and food systems. These case studies are uniformly excellent. He opens his discussion of the dry cleaning industry with a wise caveat during a time when many commentators and policy analysts are advocating more use of consensus based and voluntary approaches. “Voluntarism,” he writes, “as a substitution for public intervention, may in fact mask how industry, sectoral, institutional, and cultural influences can erect barriers against such change” (p. 101). These barriers are often most problematic for small businesses, a difficulty that “may be more reflective of their dependence upon manufacturers and suppliers in providing their products and shaping their processes or as subcontractors to larger businesses” (p. 103). Gottlieb proceeds to sketch the history of the development of the dry cleaning industry as a decentralized business that came to depend on the chlorine-based solvent perchloroethylene, or “perc”.

By the 1990s, however, perc was coming under increased scrutiny as a significant source of environmental risk for those who worked in the dry cleaning business, and for those who lived near such businesses. The perc issue was pushed to the top of the policy agenda by two old fashioned regulatory laws: the Clean Air Act and Superfund. It was provisions of these laws that provided the leverage to force the dry cleaners and chemical industry to consider a move away from perc. The 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments required that regulatory standards be established for 189 hazardous air pollutants. Perc was the first of these pollutants to be reviewed. Furthermore, it was discovered that perc was leaking into soil and groundwater—leading to major Superfund liability concerns for dry cleaners, landlords, and chemical companies. The rise of perc on the regulatory agenda presented an opportunity to shift to new, less toxic alternatives for cleaning. Gottlieb reports that a number of alternatives to solvent based dry cleaning

## Reviews

were available (such as eco-clean and machine wet cleaning), and despite skepticism about these new approaches within industry, the EPA concluded that the dry cleaning industry needed to move away from perc and that financially viable alternatives for this shift existed. In the end, though, Gottlieb concludes that “the absence of any systematic government or industry programs to facilitate a transition represented a significant pollution prevention barrier” (p. 141).

Gottlieb’s connection between race, class, and ethnicity and environmental issues is strikingly clear in his second case: commercial cleaning services. Overall, nearly 1 million people are employed in this field, and these workers are among the lowest paid in the United States. The majority of janitors nationwide are women; there is a high percentage of African Americans working in public sector cleaning; and in certain areas, such as Los Angeles County, Latinos are the majority of private sector janitors. Furthermore, over the last few decades this sector has become increasingly concentrated and cost conscious, contributing to a deskilling of janitorial work. The issue of environmental risk related to cleaning products rose on the agenda due to concern with consumer exposure to household cleansers and indoor air pollution, not occupational exposures of janitors.

A major issue, as in the case of the dry cleaning example, was overcoming the barriers to change to environmentally preferable cleaning products. Governments played a significant role here. At the federal level, President Clinton’s Executive Order 12873, “Federal Acquisition, Recycling and Waste Prevention,” led to some limited changes in federal purchasing, but more impressive were state and local initiatives, like Massachusetts’s Toxics Use Reduction Act and Santa Monica’s (California) Sustainable Cities Program. The latter program established “environmental criteria for purchasing cleaning products and supplies” and instituted collaboration with the janitors in the selection and evaluation of these products. This program was very successful, and it was clear that the empowerment of the workers in the process was crucial to this success. Connecting janitors with cleaner products and helping to re-skill their work and restore their dignity was crucial to the transition to more environmentally sound cleaning.

The final case offers the greatest opportunity for a new environmentalism due to its tremendous reach and the potential to connect sets of previously disparate interests. Low-income urban residents identify food security (food access, food quality, and food price) as a major concern. By reframing food issues around community food security and examining these issues through complete food systems analysis, the significant environmental implications of existing and alternative food systems is clearly demonstrated. As he does in the other cases, Gottlieb offers a concise and informative historical sketch of the changes in the various sectors of the food system over the last half-century: the move toward industrial agricultural production and the decline in family farms; the move toward globalization of the food system; the rising importance of brokers, processors, and manufacturers in the food system (e.g., how McDonald’s Chicken McNuggets and french fries fundamentally changed the chicken and potato sectors of U.S. agriculture); and the significance of food retailers, ranging from supermarket chains to fast food companies, all seeking a standardized product. All of these trends, Gottlieb notes, have had “powerful implications in terms of the increasing disconnect between food and place and its related environmental, economic, and social justice implications” (p. 199). Accompanying this globalization and corporatization of U.S. agriculture were a series of related problems. Despite the abundance and at times overabundance of food, many continued to go hungry. The transition to a fast food, processed food culture meant that the nutrition of food had declined for most (e.g., nearly one-third of vegetable servings for teenagers today are made up of french fries and potato chips). Lastly, this changing food system has led to the rise of genetically modified crops.

A nascent effort to connect environmental, community development, sustainable agriculture, anti-hunger, and food system analysts was launched in the mid 1990s to influence the upcoming renewal of the Farm Bill. The efforts never fully gelled, in part due to the Republican victories of 1994, which put many of the coalition groups in a defensive posture. How might these various threads be connected? Organic and sustainable agriculture offer one option. Here Gottlieb focuses his criticism on the disconnect between organic agriculture and those who might not be able to afford such food. Oddly absent is any discussion of the increasing corporatization and globalization of organic agriculture, often removing its connection to place and seasonality. A further option focuses on growing food in the city, through community gardens and school gardens. Such gardens can connect urban dwellers with their food, greatly contributing to food security. Despite some positive developments, Gottlieb concludes that “the sum of the new food movements still remains less than their parts” (p. 271).

Gottlieb brings us great stories, helping us to see environmentalism where we hadn’t before and continuing to explore and to push the boundary between environmentalism and occupational safety and health, between environmentalism and a more just society. My main criticism of Gottlieb is his failure to engage mainstream environmental groups and the new conservation movement in any meaningful way. Such engagement is crucial for someone seeking to build a broader environmentalism at the core of a new progressive politics. As in *Forcing the Spring*, Gottlieb does little in *Environmentalism Unbound* to try to convince traditional environmentalists to follow

## Reviews

his new pathway.

Indeed, at times he seems dismissive of the accomplishments or views of his erstwhile allies. For instance, in response to the Republican victories in the 1994 elections, he suggests that “the opportunities presented by environmental justice and pollution prevention emerged as perhaps the only route for a renewed environmentalism” (p. 51). This is certainly news to those engaged in conservation politics, including mainstream groups that convinced the Clinton Administration to protect millions of acres via the Antiquities Act, and potentially millions of roadless acres in national forests through administrative action, or such non-mainstream groups as the Center for Biological Diversity, which used the Endangered Species Act and the courts to achieve significant successes in protecting species and habitat.

Most fundamentally, from the perspective of mainstream environmental groups, Gottlieb never clearly explains to these groups and their followers why they should broaden their vision and, more significantly, join in a new progressive politics. For instance, in his discussion of food politics he writes, “Mainstream environmental groups, while not opposing the initiative, remained aloof and never directly associated with the community food security campaign. The mainstream environmentalist position was focused on environmental impacts from the growing of the food, not what happened to the food itself” (p. 232). This passage is indicative of this fundamental problem—Gottlieb is quick to criticize mainstream environmental groups, but he never offers a full political analysis of the situation. What support did the food security groups give to environmental groups on other issues, such as non-point water pollution or the Endangered Species Act? In other words, how much did anti-hunger advocates care about how food was produced? More broadly, what is to be gained by mainstream environmental groups by joining a larger progressive political coalition? What is to be lost? What are the tradeoffs in a move from interest group politics to social movement politics? And how might this change happen, especially in a country that has moved to the right since 1980?

I think that Gottlieb downplays and underestimates the importance of mainstream groups in creating and defending the current regulatory framework, as problematic as it may be. These groups and this framework often open the policy process for others due to the leverage these laws provide (as described above in the perc case). Neither does he explore the real tensions that can sometimes exist between labor and environmentalists over issues like protecting endangered species or opposing mining or energy development.

Gottlieb also ignores a segment of the environmental movement that could be very open to his ideas, the new conservation movement. This movement is often just as critical of the mainstream environmental groups as he is, and like the anti-toxics groups he focuses on, these groups are often more confrontational than the mainstream groups. Why no discussion of the tree sitters or road blockers or legal monkey-wrenchers? In his preface, Gottlieb asks, “Can environmentalism become part of the new regionalism?” (p. xv). But parts of environmentalism, especially those associated with the new conservation movement, have been interested in varieties of regionalism for over a decade—bioregionalism, ecosystem management, ecoregions and biogeography, sense of place. A clear example of this opportunity to connect is the rise of the new group Wild Farm Alliance, which seeks to bridge the gap between stewardship farming and wildlands conservation. Similarly, at last winter’s Northeast Organic Farming Association-Vermont conference the theme was “farming as if nature mattered.” Why not connect these moves toward nature conservation to the larger food system alliance Gottlieb seeks to build?

Overall, Gottlieb continues to be the best guide to this arena of environmental policy, areas once considered on the fringe or not considered part of environmental policy at all. He offers an excellent and convincing case for a new kind of environmentalism when viewed from the progressive perspective. The central question is: What next? As noted above, Gottlieb needs to outline a rationale for why this new kind of environmentalism is necessary from the perspective of mainstream environmentalism. Furthermore, we need more ideas about what a future environmentalism would look like. Gottlieb rightfully argues that we need to be concerned with more than just the local; we need to be concerned with the global as well. He offers ideas such as a “global minimum wage, a baseline of environmental requirements, or global debt relief” (p. 277). After a book so tied to real cases and issues, these ideas strike me as vague and abstract. What of building on connections between consumers and producers, like Fair Trade coffee? Can this serve as a model that could be expanded? What of international community-to-community relationships?

One thing is clear. The importance of what Gottlieb discusses, the interconnections of global corporations, global food supplies, global justice, and global work conditions, all tied to local and global environmental conditions, has only been magnified by the events of September 11th. As environmentalism seeks to find its way in this new century, I’ll look forward to Robert Gottlieb’s next book to help us find that new direction.