

**Sbicca, Joshua. 2018. *Food justice now! Deepening the roots of social struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 978-1-5179-0401-2. Paperback (\$27.00), eBook (\$15.49)**

**Reviewed by Sarah Rachelle Renkert.** Email: [sarahrenkert "at" email.arizona.edu](mailto:sarahrenkert@email.arizona.edu)

Joshua Sbicca's book, *Food justice now! Deepening the roots of social struggle*, is a theoretically rigorous call to action, offering a framework which challenges the underlying structures creating and upholding injustices in the U.S. food system. Using historical examples and ethnographically rich case studies of diverse food activists, Sbicca draws on James and Grace Lee Boggs' conceptual use of dialectical humanism. He first identifies the historical roots of struggle against oppression in the food system, while also envisioning multiple paths for creatively moving towards greater social equity. The application of dialectical humanism is particularly useful because it leaves spaces for productive tensions to exist within the food movement itself, where differences and disagreements between food activist groups can create dialogue and action that ultimately leads to greater social justice.

One of the key strengths of this book is that Sbicca does not pretend to provide simple answers for achieving food justice. He uses his case study approach to demonstrate that isolated solutions, such as more Farmers' Markets or less pesticides, are not enough. Instead, food justice work must take place across scales and have intersectional ties. For example, in Chapter 2, the readers learn about Planting Justice, a non-profit organization in Oakland, California who hires former prisoners, who are primarily people of color, to plant gardens. As an organization, Planting Justice demonstrates how food can be used as medium for contesting racial oppression at the grassroots level, by challenging the racialized inequalities produced by the prison-industrial complex. This is a form of food justice that intentionally takes action outside of the political system and outside traditional economic channels. This is necessary because it is these same institutions which not only create many of the structures leading to imprisonment, but that also seek to ensure that formally incarcerated individuals are unable to reintegrate into everyday life.

In Chapter 3, Sbicca outlines his fieldwork with the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770, a labor union that works towards food justice efforts at a different scale. In its fight for labor rights, UFCW 770 has joined forces with other organizations to fight major corporations, such as Walmart, to improve the lived realities of workers, such as increasing wages and offering better working conditions. Through confrontational collective action, labor unions such as UFCW 770 work to reshape the economic and political system, challenging corporate practices and advocating for political protections for laborers. Ultimately, moving towards food justice requires the dialectical engagement of food-based action which seeks to overthrow systems of oppression across scales, including at the grassroots, combating the injustice produced by a neoliberal economy and political change.

While Sbicca's structural approach to create change within the food system is convincing, it remains a bit unclear as to why the term "food justice" is used, rather than "social justice." Sbicca works towards answering this question when he says that "food justice is the *sine qua non* that connects activists across a range of interests and stretches the frontiers of food politics precisely because of the resonance of food justice in broader social struggles" (p.1). But what does using the term "food justice" provide, that "social justice" does not? What excites people about food issues? What is it about food which produces activism? If folkloric notions such as "everyone eats", "gathering around food", or the potential of food as a medium of "cross-cultural exchange" (p.141) are not a part of the food justice equation, as suggested by Sbicca, why build a conceptual argument around "food justice" rather than "social justice"? Ultimately, Sbicca's case studies makes clear that organizing around inequities within the food system has the potential to challenge labor exploitation, racism, social hierarchies, political abuses, and the pitfalls of neoliberal capitalism within the broader structures which produce and uphold oppression (although it should be noted that gender is relatively absent from Sbicca's analysis). Nonetheless, it appears that an open debate remains as to whether the compartmentalization of justices, such as "food justice". is a useful strategy for moving towards social justice.

Overall, *Food justice now!* makes an important contribution to the critical food studies literature, with broad appeal to both academics and activists. Sbicca's use of dialectical humanism opens the door for conversations within the food activist movement, where food advocates may be able to recognize the potential

within the various "waves" of food activism, while seriously considering how a justice-oriented framework should be applied to all actions. Undergraduate and graduate students in the applied and activist social sciences will benefit from this book's seamless combination of theory and praxis. However for undergraduates, a crash course may be needed first in the theoretical application of dialectics, moving from G.W.F. Hegel to James and Grace Lee Boggs, and Antonio Gramsci's approach to conjunctural analysis and hegemony. Overall, Sbicca's research makes clear that it is going to take intersectional efforts across scales and actors to create a food system based on "new hegemonies predicated on human rights and social justice" (p.15).

\*\*\*

Sarah Rachelle Renkert is a PhD student in the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona.