"FIRST FEED THE FACE": ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY

Robert Gottlieb* and Andrew Fisher

"First feed the face, then talk right or wrong,
For even honest folks may act like sinners,
Unless they get their customary dinners"

Bertolt Brecht, Threepenny Opera

In recent years, parallel, though distinctive, social movements from the inner cities and in rural communities have emerged to play significant roles in their areas of concern. One of these movements, environmental justice, has received growing attention from policymakers, the media, and other environmentalists. This attention has taken the form of a federal executive order, many published commentaries, and widespread adoption of at least the rhetoric and occasionally the substance of the environmental justice agenda by mainstream environmental organizations. The second key social movement discussed here involves the set of advocacy groups broadly concerned with "community food security;" that is, food system-based issues of hunger, access, quality, and availability, as well as related questions of how food is grown, processed or "manufactured," and distributed. While food security advocacy has received less visibility than its environmental justice counterpart, both movements have been associated with the civil rights discourse of the 1960s and have assumed a common consideration of questions of daily life. Still, the absence of any explicit linkage between the two movements is revealing of the problem of discourse; that is, the ways in which movements are defined and agendas are implemented and set. The opportunity for a broader and linked community development or "empowerment" based discourse,

* Department of Urban Planning, University of California at Los Angeles

© 1996 Editorial Board of Antipode.
Published by Blackwell Publishers, 238 Main Street, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA, and 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF UK.
however, offers a new framework for future action and coalitions involving both sets of movements.

Environmental Justice and Civil Rights

The use of the term "environmental justice" to identify movements for social and environmental change is of recent origins, though a wide variety of historical movements have sought to address the environmental consequences of urban and industrial life (Melosi, 1980; Gottlieb, 1993; Environmental History Review, 1994). Several analysts have argued that the contemporary origins of environmental justice movements can be traced to the early 1980s. In this interpretation, the threshold event for this movement involved protests against a proposed siting of a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill in a predominantly African-American, rural North Carolina county. This event, in turn, provided direct lineage (given the participation in North Carolina of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ) to the 1987 release of the United Church of Christ publication, Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States, identifying the racial and discriminatory dimensions of hazardous facility location (United Church of Christ, 1987). This document in turn has been described as pivotal to the conception and focus of environmental justice as a civil rights issue (Brown, 1993).

This perspective on environmental justice associates the movement with the evolution of grassroots, neighborhood-based anti-toxics groups in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s. These groups arose initially out of a concern that public policy addressing the hazardous substances used and the wastes generated by industry was discriminatory in its outcomes, thus adding a dimension of environmental risk to the range of social and economic inequities and burdens already experienced by the communities affected by such policies (Montague, 1989; Heiman, 1990). Although many of the anti-toxics groups, including those that emerged in inner city or rural communities of color, broadened their agendas to extend beyond this "equity" argument, the strong identification of environmental justice with challenging discriminatory policies heightened the civil rights frame of reference for the movement (Bullard, 1994).

The civil rights/environmental justice association has also emerged as a major theme of policy initiatives at the federal and state levels. The United States Environmental Protection Agency, for example, has defined environmental justice as the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income or education level with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies" (USEPA, 1994). President Clinton's Executive Order on Environmental Justice, issued on February
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY 195

11, 1994, specifically associated environmental justice with federal agencies "identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs, policies and activities on minority populations and low income populations in the United States." Similarly, the Department of Energy, in announcing its "Environmental Justice" policy in 1994, defined its approach as promoting "non-discrimination among minority, American Indian, and low income communities." (United States Department of Energy, 1994)

This concept of environmental justice as efforts to end policy-linked "discriminatory" action has been criticized by environmental justice activists who have sought to link "environmental justice" with broader "social justice" and community development concerns. For example, the approach taken by the Environmental Justice Committee of the California Comparative Risk Project is instructive in this regard. Initiated by the California Environmental Protection Agency (CALEPA), and composed of a broad array of community activists and academic and policy analysts, the Environmental Justice Committee sharply criticized CALEPA's use of the term "environmental equity" as signifying more equitably "sharing" rather than "eliminating" or "reducing" risks. Instead, the Environmental Justice Committee identified both pollution prevention and public participation as central tenets of an environmental justice approach. Similarly, the "Principles" adopted by the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit of 1991 included pollution prevention and public participation as central to its environmental justice perspective, as well as respect for the land, self determination, eliminating workplace hazards, and providing quality health care, among other positions (People of Color Summit, 1991).

The contrast between a broad environmental justice perspective posing the need for social and economic change in urban and industrial settings and the focus on "discrimination" (particularly in terms of siting decisions) in policy settings is also manifested in the evolution of a number of the local environmental justice groups. The Los Angeles-based Concerned Citizens of South Central, for example, emerged as a neighborhood-based, ad hoc group opposing a proposed 1600-ton-per-day solid waste incinerator. Effectively allying with other community-based and city-wide environmental organizations opposed to the city's incineration strategy, Concerned Citizens helped stop the incinerator and subsequently influenced the city to adopt a more aggressive recycling program. Yet the ability of the group to more permanently establish itself became linked to an expansion of its agenda beyond its initial ad hoc, risk discrimination focus. Though environmental themes still figured prominently in the organization's subsequent activities (e.g., identifying and remediating exposures to lead paint in the housing stock within the
neighborhood), Concerned Citizens also became involved in issues of community and economic development as central neighborhood needs. Even where the group developed a program with a potential environmental theme, such as its community garden project, it defined such efforts as “community development” programs. The experience of this prominent environmental justice organization has been duplicated by a number of inner city-based groups that have recast themselves beyond the initial campaigns that were instrumental in their formation (Blumberg & Gottlieb, 1989; Pulido, 1994). Such an approach is considered crucial to the viability of such groups, given the embedded, and often intersecting, problems of jobs, housing, community economic development, urban landscapes, and, as discussed below, food security.

Food Security Perspectives

Parallel to the evolution of environmental justice groups towards more inclusive agendas has been the recognition by various food system-related advocates, particularly those addressing inner city hunger issues, of the need to develop a broader-based food security perspective. First elaborated in the international development literature, food security has been defined as “all persons obtaining, at all times, a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non-emergency sources” (Fisher & Gottlieb, 1995:2; Sen, 1993). Food security’s domestic origins can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s civil rights orientation of the anti-hunger groups of that period, as well as civil rights and black power organizations concerned with such problems as adequate nutrition for inner city children. Similar to environmental justice, food security perspectives have become necessarily broad-based, addressing a wide range of social concerns associated with the food system.

Along these lines, food security as a framework for action evolved considerably in recent years. As opposed to the concept of hunger, which measures an existing condition of unfulfilled needs and is defined in terms of an individual’s insecurity, food security has come to represent a community-based and prevention-oriented framework. It seeks to evaluate the existence of resources, both community and personal (the “basket of strategies” for sustainable livelihood, as Chambers [1988] puts it) to provide an individual with adequate, acceptable food. Contemporary concepts of food security take into account such factors as income, transportation, storage and cooking facilities, food prices, nutritious and culturally acceptable food choices, food safety and other environmental hazards, questions of ownership, production and processing methods, and the existence of and access to adequate, local, non-emergency food sources. The community or empowerment framework for food security can also be seen in terms of such programs and advocacy as direct
marketing strategies (e.g., farmers’ markets or community supported agriculture (CSAs)), urban greening and food production initiatives such as community gardens, edible landscape plantings, urban river restoration, urban forestry programs, economic development initiatives (e.g., small food processing businesses such as Justice Bakery in Los Angeles), and food retail industry initiatives (e.g., joint ventures between community groups and supermarkets) (Cohen & Burt, 1989; Ashman, et al., 1993).

Despite the broad reach and appeal of the concept of food security, however, most food-system related advocacy during the past decade has been focused narrowly on separate themes and policies and has failed to establish the linkages implicit in the concept. Sustainable agriculture advocates, for example, have been most concerned about grower-related pesticide use, soil erosion, price supports that lead to unsustainable grower practices, and the contamination of the land and surrounding environments. Populist/family farm advocates have raised issues of the globalization of the food system and its uneven impacts on farmers, and the need for rural development support programs. Anti-hunger advocates have focused on the significant erosion of social programs, including the food safety net, and the measurable growth of food insecurity indicators. Mainstream environmentalists have worried about loss of farmland to urban development, while environmental justice advocates have focused on pesticide hazards for farmworkers or for low income, rural communities of color (Allen & Sachs, 1993; Allen, 1994).

The separation of issues and constituencies has also been reflected in various legislative coalitions, such as those that have emerged during the Farm Bill process. Reauthorized every five years, the Farm Bill has become in recent years an important vehicle, not only for agriculture and hunger policy, but also for environmental policy. These new dimensions to the Farm Bill process can be attributed to the changing political landscape of the 1980s and 1990s, which has witnessed a relative decline of farmers as a political force at the same time that environmental agendas have been on the ascendant (Youngberg, et al., 1993). With Republican majorities assuming power in Congress in 1994, both environmental protection and farm subsidy approaches have become problematic.

Farm Bill-related coalition building is, of course, not a new phenomenon, and can be traced to the political alliances formed around the development of the food assistance programs of the 1930s (Benedict, 1953). The rise of the sustainable agriculture movement’s environmental and consumer-based alliances in the debates over the 1985 and 1990 farm bills extended that coalition building process, though it fell short of establishing crucial links between sustainable agriculture and advocates for the urban poor, and, in a broader context, failed to bring the agendas of environmental justice and community food security into the Farm Bill process (Strauss, 1994).

The decline in numbers and importance of farmers as a political force
has also been a factor in the ability of new constituencies, broadly linked to the sustainable agriculture movement, to emerge as a significant force in their own right. By establishing that new strategic bloc around a sustainable agriculture perspective, consumer and mainstream environmental organizations especially became powerful players in the farm bill debates. Their alliance with progressive or populist small farm or family farm interests, primarily from the Midwest, further advanced the sustainable agriculture agenda in the 1981 and, more notably, in the 1985 and 1990 legislative debates over agriculture policy. Many of the victories of this new complex of interests, such as the National Organic Products Act and the Conservation Reserve Programs in the 1990 Farm Bill (Center for Resource Economics, 1991), meant that mainstream environmental agendas were going to be considered in the numerous Farm Bill-related trade-offs and deals (Zinn & Carr, 1988; Youngberg, et al., 1993).

However, the rise of consumer and mainstream environmental agendas as part of the Farm Bill debates was also accompanied by disagreements that emerged between progressive farming factions and representatives of the urban poor, as well as the notable absence of both environmental justice and community food security perspectives within the coalition-building process. Environmental agendas, for example, were defined as farm-specific (e.g., soil conservation, wetlands protection, pesticide contamination of natural environments) or consumer/food safety-related (pesticide residues on produce), but not in terms of the overall food system where environmental justice considerations (inadequate nutrition, access problems, land use, "green" community development) would more directly come into play (Clancy, 1993; Allen, 1994).

During the current, 1995 Farm Bill process, a new effort has emerged among constituencies and advocates to identify community food security as the conceptual basis for advocating changes in the food system. This coalition-building process has brought together diverse players, including urban food interests, sustainable agriculture advocates, farmland preservation groups, and rural development advocates. Significantly absent from the process, as of January 1995, have been both mainstream environmentalists and environmental justice advocates.5

That absence, however, partly reflects the preoccupation of the environmental groups with their own agendas that are seen as distinct from the food security discourse. Mainstream environmentalists have been primarily preoccupied with protecting established regulatory and legislative environmental frameworks against conservative Congressional challenges. Environmental justice groups, on the other hand, have tended to divide between those focused on a national agenda with institution and policy building objectives (where civil rights and risk discrimination issues have figured prominently in efforts to define such entities as EPA's Office of Environmental Justice) and local groups who have sought to become more rooted in community development questions as a matter of
their own survival and growth. However, the local groups, while extending their efforts beyond a risk discrimination focus, have only just begun the process of defining their environmental justice perspective within the broader patterns of urban and industrial life (Gottlieb, 1993).

The Community Food Security Empowerment Act

The effort to establish new community food security coalitions, and, in particular, the initial drafting of a Community Food Security Empowerment Act as part of the 1995 Farm bill (an effort initiated at an August 1994 planning meeting hosted by the Hartford Food System) provides a direct and strategic entry point for establishing environmental (specifically environmental justice) and food security linkage. (Community Food Security Coalition, 1994) The proposed federal Community Food Security Empowerment Act (endorsed, as of September 1995, by more than 125 anti-hunger and sustainable agriculture organizations, among other groups), contains the following provisions that have strong environmental justice implications:

- Food Security Planning:
  Establishing mechanisms at the regional level, such as Food Policy Councils, to address the range of food system issues experienced in urban settings, particularly in inner city communities.

- Direct Marketing:
  Programs, such as Farmers' Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), provide opportunities to establish markets for locally grown agricultural products, with such benefits as reduced pesticide use, reduced energy use and decreased packaging requirements. Direct marketing also improves nutrition in inner cities and can create important cultural links such as minority farmer to minority consumer relationships.

- Community Food Production:
  These include community gardens, community-based food processing ventures, and other programs designed to strengthen urban food-related enterprises. These, in turn, provide multiple benefits, including community greening, job creation, community empowerment, and nutrition education.

- Farmland Preservation
  Farmland preservation programs, first elaborated in the 1981 Farm bill, can be designed to accomplish both regional food security and urban land use objectives.

- Community Development
  Community development initiatives (e.g., empowerment zone activities) could be linked directly to community food security type projects
(farmers’ markets, community gardens, new food access-related transportation projects, food processing enterprises, etc.). Efforts to relocate supermarkets in inner city areas through joint venture arrangements with community groups represent another empowerment strategy.

More broadly stated, food system issues are significantly, though not exclusively, environmental questions. The globalization of the food system and the influences it has had on particular actors within the system (farmers, marketing, retail, etc.) has created major environmental as well as equity or “justice” impacts. This includes the way food is grown, the distance it travels to reach its final end market, the nature of the food product (or its durability, as Friedmann describes it) and what food is available or accessible (Friedmann, 1994; Koc, 1994) Each of those food system elements contain an environmental core (e.g., production hazards, land use considerations, public health aspects, etc.) as well as broader social questions (community access and control of a production system; sustainable development; economic security) that have also become central environmental justice considerations. A food security agenda seeks to address those questions (the distance/durability factors) in part by offering a counter paradigm (what Friedmann (1993) calls locality and seasonality, or Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson (1994) define as a “regional foodshed” approach). Further, this alternative food system or “food regime” represents significant environmental (reduced hazards, urban greening, etc.) and “justice” benefits (improved diet, greater community control over resources, etc).

The initiatives described above, as part of the Community Food Security Empowerment Act, seek to establish the basis for that new type of food regime, but, in doing so, have not yet assumed an environmental justice language, despite the powerful environmental justice implications embedded in the locality/seasonality approach. And while environmental justice groups would be natural allies in pursuing such initiatives, most of the community groups, while seeking to expand their social justice agendas, have been limited in extending their environmental discourse beyond the confines of the civil rights/risk discrimination approach.

It is important to note that, despite the absence of any significant connection in the current food security campaign, the prospects for alliance are still available and remain compelling in terms of the kinds of issues that have been raised. An organization such as Earth Island Institute, with its “urban habitat” and community development concerns, for example, represents an important example of a kind of “bridge” group linking environmental justice and food security. At the same time, environmental justice groups, such as Concerned Citizens of South Central and Mothers of East L.A., have discovered that food security questions
have figured prominently in the community needs assessment feedback they've received. (Ashman, et al. 1993) Ultimately, community food security advocacy could provide an opportunity to both expand the language of environmental justice (to include what "we consume" and what gets grown as well as where we "live, work, and play") and bring the potentially unifying concerns of environmental justice to the often fragmented and conflicted process of linking sustainable agriculture, small farm, and urban anti-hunger advocates.

Notes

1. The Warren County events were also notable in that the initial link made by residents with the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice was based on the long-standing civil rights rather than environmental involvement of the Commission and its then director Rev. Leon White, who knew little about the technical and environmental policy questions at stake. See Lee 1992; Freudenberg 1984.
2. The timing of the Executive Order was designed to coincide with a national conference on environmental justice organized by the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences to demonstrate White House interest and visibility on the issue. However, conference participants criticized the Executive Order (and its timing) as a political device which did not sufficiently reach beyond the equity or disproportionality argument associated with it. See Clinton 1994.
3. One of the authors (Robert Gottlieb) was a participant in the Environmental Justice Committee of the California Comparative Risk Project. See, California Comparative Risk Project 1994.
4. Interestingly, Concerned Citizens has associated itself with the development of a Los Angeles Community Food Security Coalition, an approach described later in this article. Both authors have also been directly involved in this coalition effort.
5. Among the 35 participants who met on August 25, 1994 in Chicago to initiate the process of drafting a new food security act, there was no specific environmental representation. See, Community Food Security Coalition 1994.

References

Allen, P. (1994) The Human Face of Sustainable Agriculture: Adding People to the Environmental Agenda. Issue Paper No. 4, Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, University of California, Santa Cruz


Montague P. (1989) What we must do—A grassroots offensive against toxics in the '90s. The Workbook 14:90–113


