

After the White House Garden: Food Justice in the Age of Trump

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Introduction: The White House Garden and the Good Food Movement

In October of 2016, one month before Donald Trump won a surprise victory in the United States Electoral College, First Lady Michelle Obama announced a number of measures to protect and maintain her famed White House vegetable garden. Initially constructed back in 2009, the garden had been expanded to include a larger seating area and a prominent new archway, as a combination of wood, stone, steel, and cement materials were used to reinforce the construction. Together with \$2.5 million in newly secured private funding, as well as an upkeep agreement with the National Park Service, the developments strongly suggested (although did not guarantee) that the garden would remain a permanent fixture of the White House grounds. “I take great pride in knowing that this little garden will live on as a symbol of the hopes and dreams we all hold of growing a healthier nation for our children,” Mrs. Obama was quoted as saying.¹

In many ways, the White House garden encapsulated central debates that occupied the “good food movement” throughout the course of the Obama administration. In its early

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1. Helena Bottemiller Evich, *Michelle Obama sets her garden in stone*, POLITICO (Oct. 5, 2016), <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/michelle-obama-garden-changes-white-house-229204>.

days, the garden's establishment proved an exciting rally cry for alternative food advocates, many of whom expected it would kickstart a broader conversation about the health and sustainability of our food system. Writing an open letter to the next "Farmer in Chief" prior to the 2008 election, prominent food journalist Michael Pollan specifically called for the creation of a White House garden, which he hoped would inspire the planting of school and home Victory Gardens and offer "a way to enlist Americans, in body as well as mind, in the work of feeding themselves and changing the food system."²

At the same time, the garden also became a flashpoint for conservative backlash against the so-called "nanny state" tendencies of the Obama years. This was particularly the case after Michelle Obama launched the "Let's Move!" initiative to combat childhood obesity, along with her related forays into improving school nutrition standards. As the Texas Congressman Ted Poe argued when he introduced a bill that pushed back against USDA school food regulations: "The federal food police need to stay out of our schools."³

And from yet another perspective, for many urban food movement activists who described their work in the language of food *justice*, the White House garden proved a source of deep ambivalence. Its symbolic power seemed to offer a vote of confidence for the types of non-profit, community-based programs they had been operating for years – using agriculture and cooking to promote community health and build grassroots power in historically marginalized low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. As time progressed, however, a skeptical cynicism set in for many food justice advocates, as the grassroots authenticity and overall efficacy of the Obama-led initiatives were called into question. Did these programs really

2. Michael Pollan, *Farmer in Chief*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 9, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/magazine/12policy-t.html>.

3. See e.g. Christopher Beam, *Organic Panic*, SLATE (June 4, 2009), www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2009/06/organic_panic.html; Peter Sullivan, *Bill to keep 'federal food police' out of schools introduced*, THE HILL (Feb. 13, 2015), <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/232744-gop-lawmaker-keep-food-police-off-school-bake-sales>.

promote systemic change, or did they actually encourage a style of individualized thinking that blamed victims of food injustice for their own predicament?⁴ Did the Obama administration really offer a challenge to the corporate food industry, or did it instead offer an example of neoliberal corporate co-optation at its worst?⁵ Did garden-based learning programs across the country truly tackle the structural economic and environmental barriers at the root of nutritional inequity, or did they distract from the real work of building effective social movements and enacting progressive policy change?

To return to the steel and cement reinforcements at the White House garden – what exactly was cemented in place, to be (hopefully) protected from the potentially undermining influence of the new fast-food aficionado in chief?

Community Based Food Justice

In terms of acute threats to public health, it is clear that the Trump administration could do significant damage by violating basic civil liberties, as well as by creating large holes in the existing (if inadequate) social safety net. Specifically, these issues may arise through initiatives that include cutting food assistance and nutrition programs, reducing affordable health care access, and punishing immigrant families, in addition to efforts that reshape regulations in a way that hinders food safety, weakens labor rights, and diminishes the ecological sustainability and resilience of the food system.⁶ Forceful and timely responses to these threats must be undertaken in the years ahead, and there are a host of anti-poverty, immigrant rights, environmental, labor and other advocacy groups that must be

4. SEE JULIE GUTHMAN, *WEIGHING IN: OBESITY, FOOD JUSTICE, AND THE LIMITS OF CAPITALISM* 2-5 (2011).

5. Justin Sean Myers and Joshua Sbicca, *Bridging Good Food and Good Jobs: From Secession to Confrontation Within Alternative Food Movement Politics*, 61 *GEOFORUM* 17-26 (2015); Michael Pollan, *Big Food Strikes Back*, *THE N.Y. TIMES* (Oct. 5, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/09/magazine/obama-administration-big-food-policy.html?_r=0.

6. See Nevin Cohen et al., *Food Justice in the Trump Age: Priorities for NYC Advocates*, CUNY URBAN FOOD POL'Y INST. (Dec. 10, 2016), www.cunyurbanfoodpolicy.org/news/2016/12/12/food-justice-in-the-trump-age-priorities-for-nyc-advocates.

supported in their efforts.

If the “good food movement” is to play a productive role in this resistance, it is my contention that the insights and organizing perspectives of the community-based food justice movement should be a driving force. Over the course of at least the last decade, this loosely networked constellation of activists, organizations and programs has championed many of the same general strategies that are popular in the broader food movement – from building gardens, to providing nutrition education, to improving access to healthy foods in under-resourced urban neighborhoods. What sets the community-based food justice approach apart, however, is its more incisive focus on racial and economic inequality; its commitment to building programmatic leadership from within low-income communities of color; its development of partnerships with allied social justice movements across the urban-rural divide; and its broader theory of change that highlights food’s potential as a strategic entry point for building grassroots power, catalyzing community development, and effecting social change.⁷

The good news for those activists who use food as a platform for community organizing is that there will remain opportunities to persist. This partly emerges from the fact that federal support for community food programs has never been particularly strong. The USDA’s Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, for instance, has been providing grants to non-profits for entrepreneurial community food and planning initiatives since 1996, and has given out an average of \$5 million annually since 2012.⁸ Similarly, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative was created by the Obama administration to improve healthy food access in under-resourced neighborhoods and is now run jointly by the USDA, Treasury, and Health and Human Services. In 2016, the initiative awarded approximately

7. SEE GARRETT BROAD, *MORE THAN JUST FOOD: FOOD JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY CHANGE* (2016); See Madsen, *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, class, and Sustainability* MIT (2011), <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/cultivating-food-justice>.

8. Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, USDA (2016), <https://nifa.usda.gov/program/community-food-projects-competitive-grant-program-cfpcgp>.

\$7.4 million in new grants to 11 different projects.⁹ In recent years, a number of small federal grants have also come through the Environmental Protection Agency, generally awarded to community food projects that demonstrate a connection to climate change mitigation and education.¹⁰

Early returns from the Trump administration suggest that these types of programs could be on the chopping block and it is unlikely that any new programs in this vein will be developed. Though major cuts would present a significant setback to local organizers, there remains a possibility that some community food projects could be spared from a Trump administration purge. This shred of optimism emerges from the fact that community food projects tend to reflect a long-standing bipartisan consensus in the United States that valorizes the possibility of community-based action to overcome inequality of outcome. Indeed, many conservatives who decry federal intervention on school nutrition standards actually like the idea of entrepreneurial efforts that improve local nutrition environments. For food justice advocates, the opportunity to work at the local level is aligned with their preferred style of participatory organizing and community problem-solving. This is not to say that conservatives agree with the community organizer's worldview, the latter of which highlights how the legacy and ongoing reality of racialized economic discrimination makes certain communities subject to generations of food and environmental injustice. But a good number of those community organizers – as well as their local constituents – have some paradoxical commonalities with limited government conservatives, having long ago given up on the dream that the federal government would one day intervene to fully remedy their predicament. In the past, social justice activists have found creative ways to navigate these contradictory community

9. Office of Community Services, *Healthy Food Financing Initiative*, HHS (2017), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/programs/community-economic-development/healthy-food-financing>.

10. See *Environmental Justice Grants, Funding and Technical Assistance*, EPA (2017), <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-grants-funding-and-technical-assistance>

dynamics and they are likely to continue to do so in the future.¹¹

The local community remains limited, of course, as a site for political and economic change. For this reason, community-based food activism has often been critiqued from the left, especially by those who argue that too much time and money has been spent developing cooking and gardening projects that are relatively superficial and frequently administered by affluent whites from outside of the community. Yet, the community's enduring ability to serve as a space for experimentation, relationship-building, and consciousness-raising suggests that it should not be dismissed outright, but rather cultivated to perform at the best of its potential. The question for the community-based food justice movement, in the age of Trump and beyond, is how can it best make progress toward its social transformation goals?

Recommendations for Strategic Action

Grassroots people-power remains a hallmark of the community-based food justice approach, but the ability to pay living wages to educators and organizers, to provide incentives for youth participants, and to build community institutions that contribute to local economic development are all central to sustaining that grassroots power for the long-term. Especially in the face of a hostile federal government, those committed to food justice must work hard to develop and expand projects and programs that are fiscally sound in their approach, as well as demonstrably effective with respect to achieving their educational, organizing, and advocacy goals.

Community-based food justice activists compete for a limited pool of fiscal resources, a pool that is not always allocated on the basis of organizational merit or community need. The resources available to support non-profits in this domain generally come from three main areas – 1) public funding, including modest federal support, state and municipal grants, and through partnerships with public universities; 2)

11. See Broad, *supra* note 7.

private funding, including from foundations, corporations, private universities, and individual donors; and 3) through self-generated revenue, commonly derived via the establishment of food-focused social enterprises under a non-profit structure. Often following the example of Michelle Obama and the impassioned calls of garden advocates like Michael Pollan and Alice Watters, recent years have seen a significant amount of money spent to create food and garden-based programs in schools and community spaces across the nation. After a season or two of harvest, however, many of them go fallow, perhaps due to a lack of long-term administrative and financial support, or due to a lack of integration into the culture of the community in which they were established.¹²

The takeaway is that community-based food justice organizers and their supporters in law and policy must proactively articulate and demonstrate what makes for successful programs, and then communicate that message to funders, donors, and policymakers at multiple levels of society and government. This means embracing a culture of process and goal-oriented evaluation – bolstered by participatory partnerships with allied professionals and researchers – and from there, having a willingness to shift aspects of strategy when research suggests they could be more effective. There are many opportunities, for instance, for community food practitioners to embrace new technological innovations that could improve their agricultural productivity, including those that are integrated into urban design and architecture.¹³ There are also significant opportunities to encourage social innovations that improve economic viability, particularly efforts that lead to community acquisition of land and property in the face of encroaching real estate development and gentrification.¹⁴ Equitable partnerships

12. See Kate Gardner Burt et al., *The GREEN Tool For Well-Integrated School Gardens*, LAURIE M. TISCH CENTER FOR FOOD, EDUCATION & POL'Y AT THE PROGRAM IN NUTRITION (2016), <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/media/media-library-2014/centers/tisch-center/GREEN-Tool-Research-Brief.pdf>.

13. Kathrin Specht, et al. *Urban Agriculture of the Future: An Overview of Sustainability Aspects of Food Production in and on Buildings*, AGRICULTURE AND HUMAN VALUES 33, 34 (2014), <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10460-013-9448-4>.

14. See Nathan McClintock, *Radical, Reformist, and Garden-Variety Neoliberal:*

between community activists and outside collaborators can build community capacity and prevent stagnation across these domains.

On a related note, organizers and their supporters must also have the courage to point out why some food-based programs are more deserving of support than others. Today, many of the best-funded community food projects are not situated in communities that suffer from food injustice at all, as lower-income communities for whom food is more likely to serve a vital nutritional and organizing need struggle to gain recognition. This is part of a problem that extends well beyond food injustice, as a recent report from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy points out: “Philanthropic funding for the people who need it most has lagged behind booming assets, and foundations have continued to avoid strategies that have the greatest potential to change the status quo.”¹⁵ Across the social justice landscape, more funding is needed that directly benefits underserved communities, addresses root causes, and provides more dollars as general support and multi-year funding.¹⁶ My own research into this topic points to several key principles that make for effective food justice programs: strong food justice initiatives fundamentally reflect and are shaped by the needs and interests of community members, have clear plans for fiscal and organizational sustainability, and are guided by a vision of social change that connects food injustice to a broader analysis of inequality in America.

On this final point, the years ahead necessitate significant coalition-building and collaborative action between food justice advocates and other movement actors fighting for progressive change. Here again, it is vital to reiterate the power of food as an

Coming to Terms with Urban Agriculture's Contradictions, LOCAL ENVIRONMENT 147-71 (2014),

http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=usp_fac : see also KRISTIN REYNOLDS AND NEVIN COHEN, BEYOND THE KALE: URBAN AGRICULTURE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK CITY, GEOGRAPHIES OF JUSTICE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION 8-9, 29-32 (2016).

15. Ryan Schlegal, *Pennies for Progress: A Decade of Boom for Philanthropy, a Bust for Social Justice*, NAT'L COMM. FOR RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY 3 (2016).

16. *Id.*

organizing tool – its centrality to our health and ecology, as well as its universal connection to culture and community, gives food activists a unique ability to incorporate their concerns into the work of others. To be specific, community food advocates can help affordable housing advocates integrate gardens into design efforts, rally food service workers around a living wage, and coordinate with those seeking protection for the immigrants who play such vital roles in the food system. Indeed, one could argue that the best healthy food policies are actually progressive housing, labor, and immigration policies, which can open up the time and financial resources for families and communities to pursue healthier relationships with food. Further, state and municipal programs and policies in these areas can serve as a testing ground that could be scaled up if future federal administrations are more responsive to social justice concerns.¹⁷ In the years ahead, only an integrated approach – one that combines grassroots advocacy, policy development, and broader movement building – will be able to turn these aspirations into reality.

Conclusion

Following President Trump's victory, a collectively authored editorial by good food advocates Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, Olivier De Schutter, and Ricardo Salvador argued that it was time to expand the consciousness of the food movement. The most important work food activists could do, they argued, was to get involved in urgent social justice struggles: "(F)ighting for real food is part of the larger fight against inequality and racism," they wrote, adding, "[n]atural allies are everywhere."¹⁸ While it was heartening to hear this much-needed appeal to social justice solidarity, nothing in that call to action was particularly new. For years and even decades, community-based food justice activists have been engaged in exactly these types of

17. Emily M. Broad Leib, *All (Food) Politics is Local: Increasing Food Access Through Local Government Action*, 7 HARV. L. & POL'Y REV. 321, 322-23 (2013).

18. Mark Bittman et al., *Food And More: Expanding The Movement For The Trump Era*, CIVIL EATS (Jan. 16, 2017), <http://civileats.com/2017/01/16/food-and-more-expanding-the-movement-for-the-trump-era/>.

social justice coalitions, and have been calling for the broader food movement to see food as a tool for social transformation – not as a magic cure-all for health disparities or environmental injustice. Through it all, these activists have understood that the power of the food justice movement was never centered in the White House garden, supportive as that symbolic action might be. Moving forward, it should be those food justice activists who are at the forefront of the food movement’s response to President Trump – building authentic social justice partnerships, developing sustainable and effective models for community-based programming, and articulating a future vision for a more just food system.