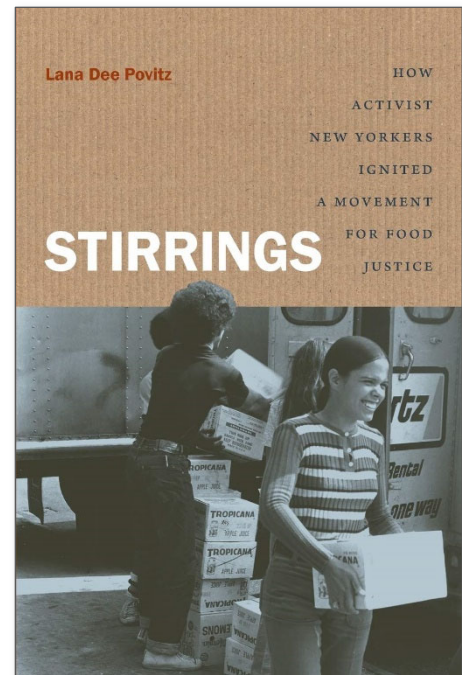


Stirring up lessons for food activists

Review by Robert A. Kluson *
 Cork, Ireland

Review of *Stirrings: How Activist New Yorkers Ignited a Movement for Food Justice*, by Lana Dee Povitz. (2019). The University of North Carolina Press. Available as ebook, hardcover, and paperback; 360 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://uncpress.org/book/9781469653013/stirrings/>



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The book *Stirrings* examines the anti-hunger efforts of the food movement in the latter part of the 20th century for lessons in their successes and failures, as well as relevance to the modern food movement in America. Its six chap-

ters examine four food nonprofits’ responses to hunger and its causes in urban New York City (NYC). The diversity of these case studies allowed for multidimensional analyses and insights of how groups of people can work to challenge policy priorities and change social values that cause hunger. The context of the case studies is established in the introduction by recounting the history and politics of the awareness of hunger and poverty in America, the “land of plenty and wealth” during the 1960s, and the subsequent federal government anti-hunger and welfare programs (e.g., War on Poverty and food stamps programs). This context also includes the drastic reductions of these programs, first by the austerity budget measures of the mid-1970s and then by the rise of neoliberal gov-

* Robert Kluson is retired faculty with the University of Florida, IFAS Extension. His Extension education programs included agroecology, sustainable agriculture, local food system development, food economy surveys, urban agriculture, small farming, natural resources education, and food policy council facilitation. His academic training includes a Ph.D. in agroecology and sustainable food systems (University of California-Santa Cruz) and a MSc in agronomy (University of Maryland). His current activities include membership in Agroecology Europe and the production of a free podcast and Facebook group called Agroecology World. He can be reached at klusonr@gmail.com.

ernment policies starting in the 1980s. This information is intended to inform the reader of the *raison d'être* for the rise and diversity of food activism movement described in this book.

At the same time, considering the importance placed by the author on the context of the case studies, it is worth mentioning a couple omissions in this narrative. First, an important part of the chronological linkage between food activism and government policies is the role of the scientific and academic sector in analyses of the extent of hunger in America. For example, the 1984 *Report of the President's Task Force on Food Assistance* conceptually differentiated the concepts of "hunger" and "food insecurity" for the first time. The experts on this task force accepted a very narrow medical definition of hunger (i.e., "actual physiological effects of extended nutritional deprivations" [p. 24]) that could justify the federal government erroneously concluding that hunger was not a policy priority in America. The social definition of hunger as food insecurity (i.e., "the inability, even occasionally, to obtain adequate food and nourishment" [p. 26]) only became integrated in food policy development during the 1990s based on the conclusions of later scientific literature (National Research Council, 2006). Second, there was no description by the author of the concept of food justice itself when introducing these examples of anti-hunger and food activism. Considering that the term is included in the book title, a definition or overview of the criteria for the concept would have contributed important context to the lessons from the case studies. This is a missed instructive opportunity because, while the term is liberally used in the modern food movement, it is still a subject of debate as to its exact meaning and practice (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015).

Chapters 1 and 2 examine the nonprofit United Bronx Parents (UBP) of South Bronx and its activism in addressing community hunger issues through the school lunch program of the NYC Department of Education (DOE). This narrative about the UBP illustrates very well the sources of UBP's strengths and successes. For example, food activists placed importance on having direct linkages to their constituency and between earlier and/or current social activist movements in resist-

ing institutional and political inequalities. This was exemplified in a leadership derived from its constituent poor Puerto Rican community and who had previous experience in progressive labor politics. UBP's strong community ties were explained as based on previous advocacy skills training to resist DOE's history of discrimination that successfully empowered community control of local schools. Finally, UBP's effective management was described as resulting from the hiring of staff with political and public relations skills that provided strategies and program linkages to greater NYC community action groups which effectively mobilized this volunteer-based, grassroots nonprofit.

Chapter 3 examines the nonprofit Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) located in Brooklyn and its role in providing community access to low-cost healthy foods. The narrative integrates well the activities of PSFC and the social milieu from its beginning in 1973 as part of a counterculture era influenced by the influx of diverse social activist groups starting in the 1960s and continuing into the early 1970s where "members saw consuming better as one way to achieve social and environmental change" (p. 95). As the author states, the story of the PSFC is remarkable because "while it was part of a national trend at this time of such enterprises which typically haven't survived, it has succeeded in becoming today the largest consumer-owned single-store cooperative in the U.S. offering locally-produced, organic foods to its members" (p. 87). The factors of this success were explained by their community organizing and management skills from implementing a structured, labor cooperative model to participatory governance. In addition, PSFC expanded its community ties by responding to the social needs of a demographically changing Brooklyn, such as becoming a community space for social and food activists, and for cultural, education, and political events. Equally important, the narrative about PSFC describes the social changes of that era, such as gentrification, that dramatically reduced the ethnic diversity of Brooklyn that had first attracted activist communities. The author cites this outcome not necessarily to find fault in PSFC but to remind the reader that "prefigurative projects, even when carried out in positive, exciting, and innovative ways, were

not impervious to larger structural forces” (p. 92). Therefore, the author reinforces the importance of PSFC’s prefigurative aspects as described in the narrative, such as cooperation, not being profit-driven, egalitarianism, diversity, tolerance, and ethical sensitivity.

Chapter 4 examines the nonprofit God’s Love We Deliver (GLWD) as an atypical form of food activism which, nevertheless, effectively responded to community hunger. The author describes very well the personal and social background for GLWD providing millions of free, high-quality meals to citywide homebound victims of AIDS starting in the mid 1980s and, as of 2001, to clients with other serious illnesses. For example, the personal and spiritual convictions of GLWD’s leadership demonstrated the potential for organizing with a vision that redefines the extent of and responses to hunger. GLWD’s effective community organizing then was based on reaching out across the religious and political differences among the city-wide public with an uncontroversial message of compassion and service during an era of “fear, lack of medical treatments, societal scapegoating, familial homophobia, lack of legal protection, and government neglect” (pp. 127–128). Very importantly, GLWD’s apolitical activities were explained as strategies in building solidarity relationships that can complement supporting social activists, such as the LGBTQ+ community, in resisting political and social inequality sources of hunger.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the nonprofit Community Food Resource Center (CFRC) and the strengths of its citywide anti-hunger activities, beginning in 1980 and through the changing political economy of NYC afterwards. CFRC was started by experienced leaders with tenure at UBP and with connections to other citywide successful grassroots food activists. In its beginning, the leadership championed a comprehensive vision of food justice that included job creation and advocacy, e.g., setting up community food enterprises and an office of food policy in partnership with city officials. The author then explains how the cumulative impacts of budget austerities and neoliberal policies, as well as the proliferation of other dire societal priorities, forced CFRC to shift

its focus to a wider range of direct service activities. To this end, the narrative shows how food movements can be severely limited by the repeated failures of politicians to correct the systemic causes of hunger and food insecurity while exploiting food nonprofits as convenient “service providers.” Nevertheless, CFRC’s successes were used to identify its crucial attributes to this background of events. First, as the author describes it, CFRC managed to “weld direct service and advocacy work together so that each reinforced the other” (p. 22). This outcome supported the intention for the book stated in the introduction, that it is a challenge to “the commonly held view of nonprofits as coopting grassroots activism” (p. 5). Second, CFRC’s leadership, both in gender and management style, demonstrated effective alternatives for social and food movements.

I highly recommend this book for both academic and lay audiences, but especially for practitioners of modern food movement in responding across the food landscape of America to a complex of negative impacts by the industrial food system on human health and the environment. Very importantly, it provides the following instructive linkages that can “stir up” more diverse modern food activism and public support for the hunger issues of today and tomorrow. First, these case studies demonstrate that the political issues and social changes of America, in general, and in urban areas, specifically, are common features of the past and present. Second, the narrative demonstrates the community perspective as a reoccurring theme among food activists, as well as a legacy and final statement of advice. Finally, the author uses the familiar concept of *terroir* (as in gastronomy) as an analogy for the source of activism capacity of food nonprofits. In other words, the unique social situations, personalities, and dynamics of food nonprofits will shape their efficacies and structures. Projecting these ideas to present times, the continuing creative and diverse examples of food activism across America in response to hunger needs, such as in the current COVID-19 pandemic, clearly agree with this thesis.

(References on next page)

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