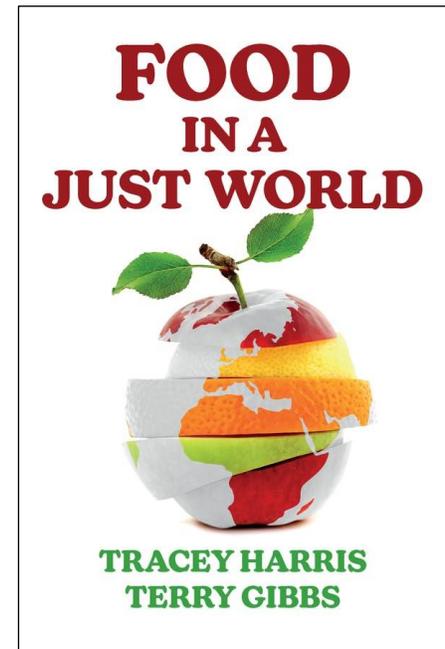


Cultivating compassion in the global food system: A review of *Food in a Just World*

Book review by
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Review of *Food in a Just World*, by Tracey Harris and Terry Gibbs. (2024). Published by Polity Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and ebook; 256 pages. Publisher's website: https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail?book_slug=food-in-a-just-world-compassionate-eating-in-a-time-of-climate-change--9781509554010



Submitted June 6, 2025 / Revised July 11, 2025 / Accepted July 13, 2025 / Published online September 9, 2025

Citation: Knight, M. (2025). Cultivating compassion in the global food system: A review of *Food in a Just World* [Book review]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 14(4), 383–385. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.144.019>

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Food in a Just World, by Tracey Harris and Terry Gibbs, offers a far-reaching analysis of injustice in the global food system. The book weaves together narratives of nonhuman animal exploitation and discussions of human rights, structural violence, climate change, and environmental degradation to show how the animal-industrial complex (A-IC) both reflects and reinforces deep systemic inequities. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with researchers, workers, policymakers, advocates,

and activists from diverse backgrounds, the authors take a critical stance toward our institutions and relationships with nonhuman animals in the food system. Their approach exposes the invisible interconnections of oppression from the perspectives of citizen-consumers, workers, nonhuman animals, and the environment, while building a vision for a just transition rooted in radical democracy, transparency, accountability, and compassion.

Harris and Gibbs support their arguments with a diverse combination of qualitative research, critical theory, and interdisciplinary evidence. Central throughout the book are excerpts from their semi-structured interviews, and by weaving direct quotes throughout the book, the authors bring emotional and experiential depth to complex issues. Harris and Gibbs further support their claims by drawing from a wide body of interdisciplinary academic

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research. They cite studies from environmental science, sociology, public health, law, and political economy to ground their arguments on the impacts of industrial animal agriculture on climate change, the exploitation of human and animal labor, and food safety and security. The authors also draw on a range of theoretical frameworks to structure their critique, such as structural violence, speciesism, and the democracy of species. Drawing on thinkers like Vandana Shiva, the authors utilize the conceptual framework of *Earth Democracy* to demonstrate how the suffering of nonhuman animals is inseparable from universal injustices like climate change, poverty, human rights violations, and food insecurity, and how the diverse issues of workers, consumer-citizens, and nonhuman animals share a common origin. Their systems-based approach connects disparate injustices back to their central critique of neoliberal capitalism and the commodification of human, animal, and plant life.

Harris and Gibbs critically examine how corporate consolidation and the “logic of capital” drive the exploitation of human and animal labor. Central to the logic of capital is the commodification of people and land, which they argue is inseparable from the commodification of nonhuman animals. They examine how profit optimization has resulted in increasingly concentrated operations that heighten both animal physical and psychological suffering, pollute and damage surrounding environments, and increase the spillover of zoonotic disease. Harris and Gibbs use firsthand accounts and cite research to show how workers, especially migrant and undocumented laborers, are subjected to unsafe conditions for minimum pay and face the mental and physical toll of participating in routinized violence. They use the concept of speciesism, which is defined as the elevation of the human species to a more privileged status compared to other animals, to explain how our socio-economic system normalizes, regulates, and enforces the exploitation of nonhuman animals. The authors connect our acceptance of speciesism to the continued pervasiveness of hierarchical concepts like racism, nationalism, and sexism, arguing that we must adopt a values system where all life-forms are treated as equally valuable if we are ever going to tackle all of these injustices.

Utilizing this intersectional approach, Harris and Gibbs focus on the animal industrial complex’s impacts on climate change, workers, and animal health as central examples of the interconnectedness of injustice. They identify climate change as a form of structural violence, which they define as the political, economic, and cultural systems that inflict harm on people, animals, and the environment. They point to evidence demonstrating that climate change is increasing food insecurity, driving forced displacement, and exacerbating resource conflict, disproportionately impacting those least responsible for carbon emissions. Harris and Gibbs cite robust research demonstrating the animal agriculture sectors’ disproportionate contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and environmental pollution around the world. This supports their argument that industrial animal agriculture directly contributes to the structural violence of climate change and that reducing its emissions is key to mitigating the climate crisis and rectifying the injustice of climate change. The authors use climate grief and our response to global crises as emotional entry points into imagining systems built on compassion, a recurring theme throughout the book.

A key strength of *Food in a Just World* is how it makes the often invisible and normalized harms embedded in the A-IC both visible and vivid. They argue that exposing the conditions faced by animals and workers in the A-IC is one essential part of ending this violence, and advocate for systemic transformation through transparency, education, and communication. Despite the book’s breadth, the authors manage to maintain clarity and coherence without oversimplifying the concepts they aim to communicate. While at times the book moves quickly between topics and frequently introduces concepts and ideas which may be new to the reader, the authors skillfully articulate complex ideas like speciesism and the commodification of nature while providing robust evidence that distills a vast array of research to support their arguments.

Food in a Just World is ultimately an appeal to understanding, realization, and action for both individuals and institutions. The authors argue that the key to solving our interconnected crises is through our social and ecological relationships,

connection, community, and compassion for all beings. Relationships of mutual respect are central to the authors' vision of a just food system and a just world. They identify the need for paradigm shifts in our social and economic values, community-building to increase resilience and interdependence, and a combination of incremental reforms and radical transformation. Their vision of

a just food system is rooted in the precautionary principle, radical democracy, and localized decision-making. By centering the interconnectedness of all living beings and refusing to rank forms of suffering, Harris and Gibbs offer a profound and necessary message: a just food system is inseparable from a just world.

