



Alison Hope Alkon and Julie Guthman (eds), *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780520292130 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520292147 (paper)

Getting Political and Getting Organized: A Call to Repoliticize the Food Movement

Alison Hope Alkon and Julie Guthman have each individually pushed the conversation in agro-food studies forward in critically important ways. As a result, I was particularly enthusiastic about a product of their joint effort. In their edited collection, *The New Food Activism*, Alkon and Guthman bring power and collective struggle front and centre to the food movement, a movement that has faced strong criticism for resorting to individual and market-based solutions to address what are in fact deep systemic problems (see, for example, Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Bradley and Herrera 2016; Busa and Garder 2015; DeLind 2011; Guthman 2008). Their central argument is that the food movement has become largely depoliticized and disengaged from food justice issues related to class, power and capital. In the words of Alkon and Guthman, their aim is to “expand the possibilities of food activism” by cultivating a food movement that is “more politicized, strategic, and confrontational” (p.15). They call on food activists and the food movement as a whole to broaden their analyses and shift their understandings of what it means to engage in social change.

Along with an introduction and conclusion written by Alkon and Guthman, the book features eleven chapters organized into three sections: “Regulatory Campaigns”; “Working for Workers”; and “Collective Practices”. The first and second sections highlight the victories that have been achieved by working in coalitions, utilizing diverse strategies and building collective power, while the third section begins a discussion of what it might look like to build alternatives that center food and land justice along with democratic ownership and decision-making. Despite the critical tone of the introduction, the book is not primarily a critique of the food movement, but an illustration of how a politicized and critical food politics can form the basis of a more

vibrant, confrontational and transformative movement. The case studies provide specific examples of how neoliberalism creates the conditions under which a particular manifestation of food politics flourishes while stifling other incarnations. They also highlight the importance of collective action to bring back what neoliberalism has taken away.

Between Prefiguration and Contestation

The most valuable contribution of *The New Food Activism* is its attempt to embrace the complexity of the food movement, presenting a nuanced discussion of activism in the context of an overwhelmingly neoliberal landscape. This is the key strength of the book, providing an engaged yet critical analysis that seeks to deepen the politics of the food movement and support a diversity of ways forward. Despite their critiques, it is clear that the authors are supportive of, and in several cases actively involved in, the examples of food movement activism they discuss.

This acknowledgment of complexity is first visible in how the book addresses a key tension within the food movement between building alternatives and seeking to reform the dominant food system. For the most part, rather than perpetuating a blunt dichotomy of building alternatives vs. reform, *The New Food Activism* brings a welcome layer of nuance and specificity to the debate. Alkon and Guthman assert that the creation of alternatives has become the “dominant mode of food politics” (p.17), something they connect to the depoliticization of the food movement. They reflect that the problem with the rise in popularity of alternative formations is that they have become misunderstood as a form of activism. For many individuals, particularly white middle class individuals, participating in alternative food systems is not only an alternative way to access their food, but an alternative way of engaging in social change and conceptualizing social movements: “for many supporters of alternative food systems, farmers’ markets represent an alternative, not only to agribusiness, but to traditional forms of social-movement activity” (p.316). Similarly, Joann Lo and Biko Koenig, authors of a chapter on worker-consumer coalitions, insist that “[i]f our goal is to reshape the food system into

something equitable, sustainable, and just, we must get out of the farmers' market and into the streets" (p.152).

This isn't intended as an outright dismissal or rejection of farmers markets, for instance, but an argument that the dominance of these alternative formations within the food movement has had particular consequences for how we conceptualize and engage in food system transformation, particularly when they become divorced from broader food movement struggles. As Jill Lindsey Harrison notes, alternatives without this deeper engagement and connection remain "necessary but insufficient" (p.49). Joshua Sbicca skillfully teases out this perspective in the conclusion of his chapter on food worker campaigns:

...food politics can be more than a politics of autonomy, cultural foodways, market-based alternatives, and self-provisioning. This is not to discount the value of progressive and radical efforts by working-class communities, communities of colour, and their allies to prefigure the kinds of practices that stoke our imagination of, and inspire experimentation with, more socially just food systems. Rather, by turning our attention to the formation of a class-conscious food politics within L.A.'s food movement, we see that *one of the roads* to a socially just food system is paved with confrontation." (p.123, emphasis added)

The New Food Activism also suggests how alternatives can be re-oriented and embedded within a stronger food politics. For example, in their chapter on food hubs within two black communities in Chicago, Meleiza Figueroa and Alkon suggest that when Alternative Food Network spaces are rooted in and prioritize low-income communities of colour, they can play a role in movements for food justice. Others, such as Michelle Glowa, explore how Alternative Food Network¹

¹ Alternative Food Networks, or AFNs, is a term used to refer to a broad set of food-provision practices that seek to circumvent dominant food systems in favour of more environmentally and socially just forms of production and

practices, such as urban gardening, can act as an entry point to developing and engaging in a broader set of food politics and political strategies.

A Politics of Consumption Beyond Neoliberalism?

This appreciation for complexity is also on display in the authors' discussion of neoliberalism and consumer politics. A key manifestation of the rise of neoliberalism within the food movement has been the dominance of individual consumer-based strategies. *The New Food Activism* asks the reader to consider the possibility of a politics of consumption beyond neoliberalism: can these market-based and non-state centric mechanisms be collectivized and contextualized within a more radical food politics?

The majority of case studies within the book resist the urge to outright dismiss consumer tactics, and instead illustrate how consumer politics can move beyond an individual and market-based framing. Several of the chapters, particularly in the third section, point to the possibility of consumer action that is collective rather than individual, moving beyond a market-centric approach to incorporate and centre considerations of social justice. The result is not a rejection of consumer strategies altogether, but a proposal for how consumer action can be contextualized within a broader set of strategies and tactics based on other subjectivities, and a recognition that the potential power of consumers is not limited to individual acts of consumption. For example, in their chapter on the successful resistance to soil fumigant Midas, Guthman and Sandy Brown suggest that it is not necessarily that neoliberal tactics have no use, but that they need to be embedded in a broader strategy of collective action and contentious politics. Pursuing neoliberal consumer strategies unmoored has led to a neglect of the political. The solution is to situate these approaches within a broader politics and critique of the food system, so that they are connected to, and articulated alongside, the claims and demands of other food system actors, namely, food workers, farmers and low-income eaters. Similarly, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern provides an

consumption.

insightful historical context to current consumer-based strategies, highlighting how consumers can participate in and contribute to a food movement in solidarity with farmers and farm workers by “not only using their purchasing power directly, but also applying their influence in boycotts, protests, and media campaigns” (p.158).

There is, however, considerable diversity in the degree to which the individual chapters embrace this line of inquiry. Some of the authors start from an assumed binary that privileges confronting the state over seeking alternatives, and the occasional generic jabs at the sustainable agriculture movement feel unnecessary for the argument and detract from its detail and nuance. Similarly, some offer a more blunt and explicit critique of consumer strategies, while others see more possibility in reframing consumer politics and alternative imaginaries to push these efforts outside of a neoliberal framing. Within any edited collection there will be, and should be, a diversity of perspectives; however, there was a noticeable disconnect between some of the case studies and the framing provided by Alkon and Guthman, a tension that largely went unacknowledged.

For instance, Andrew Zitcer’s chapter suggests that the food co-ops he researched offer spaces of hope, despite being exclusionary, based on race, ethnicity and age, and, I would add, class. However, a key conclusion coming out of Alkon and Guthman’s analysis is that the food movement needs to stop making these types of claims. If the alternatives being propped up are full of middle class white people, then perhaps they are not the spaces of hope we should be focused on. Too much attention has been placed on the potential and possibility of alternative food networks without also considering how they play out in practice. In addition, Zitcer argues that “consumers, working together, affect what appears on the shelves, how workers are treated, and even what goods are produced and brought to market” (p.181). This reads as a gross simplification of a complex system of advertisements, government regulation, our ability to even know about labour practices, how needs and desires are shaped by society, the media, corporations, etc. We need to start prioritizing alternatives that offer exciting possibilities not in

spite of their poor class or race analysis, but because of their strong intersectional grounding. The problem here is not the politics of hope and possibility, but the way this politics is dis-embedded from the critical analysis Alkon and Guthman insist the food movement so desperately needs.

In contrast, Tanya Kerssen and Zoe Brent offer one of the strongest chapters of the book, emphasizing the importance of land justice to a reinvigorated food politics. Despite the centrality of land to many historical food movement struggles, contemporary efforts rarely acknowledge the question of land. Yet Kerseen and Brent suggest that issues of land access and ownership have the potential to be a galvanizing and converging force for the food movement. As Kerssen and Brent forcefully argue, “[b]ringing land into food justice radicalizes the work by addressing race, class, and gender ‘in relation to dispossession and control in the food system’ (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011: 98)” (p.291). Their discussion is not about alternative vs. reform, consumption vs. production, it is about centering a particular vision of the food system regardless of our particular strategies or tactics.

Clarifying Strategies vs. Politics

My core concern with *The New Food Activism* is that, in articulating their critique of the dominant food movement, Alkon and Guthman conflate tactics and strategies with politics and principles. As a follow-up to their critique of the food movement’s focus on creating individual and consumer-orientated alternatives, Alkon and Guthman push food movement actors to engage in collective activities that seek to engage and confront the state and corporations. This proposal is based on an assumed correlation between particular tactics and strategies (confrontational campaigns against the state and corporate actors) and a more radical politics and critique of the food system. Is holding the state accountable necessarily more progressive than encouraging the development of worker co-operatives or organic community gardens? I would argue that there isn’t a clear answer to that question; rather, it depends on how the state is being held accountable and for what, and how a worker-cooperative and organic community garden is being organized

and for what purpose. *The New Food Activism* implicitly assigns a moral superiority to a particular set of tactics under the guise that they inherently build better politics.

Instead of positioning certain tactics or strategies as inherently more radical or progressive than others, or as necessarily corresponding to a particular vision of the food system, I find it more constructive to consider how we can nurture a diversity of strategies and tactics that seek to transform our food system in different ways. Whether the goal is to improve state regulations of pesticides or establish a new food co-op, both actions can benefit from a strong class consciousness, the prioritization of marginalized voices, and a focus on the distribution of power. Constructing alternatives and challenging oppressive structures do not have to be mutually exclusive. The third section of the book directs its attention to this conundrum, but often without sufficient engagement with the cautions laid out at the outset of the book by Alkon and Guthamn on the pitfalls of building alternatives.

The tendency within the food movement to disengage rather than engage in formal politics is a valid observation, but the reasons for that attempted removal are diverse. They can't all be chalked up to neoliberalism and the privileged position of white middle class consumers. It's also important to acknowledge that mass mobilizations against the state and/or corporations aren't always outside or in opposition to neoliberal discourses, and they don't necessarily represent a more political or radical vision for our food system. For instance, consumer "right to know" campaigns in regards to GMO labelling can very much adopt an individual consumer neoliberal discourse. By the same token, there are many different ways to express, practice and experiment with alternative forms of production and consumption of food. Sbicca asserts that "[b]uilding alliances, organizing rallies, and protesting can lead to concessions and reforms otherwise unattainable through prefigurative politics" (p.124). This may be true in some situations, but not necessarily in all, not to mention that prefigurative politics are not intended to bring about concessions or reforms.

It's unclear whether part of the critique of alternatives advanced in *The New Food Activism* is that they do not go far enough in their alternative-ness, or that they do not directly confront the state and corporate capital. Those are similar but slightly different arguments. The latter suggests that alternatives are unable to bring large-scale change because they are inherently limited and exclusive, while the former is making a statement about the scope of alternatives currently being developed within the food movement.

Much of the difference between authors within *The New Food Activism* can be traced to distinct approaches to the role and value of prefiguration as part of social struggle. Many of the chapters contain an implicit, and in some cases explicit, critique of prefigurative politics and the “politics of possibilities” perspective put forth by J.K. Gibson-Graham, while others more heartily embrace this orientation as an element of collective action. These debates of confrontation vs. alternatives, engagement vs. disengagement are not unique to the food movement. Similar tensions exist across multiple social movements. At their heart, these are questions about contrasting theories of change, political philosophies and analyses of the state—questions that are beyond the scope of the book and certainly far beyond this review essay, but they are questions that are worth explicitly naming and considering.

One disappointment in reading *The New Food Activism* was that several of the contributions are reprints or revisions of earlier articles. For instance, Emily Eaton's chapter, “How Canadian Farmers Fought and Won the Battle Against GM Wheat”, is based on an earlier publication (Eaton 2013). The victories discussed are somewhat muted given that the Canadian Wheat Board, one of the central actors in mobilizing and giving voice to farmer opposition to GM wheat, no longer exists, having been dismantled by the federal government.² Particularly

² While the entity formerly known as the Canadian Wheat Board continues to exist as a grain company under the name CWB, it no longer operates as a “single-desk” producer marketing system, following the passing the Bill C-18, the Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act.

under the framing of “new” forms of food activism, the inclusion of more original and current material would have further enriched the analysis.

Finally, and perhaps shaped by my own geographical context of Canada, a discussion of how to re-politicize and cultivate collective action within the food movement without a meaningful acknowledgement of colonization and the struggles of indigenous peoples is necessarily incomplete. Perhaps the context is different in the United States, the site of all the case studies save one; however, the dispossession of indigenous lands and destruction of indigenous food systems seems equally relevant to the US and Canadian food systems.

Questions/Moving Forward

The New Food Activism prompts the reader to consider what is, or should be, considered political. What does it mean to participate in the food movement, to be a food activist or organizer? In recent decades, the term civil society has become increasingly popular to refer to the collection of community groups and non-government organizations working towards social change, at times eclipsing the more traditional and perhaps radical term of social movement. This is not just a discursive shift; building on the arguments of the book, the food movement has perhaps become less of a social movement and more of a so-called third sector or social economy one. At a recent conference in Waterloo, Ontario this past Fall,³ Harriet Friedmann noted this trend and urged those in the room to return to the language of social movement rather than civil society.

A related question that simmers just below the surface is whether food and an analysis of the food system is a means or an end of social struggle? Are the struggles discussed in *The New Food Activism* using food as a lens or entry point to engage in broader social justice struggles

³ As part of the FLEdGE (Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged) research project, academic and community partners involved in a series of food systems research nodes met September 7th-9th to share research updates and plan for the next phase of the project. For more information see <https://fledgeresearch.ca/fledge2017/>

that transcend the food system, or are the power dynamics and manifestations of neoliberalism unique to the particularities of the food system? The authors of this volume use the consumption, production and exchange of food as an opening into broader social justice issues and societal transformation, and in doing so seek to broaden the scope of what is considered a part of the food movement.

Ultimately, *The New Food Activism* is a valuable contribution to critical food studies that raises important questions about what kind of food system we, as scholars, organizers, eaters and workers want to see and how we are going to get there. It advances the conversation on how neoliberalism has become embedded in food movement organizing, even as food movement actors seek to organize against it, and illustrates how we might cultivate other logics and rationalities in our work. The cases highlighted serve as a reminder that not all battles were lost, and that a food system dominated by corporate interests, low wages and consumerism is not inevitable but it is also not going anywhere without a fight. To succeed in transforming our food system we need to know what we are fighting for, and what we're fighting against.

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