

Deconstructing the narratives that frame food system transformation

Book review by

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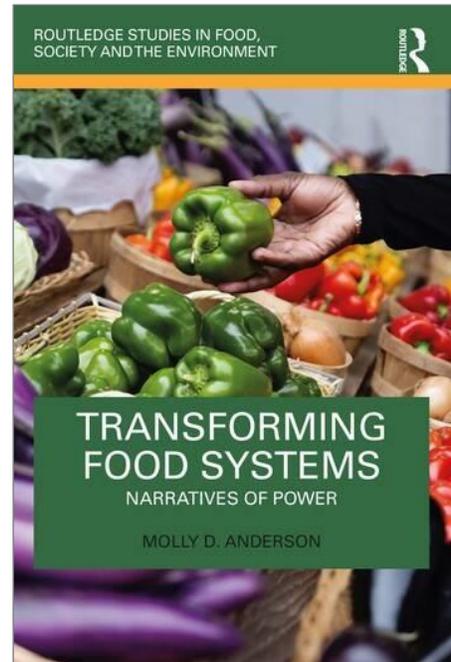
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Review of *Transforming Food Systems: Narratives of Power*, by Molly D. Anderson. (2024). Published by Routledge.

Available as paperback, hardcover, and eBook; 282 pages.

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<https://www.routledge.com/Transforming-Food-Systems-Narratives-of-Power/Anderson/p/book/9781032196671>



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Narratives hold power. The stories we tell ourselves about the food system—what it is, what it ought to be, and who has the power and agency to change it—shape our conception of what's possible. In *Transforming Food Systems: Narratives of Power*, Molly D. Anderson explores the most common narratives around food system transformation and deconstructs the theories and assumptions underlying them. Drawing on her decades of scholarship and advocacy, she demonstrates the

power of narratives by exploring how they show up in contemporary food systems discourse and the influence of such narratives on actionable change.

Anderson organizes her book into five parts and 11 chapters. In the opening part, she defines what “food system transformation” means to her. First, she argues that the goal should be to achieve a regenerative food system: one that goes beyond merely sustaining the status quo to actively restoring ecosystems and communities. Second, she argues that achieving this goal requires a deep reorientation of social values to be focused on fairness and the public good rather than individual profit. Throughout the rest of the book, each narrative of food system transformation is assessed

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against whether or not it aligns with this vision.

Part two sets out what narratives are and why they matter. Anderson defines a narrative as a course of action with a beginning, middle, and end, which is used by humans to make sense of and provide meaning to their experiences. She then argues that narratives create and reinforce different perspectives on problems and solutions. She demonstrates this by setting out two “meta-narratives” in the food systems discourse—food as a commodity vs. food in the commons—arguing that these narratives involve fundamentally different views of the value and purpose of food. She finished the section using system diagrams to show how power flows through the food system both narratively and visually. For example, she maps the interplay of different actors and how their power can reinforce or counteract each another.

Having set out the conceptual foundation, part three forms the core of Anderson’s analysis: a typology and examination of common narratives of food system transformation. She distinguishes between narratives that do not require structural change (e.g., sustainable intensification and international summits) and those that do (e.g., food democracy and agroecology). Anderson deconstructs each narrative by laying out its implicit or explicit theory of change and underlying assumptions, showing they are far from value-neutral. She then demonstrates how these narratives present themselves in the discourse, using examples from interviews, literature, the media, speeches, and her own first-hand accounts. Ultimately, she argues that from her perspective, only the more radical narratives (namely, food sovereignty) can deliver on the goal of a regenerative food system.

From there, Anderson moves her analysis to actors in the food system, exploring who has the power, agency, and accountability to lead transformative change. She ultimately argues that civil society is best positioned to do so, but that involving multiple actors will increase the likelihood of success as different actors balance and reinforce each other. The sheer quantity of examples included in this section make it information-dense at times, but the sources included can serve as a valuable resource guide for readers seeking to learn more.

In part four, Anderson uses case studies to explore how the competing narratives identified in part three play out in practice. For example, she shows how disagreements surrounding the Committee on World Food Security over the involvement of the private sector and civil society in policy-making stem from differing narratives around the sources of the problem and which actors are best positioned to bring about change. The wealth of examples included in this section is both a strength and a challenge, as readers may find themselves wishing for a clearer through line to guide them through. The final part ties the book together, arguing that achieving transformative change first requires shifting the dominant cultural narrative about what food is and what it is for. Only once we leave behind the idea of food as a commodity do we have any hope of achieving regenerative food systems.

Anderson’s work stands out for its synthesis and scope. To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to comprehensively map the full landscape of narratives within the food systems discourse. For newcomers, it provides a helpful orientation to the various perspectives shaping global debates. For those already embedded in them, it provides an interpretive framework for critically assessing their own work and understanding sources of contention. All readers will emerge better equipped to discern the assumptions and power relations shaping today’s food system debates.

There is, however, one limitation to Anderson’s analysis. While she speaks to the different problem definitions that actors may have, she presupposes that all actors within the food system want to change it. In doing so, she does not account for the self-interest that may be driving actors towards certain narratives precisely *because* they cannot deliver on her goal of transformative change. For example, an owner of large assets who stands to lose from deep structural change may push forward the sustainable intensification narrative because it protects their wealth and power, which are their more fundamental goals. These underlying motivations may therefore lead certain narratives to gain traction not because they are more likely to be effective, but because they are useful to those in power who benefit from the sys-

tem as it is today. Incorporating this broader political economy dimension would have sharpened Anderson's analysis and deepened the book's explanatory power.

Ultimately, *Transforming Food Systems* serves as both a diagnosis and a call to action. Anderson persuasively argues that meaningful change will

not be found in new technologies or international declarations, but through deeper changes in our values and the stories we collectively believe about what is possible. Her book's lesson is clear and compelling: to transform our food system, we must first transform the narratives of power that sustain it. 