

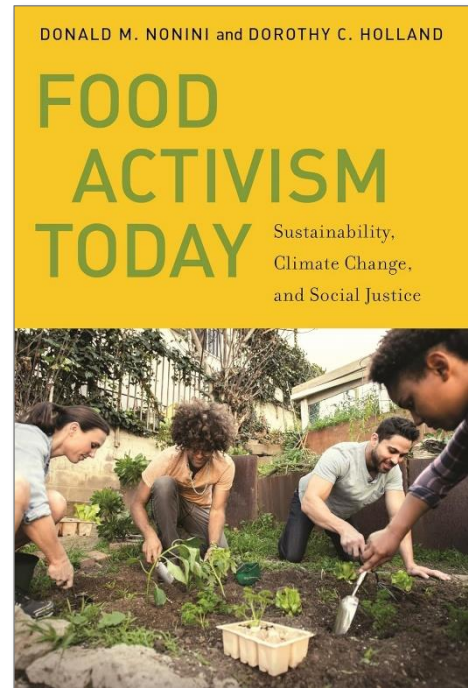
Food justice and the power of collective action

Book review by

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Review of *Food Activism Today: Sustainability, Climate Change, and Social Justice*, by Donald M. Nonini and Dorothy C. Holland. (2024). Published by New York University Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and Kindle; 400 pages. Publisher's website:

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Food Activism Today: Sustainability, Climate Change, and Social Justice reports on the authors' research into local food systems in four locales across North Carolina: Watauga and Ashe counties

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in western North Carolina, Edgecombe and Nash counties in eastern North Carolina, and the cities of Charlotte and Durham. In each, Nonini and Holland focus on activists seeking to improve the equity (justice) and sustainability of those systems in various ways. The authors conclude that, as the site of historical and ongoing racial and class disenfranchisement, economic depression, and a stark urban/rural cultural divide, the state has not seen the successful integration of the local foods movement and small-agricultural advocacy movement that has been more prevalent in other areas of the country.

The book examines what the authors call the corporate industrial food alliance through an interrogation of the neoliberal global regime ("transnational food corporations, the US government, and international trade and financial institu-

tions” [p. 38] that conspire to disinvest local food economies of choice, agency, and sovereignty), before pivoting to an exploration of possible alternatives to the bleak and fallow future sown by the pursuit of agri-market hegemony over community and ecosystem health.

In the philosophical and practical terrain of food systems transformation in North Carolina and beyond, the authors counterpose rural and urban, affluent and impoverished, farmer and restaurateur. Each case study features the first-hand accounts of multiple stakeholders as well as the authors’ own observations about the alliances and conflicts brought about through diverse and sometimes irreconcilable viewpoints. The book excels at expressing the pain and frustration of small farmers who toil for years at growing and producing sustainable, ethical, often organic foods and, far too often, end up losing their lands and businesses to the encroachment of corporate-industrial interests.

The authors contrast the discursive positions of global food conglomerates whose goals are the industrial-scale provisioning of cheap, abundant monocrops across national borders with the often microscale, biodiverse specifics that make up a global patchwork of small farms, each with idiosyncratic goals, methods, and production agendas. Nonini and Holland posit that the privatization of state resources and duties under neoliberalism, allocated to corporate partners, simultaneously cedes public interest to private agendas while restraining the ability of alternative food systems to flourish. At the same time, corporate “food aid” distributed both domestically and internationally provides tax breaks and improved public profiles to the same companies while undercutting small farms’ livelihoods through subsidies and artificially low prices.

One highlight of the book is a section that profiles the activities and motivations of several local foods entities operating in the state, from farmers markets to food pantries to advocacy groups. Nonini and Holland alternate narrative reporting on their local ethnographic research with reflections on broader issues affecting the worldwide tableau of producers, merchants, consumers, ecologists, and working people worldwide. These stories indicate the breadth and variety of philoso-

phies and operational structures that interact in local food systems, which they term “diverse community econom[ies]” (p. 103) existing outside of reductive capitalcentric logics. In Charlotte, NC, for instance, local manifestations of the Slow Food movement have combined epicureanism with reform politics, championing the sensual pleasures of fresh local foods produced in just and sustainable ways. Critics of this form of food activism, cite the somewhat elitist nature of an event-driven approach which, they claim, tends to celebrate individual actors and exclude the vast majority of local consumers who are unable to afford such goods and services.

Later chapters expand the authors’ framing of food justice to include the moral implications of neoliberal class divisions and the role of dignity within the truly sustainable social relationships that might be engendered by shared experiences of producing, preparing, and consuming food. Rather than some forms of industry-supported charitable distribution, which some study participants argue breed resentment and low self-esteem among minoritized communities, the authors cite examples of equitable, resilience-building initiatives like participatory food banks, community supported agriculture, and outdoor education programs that combat food desertification, nutrient poverty, and chronic scarcity.

The title notwithstanding, there is actually little explicit exposition on climate change throughout most of the book. Rather, the authors position the industrial farming processes that contribute to climate instability as a background force in the discussions and analyses that accompany each case study or portrait. In the book’s conclusion, however, the authors propose climate justice as a possible umbrella framework under which food justice activists might join with labor, women’s rights, Black Lives Matter, and other movements to form a stronger, more far-reaching coalition through which to combat the neoliberal global agenda. In this section, the authors cast such an intersectional movement in opposition to a toxic alliance of political elites, right-wing extremism, and an unfettered fossil fuel industry pushing both society and the biosphere toward devastating collapse. In this final section, written by Nonini alone, the

author proposes that the concerns and capacities of local food movements as outlined throughout the book represent an actionable framework with the moral and practical momentum necessary to synergize the broad agendas of a worldwide peoples' movement to stave off mass calamity.

In imagining the possible outcomes of such opposing visions, *Food Activism Today* proposes hopeful solutions to the ecological and social degradation wrought by industrial agriculture within the global neoliberal economic regime. Grounding the book in a study of local food

systems in North Carolina provides the authors with a seedbed of conditions from which to extrapolate a set of goals, limitations, and strategic considerations that might enable globally linked communities of producers, consumers, workers, and activists to improve outcomes in health, ecology, and livelihoods. Arriving at a time of particularly unstable international politics and economic upheaval, the book provides an important contribution to the developing discourses around food sovereignty, environmental justice, and the power of collective action. 