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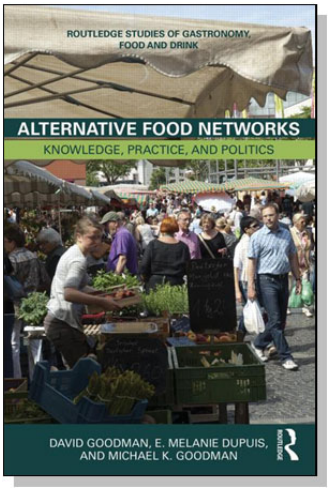
Exploring the politics of possibility



Book review by Rachael E. Kennedy *
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Review of *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice, and Politics,* edited by David Goodman, E. Melanie Dupuis, and Michael K. Goodman. (2011). Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge. Available as paperback (2013); 308 pages; US$51.95. Publisher's website: http://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/details/9780415747691/

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After 40-plus years of visioning and planning, are the basic tenets of the food movements, such as reconfiguration of capitalist society, relocalization, social justice, and sustainability, still credible? Further, will more progress be made if we critically outline the failings of activist projects and force a reckoning, or should more purchase be given to highlighting socially progressive efforts created by food movements as a way to stimulate momentum? These are the questions I ponder into the wee hours of the night. These are the questions my monthly sustainable foods community of practice salons chew on. These are the questions Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman ask. Perhaps these questions resonate with you.

It was with great anticipation that I bought *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics* as soon as it was released in paperback (2013). David Goodman, E. Melanie Dupuis, and Michael Goodman are noted agri-food systems scholars with a penchant for pushing the lines of inquiry toward increasingly substantive discourse and for clarifying the murkiness of relatively neglected aspects of the food system. I fully expected to find a book striking a balance between critical evaluation and constructive analysis—and I was not disappointed.

Surprisingly, what I also found was development of a unifying framework of three cross-cutting analytical themes: reflexivity, shared knowledge practices, and alterity. Embracing reflexivity requires that both the causes for and effects of alternative food networks (AFNs) are,

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from a critical distance, deeply considered. By taking a reflexive stance in their review of relevant AFN data, "local is not idealized as a space insulated from power relations and anomic global capitalism but is acknowledged as a publicly contested site of political-economic struggle, exploitation, and accumulation" (p. 8). The concept of shared knowledge practices hones in on the split in research between production, "growing food," and consumption, "knowing food." Thus they explore the politics of consumer-producer relationships and benefits of establishing formative linkages between theories and practices. For example, they bring focus to new "social practices of consumption" generated by fair trade and ensuing North-South debates (p. 9). Finally, alterity, new ways of doing things, is investigated in terms of economic, socio-cultural, and political foundations to assess intersections with politics of boundary maintenance, social reproduction, and collaborative governance strategies.

The authors' goal is to explore debates and controversies in a comparative perspective in an attempt to answer if assimilation can be resisted, and concomitantly, "what kind of social change can 'conventionalized' social movements achieve?" (p. 5).They seek to expose the "politics of possibility" that are available given that AFNs must secure their social reproduction within the extant spaces of neoliberal capitalism.

Four distinct sections feature different aspects for consideration, complementing each other in their return to the three-part framework for comparative vantage. Part 1, "Alternative Food Networks Reflexivity and Shared Knowledge Practice," lays the groundwork for understanding AFNs as socio-ecological assemblages. Theoretically dense, this section presents readers with major philosophical propositions and conceptually adroit discussions, including Habermas's "colonization of lifeworld," Friedland's "commodity systems analysis," and Latour's "actor-network" approaches. Further, the place of food as either a Marxian fetish or a Durkheimian totem is addressed, with many scholarly views presented. An introduction to feminist standpoint theory shows how food illuminates everyday gendered practices. In essence, this section forces a much needed, deeply sociological awareness on the subject of food systems.

Part II, "Alternative Food Provisioning in the U.K. and Western Europe," gives short sketches of confluent social movements, institutional practices, and catalytic events within the U.K. and Western Europe set the stage for processing notions of *terroir*, horizontal networks, and "new realism." They critique the obfuscated ways "the protagonists in these recaptured spaces [are] contesting, rather than reproducing, 'embedded' structures of wealth, property, privilege, and power" (p. 84). Playing with "framing/overflowing" metaphors, the relationships between corporate actors and activists in "permanent negotiation and conflict" (p. 103) are also explored.

Part III, "Alternative Food Movements in the U.S.A.: Formative Years, Mainstreaming, Civic Governance, and Knowing Sustainability," paints a picture of U.S. AFNs seeking identity and purpose within the ineluctable mainstreaming neoliberal pressures. This section questions whether new modes of governance, such as deliberative democracy (see Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, for discussion), can successfully couple with the multiple ways of knowing to maintain or advance alterity. However, doubts are raised by examples that have been "intrinsically inegalitarian" (p. 156).

Part IV, "Globalizing Alternative Food Movements: The Cultural Material Politics of Fair Trade," explores the history of the fair trade movement and network development as a Global North to Global South enterprise. Antecedents of the marketization of the fair trade "ethics of care" are dissected. Cases further elucidate the paradoxes inherent to the success of fair trade and illuminate concerns over the celebritization and resultant "tyranny of quality," issues previously untapped. At the heart of this segment is concern for the deepening invisibility of the lives of those who these networks were set to assist.

As much as this book is about AFNs, it is at the core relational with the wave of social activism resisting the global industrial food system. The new politics of food build on multiple imaginaries that challenge the capitalist logics and rationalizing worldviews. Evocative of Held and Young's (2013) statements that "cosmopolitan" society will become more fragmented and risk-laden and

Chandhoke's (2002) work processing the limits of civil society, the authors seek to determine if *any* measure of success can be replicated as communities strive to find food security and resiliency.

This book is extremely valuable for scholars and activists dissecting factors that condition and delineate AFNs. However, I caution that to embrace the full vigor of the text, scholarly proficiency is advantageous due to the dense prose and heavy theoretical underpinnings. The strength of this book, and why I recommend it, is the comprehensive overview and analysis of the most relevant literature on AFNs within the U.S. and Western Europe as well as the international fair trade network. Further, this book's systematic critique exposes the underlying problematics of AFNs in ways that provoke needed changes in order to address the politics of possibility. I urge libraries to order this as an e-book to make it more accessible to activists and practitioners, as they will no doubt find great benefit from the critiques and suggestions.

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