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Review Essay

Organics, Fair Trade, and Peasants: Changing Perceptions of Food through Activism

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Rebels for the Soil: The Rise of the Global Organic Food and Farming Movement. By Matthew Reed. London: Earthscan, 2010. 168 pp. \$95 cloth, \$32 ebook.

Global Activism in Food Politics: Power Shift. By Alana Mann. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 232 pp. \$90 cloth, \$71 ebook.

A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaign to Corporate Compliance. By Matthew Anderson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 248 pp. \$90 cloth.

Contestation over production, consumption and access to food has long been a staple of social organisation. Protests over food have echoed through time, presenting a challenge to the established order alongside more immediate demands, as can be seen in the form of the food riot.¹ Such activism using food to organise opposition and express discontent can also present alternative positive visions for the ordering of society.² While actions focused on food have been observed historically, the contemporary spread of practices associated with the globalisation of production and the associated commodification of food goods presents new challenges. Greater attention to the division between the developed North and developing

South at the global level has sharpened the focus on social justice while legacies of historical development have become more significant in a borderless world.

The purpose of this essay is to consider the development of three movements that have presented alternative visions of food production and consumption. Movements around organics, fair trade, and food sovereignty emerged at different times over the past century, but have each influenced attitudes and patterns of production and consumption. Matthew Reed's book traces the development of the organic movement from its emergence in the 1920s through to its current struggle to establish a coherent and consistent narrative. Examining the growth of the Fair Trade movement in Britain from the 1960s, Matthew Anderson identifies attempts to manage the effects and possibilities of globalisation through the provision of fair prices for goods from the South. Finally, Alana Mann moves more firmly into the contemporary era, examining the history of *La Via Campesina* (the Peasant Way) from its formation in the 1990s and the associated concept of food sovereignty that it espouses, presenting a direct challenge to corporatized, Northern dominated governance of food at the global level. In addressing divergent movements the three books together represent the ways in which contention around food has developed over the past century and the ways in which alternative visions are presented and received.

The organic movement emerged in the 1920s during a time when global patterns of trade and consumption were linked to imperial possessions. Outlining the origins of the movement, Reed notes that it was conceived with paternalistic goals, seeking to improve the wellbeing of society as a whole by changing patterns of food consumption and behaviour. The interconnected nature of the colonial system was a clear influence on the movement, as farming practices from around the world were drawn on to develop practices that underpinned organic thinking. Presenting the organic movement as a social movement, Reed argues that it is a relatively loose collection of ideas and actors, enabling diverse perspectives

to be incorporated under the banner. The risks associated with focusing on the production of unadulterated food is noted by Reed with reference to interwar Germany and contemporary Cuba, notably the idea that organics as a technical issue can discount important social aspects of production and consumption.

Following the end of World War II in 1945 the organic movement entered a period of abeyance, as the attention of the international community shifted to food security and the need to recover from the disastrous consequences of war. Pressure to increase production was managed by the emergence of the “green revolution” enabling substantial increases in production volumes through the use of artificial inputs. In response, the organic movement turned inwards and sought to establish a firmer scientific base for its claims and also institutionalise.³ Following a period of relatively limited impact, the organic movement regained some of its influence from the mid-1960s with the growing awareness of the damage of chemicals on the environment and potentially human health. Reed notes that this saw a shift in the orientation of the movement towards seeing food as linked to the environment, allowing organics to provide a foundation for the emergence of the broader environmental movement. Processes of decolonisation that were also taking place in the 1960s opened an arena for questions concerning global distributions of power and resources. The Fair Trade movement emerged in this space where “world cultural norms that favour, equality, human rights and environmentalism”⁴ were beginning to take hold. As with the organic movement, the Fair Trade movement can be traced to the actions of pioneering individuals who pressed for social justice in dealings with the states of the global South. In contrast to the organic movement, Fair Trade was from its beginnings rooted in an economic logic in which the trade of goods should be mutually beneficial, producers in the South would benefit from being able to trade fairly on the global market and consumers would have access to certified goods. Anderson argues that while the founders of Fair Trade rooted it in religious and moral ideals,

success was based on the role of non-governmental organisations and alternative trade organisations in establishing consumer demand for the Fair Trade brand.

The relative success of the organic and Fair Trade movements from the 1970s and 1980s brought new challenges and opportunities. Patterns of globalisation enabled their ideas to spread internationally and both had formed bodies to protect their identity and represent their positions. At the same time, growing popularity meant that they became increasingly entangled in the commodification of food goods. Major retailers adopted organic and Fair Trade models and used them to develop new products and means of production aimed at appealing to socially conscious consumers. Anderson argues that “the idea of Fair Trade has successfully encouraged producers to adopt new business models, retailers to stock new lines, consumers to support new products, governments to assist new programs.”⁵ This form of success was complicated as “expansion beyond an ‘alternative’ niche and entrance into mainstream markets has been celebrated and criticised in almost equal measure.”⁶ In the case of the organic movement this transition was also problematic and led some to argue that the organic food has been co-opted into a form of organic consumerism and lost sight of its initial aims.⁷ In opposition to this view, Reed notes that the “role of the organic movement has been to provide the counter culture with the infrastructure necessary to change the food industry.”⁸ Together, the experiences of Fair Trade and organics demonstrate the challenge facing movements presenting alternative visions, balancing attempts to broaden their appeal while holding on to their founding ideals.

By the 1990s the organic and Fair Trade movements had established themselves as active, if marginal, parts of the global food infrastructure. In the case of Fair Trade there was an established pattern of relationships with producers in the South. However, as Reed notes there were questions being raised about the extent to which it could be seen as anything more than “a label for commodity products exported from South to North.”⁹ Meanwhile, having

settled into a position of relative stability, the organic movement was shaken by the emergence of genetic modification (GM) and the challenge posed to the maintenance of organic crops and the ideal of natural food. Reed argues that the introduction of GM crops presented an opportunity to re-engage with the environmental movement, as the interests of organic and environmental movement actors converged. The result of this collaboration saw the emergence of a new form of direct action involving trashing of GM crops.¹⁰ It also raised further questions regarding the aims of the organic movement, leading to a re-examination of its purpose and the extent to which it should engage with issues of social and environmental justice. As the century drew to a close both the organic and Fair Trade movements were being forced to consider and justify their positions as agents for social change. Both remained rooted in the networks of the developed North and dealt with states in the developing world largely on terms that benefited the former.

The food sovereignty movement emerged in this space with the clear aim of more directly representing the interests of producers from the global South on their own terms. Food sovereignty is qualitatively different as it “has been constructed not only as a new way of understanding the production, distribution and consumption of food but as a solution to multiple global crises stemming from the neoliberal project.”¹¹ It seeks to present a direct challenge to patterns of neoliberal globalisation and re-establish national interests in food production, rather than leaving them to the mercy of global markets. Mann identifies *La Via Campesina* as a key actor involved in the promotion and facilitation of food sovereignty. Forming in 1994 as a loose network bringing together diverse producers as a reaction against the control of food at the global scale affected by the World Trade Organisation, *La Via Campesina* also presents a challenge to both the Fair Trade and organic movements.¹² Food sovereignty illustrates the way in which Fair Trade and organics have been constructed in forms that reinforce the existing international distributions of power, requiring states in the

South to conform to the norms established by Northern actors. Faced with the intransigence of the global food system, food sovereignty, as represented by *La Via Campesina*, gives voice to those who have been previously marginalised – “small-holder farmers, landless peasants, fisherfolk, and migrant and seasonal workers...over 1.2 billion globally.”¹³ Mann argues that the core goal of the food sovereignty position is to re-politicize food and strengthen localised food networks, while avoiding the threat of co-optation. Food sovereignty can be seen as rooted in the growing confidence of developing countries following the end of the Cold War in presenting resistance to deepening neoliberal globalisation. Examining groups in Chile, Mexico, and the Basque Country, Mann demonstrates that the diversity of the movement has enabled it to encompass concerns around indigenous representation, food security and “multifunctional agriculture.”¹⁴ Although food sovereignty may be seen as more genuinely global than the other movements it has also struggled to establish itself equally in all nine macro-regions as “gatekeepers and bottlenecks can be created when the membership process places too much emphasis on national and regional levels.”¹⁵

Considering the development of the three movements it is possible to identify common themes. While each movement was a product of its time their continued existence has required adaptation to increasingly similar contexts. The growth of globalisation and the emergence of new actors has led to changes in the forms of organising that are possible by enabling the construction of platforms on which to operate and opening opportunities for collaboration. However, as Mann and Anderson note, there remains a divide between the developed North and the developing South that is difficult to bridge. Looking to the organic movement, Reed argues that its foundation in the metropolitan core enabled it to draw on practices from the periphery and feed these in. With the emergence of food sovereignty the impetus for change was driven from the former periphery, challenging the long-established legitimacy of international bodies created and controlled by powerful Northern states.

Adaptation has been fundamental to the continued viability of all of the movements considered, but as argued in the case of organics (Mann) and Fair Trade (Reed), this can lead to a loss of identity and a degradation of the founding ideals. The movements considered in this essay also illustrate the difficulties of talking about global food movements as a means of managing the effects of globalisation. The organic and Fair Trade movements remain rooted in the North and operate in ways that potentially reinforce the norms and practices shaped in this context, although recognition of the need to focus on social aspects may enhance the potential for change (Reed). Food sovereignty presents a more global vision that works on challenging the notion of a homogenous globe by emphasising and valuing difference at local scales through a form of glocalisation.¹⁶ Taken together it can be argued that processes of globalisation have led to the spread of ideas and technologies over the past century in the production and consumption of food, but they remain constrained by national and regional contexts that limit their chances of leading to long-lasting and thorough-going change.

Reed, Anderson, and Mann present valuable contributions to the study of alternative food visions. While they largely remain rooted in the national context, focusing on countries primarily in the developed North, they do identify broader issues. Globalisation presents opportunities for each of the movements to establish larger-scale, broader networks, but the ability to continue to exert influence in the longer-term relies on their capacity to adapt to changes in the external environment, such as the increasing visibility and influence of actors from the global South and pressures for technological advances presented as vital to ensuring food security. As Reed notes with regard to the organic movement, such movements can reach a point where ideas of success and viability need to be carefully weighed against founding ideals. Much of the development of the movements has involved reacting to changing contexts, whereas longevity and impact may be based more on conscious decisions about the direction and priorities of each movement in seeking to engage with other actors on

the global stage.

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¹ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50, no. 1 (1971): 76-136; John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, c. 1550-1850* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

² Claire Nettle, *Community Gardening as Social Action* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

³ On social movement institutionalisation, see Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴ Kristen Shorette, “Nongovernmental Regulation and Construction of Value in Global Markets: The Rise of Fair Trade, 1961-2006,” *Sociological Perspectives* 57, no. 4 (2014): 542.

⁵ Matthew Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaign to Corporate Compliance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, 110.

⁷ Alana Mann, *Global Activism in Food Politics: Power Shift* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁸ Matthew Reed, *Rebels for the Soil: The Rise of the Global Organic Food and Farming Movement* (London: Earthscan, 2010), 107.

⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

¹⁰ Brian Doherty and Graeme Hayes, “Tactics, Traditions and Opportunities: British and French Crop-Trashing Actions in Comparative Perspective,” *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 4 (2012): 540-62.

¹¹ Mann, *Global Activism in Food Politics*, 3.

¹² Kim Burnett and Sophia Murphy, “What Place for International Trade in Food Sovereignty?” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 6 (2014): 1065-84.

¹³ Mann, *Global Activism in Food Politics*, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, 117.

¹⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹⁶ Gili S. Drori, Markus A. Höllerer, and Peter Walgenbach, “Unpacking the Glocalization of Organization: From Term, to Theory, to Analysis,” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1, no. 1 (2014): 85-99.