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Book Review

by Ryan Hayhurst

Critical Perspectives in Food Studies. Edited by *M. Koç, J. Sumner, & A. Winson.* Don Mills, ON: Oxford, 2012. 402 pp. ISBN 97801905446418

For students of agro-food systems, *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* is the kind of book that will spend little time collecting dust on the bookshelf. This reader, intentionally designed to serve as a “formal text to represent the depth and breadth” (Koç et al., 2012, p. x) of Food Studies, will more likely be found in use, open, pages marked, highlighted and interspersed with small crumbs of food. This invaluable 400–page book features well-written, well-researched chapters penned by leading figures in the Canadian Food Studies field. This volume is a credit to the depth and diversity of the Canadian Association of Food Studies (CAFS) in which it was incubated, to its editors, contributors, and to all the institutions, organizations, and individuals that drive the food movement in Canada, from field to table.

The Food Studies movement is progressively interdisciplinary and this text demonstrates the value of bringing multiple perspectives to bear on a complex problem through critical inquiry. Contemporary Food Studies is giving rise to community engaged scholarship from its critical pedagogy, creating a new breed of activism amongst scholars and students in this field. Action research and community-university alliances are becoming commonplace as many of the chapters in this volume attest, offering a welcome dose of collaborative inspiration within the sea of silo'd academia. Ultimately, however, it is the “Emancipatory Question” (Constance, 2008) what many feel to be the leading edge in Food Studies scholarship that is at the core of this text, and the focus on interdisciplinary and organizational forms bringing social value that will be of particular interest to those interested in the Social Economy.

Smartly spliced into five parts, plus an introduction and conclusion, the 22 chapters of *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* bring readers through a logical progression from the what, to the why, to the how of Food Studies. Through the Introduction and Chapter 1, co-editors Mustafa Koç et al. situate the emergence of Food Studies' interdisciplinarity and mixed-methods as primarily a great strength, but note that this leaves the field open to boundary, methodology, and overall clarity issues which will need to be resolved through collective engagement at the intersections within the broader Food Systems framework.

The remainder of Parts One and Two, including works by prominent scholars such as Freidmann, Albritton, and Cooke, showcase the diversity of analytical perspectives in Food Studies as well as the multiple levels of inquiry in scope and scale. What begins to come through in this work is the magnitude of the Food System's impacts on our socio-ecological systems. From systems of production and distribution, to evolving cultures of consumption, and linkages to health, art, education, gender, social justice, and environment, the prominence

Book Review / Compte-rendu ♦ Hayhurst (2012)

and prevalence of food as a lens through which to critically situate oneself within society and environment, becomes clearer.

Parts Three and Four of the text offer further proof of the abundant analytical fodder for Food scholars across our troubled Food System. From the “Farm Crisis” (Wiebe) to the “Crisis in the Fishery” (Sundar), to the root causes of the diet-related health epidemic at the grocery counter (Winson), among Aboriginal peoples (Martin), and food bank users (Suschnigg), critical analyses by leading Canadian scholars offer stark assessments of the challenges in reforming the Food System. Food pricing, food labelling, and food governance are also covered herein, using a combination of theoretical analysis and case study perspectives to bring clarity to each of these critical debates. One of Canada’s preeminent food policy scholars, Rod MacRae, looks at the historical unfolding of food policy in Canada at the conclusion of Part Four, highlighting that, while many of the levers in the existing political system appear to be jammed, there are still mechanisms that could help accelerate a shift to a more sustainable Food System by re-appropriating spending to program areas that generate greater triple-bottom-line returns.

The future of Food Studies scholarship, and perhaps the Food Movement in general, hang on the contributions of where Sumner, Blay-Palmer et al., and Desmarais lay out some important perspectives on “Food for the Future” in Chapters 20–22. Sumner offers a framework for sustainable Food Systems in this respect, by highlighting different projects from across Canada that are breaking new ground through grassroots approaches to inclusive community shared agriculture and cooperative food paradigms. Rebuilding a civic agro–food commons and Social Economy is at the crux of Sumner’s assertion, making the case that food is not a commodity like any other as its societal value and importance to the public good cannot effectively be safeguarded by the invisible hand of economics.

The subject of Food System sustainability metrics is the central concern of Chapter 21 in which Blay-Palmer et al. explain why scholars, policy makers, and practitioners need to put more focus on data collection in Food System research. While her initial work using primarily secondary data does suggest that the Food System status quo is a good news–bad news story, the complexity of the measures makes it difficult to conclusively say whether the challenges outweigh the opportunities.

In an emphatic final chapter, Desmarais points to the Food Sovereignty movement, and the work of *La Via Campesina* in particular, as the organizing principle that offers the most promising alternative to the neo-liberal agro–food complex. While not without its challenges, Desmarais suggests that a new “Agrarian Citizenship” (Wittman, 2010) of engaged, inclusive, and democratic food politics could bring change not only to the Food System, resulting in better social and environmental health outcomes, but as well bring a broader emancipation to the disenfranchised peoples in both the North and South.

In summary, *Critical Perspectives on Food Studies* is a landmark compilation for Canadian Food Studies scholarship. It reflects not only an impressively thorough analysis overall, but as well, great integration in both analytical perspectives and scales of analysis. Each chapter has the added benefit of a lengthy bibliography, recommendations for further reading, and thoughtful “discussion questions,” which will help both teachers and students maximize the impact of this volume and comprehend the breadth and depth of the field.

Book Review / Compte-rendu ♦ Hayhurst (2012)

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