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From Academia to the Mainstream – Food has Many Colors

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Abstract

Within the past couple of years, conversations about the agricultural industry and determining what is fair for consumers along with farmworkers has entered public discourse because of items such as the Farm Bill. These movements discuss monetary hardships and creating sustainable food systems, but what is lacking from the conversation is the issue of race, culture, and space in determining how to support farmers and feed America. In *Cultivating Food Justice*, editors Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman compile work from numerous researchers that analyzes and challenges current food systems that enable social inequalities from producer to consumer.

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Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability by Alison Hope Alkon, Julian Agyeman (Eds.). London, England: The MIT Press, 2011, 404 pp., \$22.85 paperback.

Review by Hanna Rosman, Iowa State University

In the book *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, editors Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, along with an assembly of researchers across many academic fields, illustrate the social complexities within the food industry and alternative food movements. The book demonstrates repeatedly that both poles of the food industry have faults in achieving equality and access. Overall, the contributors to this book pursue a multi-dimensional agenda aimed at providing a full-bodied analysis of race, food access, and food sovereignty.

Throughout the book, the authors exemplify that food largely contributes to identity and, thus, by denying access to food, a part of peoples' cultural heritage is denied. The authors illustrate how the rights of some groups to natural resources are taken away while others dwell in food deserts with no access to nutritious food at all. The book's utility extends from the root of the issue of social injustice in agriculture to prospective directions that can be taken by conversations and agricultural policy. The book not only illustrates the social injustices caused from cultural loss as well as the mechanization of agriculture, but also how minority farm workers are treated by an industry that is funded and managed by corporate entities. It represents the tipping point the United States is reaching in terms of fairness and the need to reevaluate the U.S. agricultural system.

From the beginning, the editors of *Cultivating Food Justice* situate these injustices within the alternative food movements that are led by advocates such as Michael Pollan (author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*) as well as Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin (authors of *Skinny Bitch*). The editors, along with other researchers, denote the elitism within these movements that makes them as much of a monoculture as the industrialized food that these figures are trying to combat. Eating fresh, local, organic, or even vegan food (as advised by Freedman and Barnouin) produced by small farms is often only afforded by those in a higher economic bracket, being not accessible to all.

Cultivating Food Justice allows us to see that the problems within the food industry are a collage of different colors rather than being simply black and white. The editors bring together qualitative and quantitative analyses of the topic in a way that

deeply illustrates the micro- and macro-repercussions to those who are denied access to food as well as those who seek to manage their own farm. The editors and authors show that many of today's problems were created through a historical process. Society is living and eating the products of decisions made in the past.

Overall, the book consists of four sections that encapsulate the issue of social justice and food from the creation of unequal access to future directions of the topic. These sections provide a thorough, multidisciplinary look at peoples' relationships with food. This approach is effective because it addresses the historical reaches of the United States' current problems with food, which is not often known by the general public. The editors also bring together a thought-provoking range of topics within each section to demonstrate the vast reaches of social injustice related to food systems. They highlight such contributing factors to social injustices within agriculture as the environment, economy, governing institutions, and urban planning, among other variables.

The following descriptions are highlights of a selection of sections contained in the book. This is to illuminate subjects the editors brought together for readers to better understand the topic of race, food, and justice. In the chapter "Race and Regulation: Asian Immigrants in California Agriculture," Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Nancy Peluso, Jennifer Sowerwine, and Christy Getz find social inequality among Asian farmers in areas where agricultural laws and policies institutionalize inequality under the guise of rules and regulation. This chapter from a section of the book entitled "The Production of Unequal Access" shows the negative side of the capitalist nature of agriculture. Profit-based success perpetuates racial "othering" and exclusions, which could be unintentional or intentional, by the government. The authors also show that food access is about more than just the consumer, but about the producer as well.

A. Breeze Harper's chapter on "Vegans of Color, Racialized Embodiment, and Problematics of the 'Exotic'" highly illustrates the crux of the section titled "Will Work for Food Justice," where, unlike the mainstream ideas of progressive movements, racial privilege is created within alternative food movements that favor self-identified White people. The author notes that food movements, particularly vegan movements, are propelled by a "colorblind" tactic towards food politics that glosses over race and class as influences on food choices. These movements seek to diversify the landscape of food, but they fail to see the social problems they perpetuate. Harper and the other authors in this section of *Cultivating Food Justice* succeed in bringing to light an

unexpected understanding of the denial of food consumption that is often not seen in the mainstream.

In the final section of the book (“Future Directions”), the chapter by E. Melanie DuPuis, Jill Lindsey Harrison, and David Goodman, entitled “Just Food?” outlines a crucial aspect of future discussions. The authors propose a reflexive approach to justice that takes into account its various meanings. Many movements attach themselves to one idea of the concept of justice, which fails to acknowledge the conflicts they may create by ignoring other ideas regarding social justice. DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman propose that different understandings of the definition of equality should be embraced in order for people to know the qualities of good communities and good food. The current food system is a system that is far from perfect, as the authors note, but it is also not a static process. The concepts within social justice and food movements will shift and change as people change. Thus, reflexivity operates by focusing on process rather than the goal of creating a perfect world. The authors note that an important aspect to consider is that the concept of reflexivity places a wedge between what is true equality and what is simply charity. It creates inclusivity to empower people rather than allow them to merely survive. This is a significant argument for social justice in general, as many groups embrace many meanings as to what justice is and how we can create a better world for all.

Along with highlighting important aspects and tensions within food systems and social justice, a strength of *Cultivating Food Justice* is the fact that the editors of the book focus largely on positionality, which is the understanding of context created by the many facets of social identities (e.g., class, race, gender) that help determine how the world is seen by people and how they, in turn, are seen. The editors of the book note their positionality within the preface by stating who they are and their individual histories that led them to the making of the book. Alison Hope Alkon cites her undergraduate education as something that put her in motion to oppose exploitation and support environmentalism. Julian Agyeman was attracted to the study of social justice through his appreciation of the environment and how it encapsulates race, ethnic backgrounds, and space. Their added histories contribute to the book because they remain consistent with the ideas each author presents. The book does not act as a blind approach to social justice and food, but adds to the larger context of where the editors are coming from in compiling this book.

A potential strength and weakness of *Cultivating Food Justice* is that the editors attempt to cover a wide range of social justice issues within the book. Due to this challenge, the book seems to serve as an introduction to provide readers with an array of social injustices in the food industry. In the section “Consumption Denied,” there are only two chapters regarding issue of food access to consumers. That is very little space in the book given to such a large issue. Overall, the book leaves the reader with broad strokes of ideas and no particular details on next steps. Though the editors and authors effectively highlight the problems that arise from a system that is highly neoliberal and focused on profits rather than feeding people, there is a need for more discussion about the specific future directions of social policy in agriculture at the macro level within the United States.

Cultivating Food Justice is an appropriate book for those who have an interest in agriculture or government policy. The editors compiled works by authors who thoroughly illustrate the reaches of social inequalities in all areas of the agricultural industry. This book is also appropriate for those who seek to understand more about social justice and inequality. Since the book is introductory in nature by covering such a broad range of topics, it is most appropriate for those who are entering their respective fields as well as for those who work in social advocacy.

As a whole, *Cultivating Food Justice* brings up subjects and discussion points on social justice and food that are both expected and unexpected. It brings to light the issues that one may not typically see on the surface, such as problems that arise with alternative food movements. Often, alternative food movements are thought of as the gold standard to model new food system on. It is interesting to see that even the most earnest movements on the surface can have social problems underneath. Each section of the book brings a diverse array of issues to the table for the reader to understand and evaluate. Because of this, the book serves as a jumping-off point for readers to decide which issues are of interest and worthy of further pursuit. This work relates to others on the subject of social justice in demonstrating that it is not a singular issue, but one that is tied to the many facets of society that create or exacerbate inequalities. The editors and contributors extensively address appropriate issues of social justice and inequalities from producer to consumer, which gives the reader a broad look at a complex industry within the United States.