

**BOOK REVIEW**

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*Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota*

By Craig B. Upright. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020; 256 pages. \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5179-0073-1.

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**REVIEWED BY ELLEN A. AHLNESS**

Early in *Grocery Activism's* introduction, Upright introduces a tactic that guided Whole Food Market's expansion across the United States: the identification and co-opting of existing organic food markets. By the end of *Grocery Activism*, readers will be intimately familiar with this tactic. Right away, Upright explains what makes Minnesota a unique playing field in the unfolding story of the organic food industry in the United States. Minnesota witnessed a significant formation of cooperative food stores in the 1970s, facilitating centers "for debate and distribution" that ultimately supported their own survival (4).

The introduction posits the driving question of *Grocery Activism*: Why have grocery cooperatives continued to thrive despite the greater availability of organic foods in more conventional supermarkets? They have transcended their initial contexts where organic food was more often a concept than a reality. By the conclusion, Upright has presented a compelling case for a central premise in their argument: Cooperatives' strengths lie in their supposed weaknesses. Because cooperatives are so dependent on local support and economies, they must pay attention to (and meet) local demands and wants. In other words, while cooperatives as a collective share common

traits and goals, cooperatives as individual units are highly shaped by their particular social, economic, and political contexts. At the same time, cooperatives supported one another through critical periods of development. Crucially, Upright clarifies that they do not assert that cooperatives are *solely* responsible for the rise of the organic food movement.

Upright's argument for cooperatives' longevity—and moreover, their ability to thrive—is a three-pronged claim. First, cooperatives did not emerge to primarily act as vendors for natural and organic foods; rather, they were formed to promote social change, with “food as power” as a central tenet of their movement (6). Second, cooperatives were selective and actionable in selecting their goals and strategies for accomplishing social change. Third, cooperatives in Minnesota mirrored broader changes in the national organic food industry, creating and drawing from a larger consumer base.

The second prong of the argument clarifies that social change is a broad goal; what made cooperatives successful was their ability to narrowly define their goals and strategies they used to pursue them. By championing the idea of “intentional consumerism” they dually addressed the structure and culture of society. The third prong asserts that because social movements and transformations took place at in lower and local social structures, they garnered less scrutiny from critics. By the time large, national chains came to be and began to spread, local cooperatives had to react.

These three prongs are woven through the book's narrative, which flows naturally across its five chapters and conclusion. Chapter 1 roots the development of natural and organic foods through the twentieth century in response to broader shifts in agricultural practices. Chapter 2 builds on this history as it explores the long-term history of cooperative organizations as a social service structure. Chapter 3 turns a focus to Minnesota, discussing the unique social and geographical features (both inextricably tied to farming and progressive politics) that have led to its forty-plus food cooperatives currently in operation (more than any other state; 13). Chapter 4 turns a close eye onto a focused period in Minnesota's food cooperative history—from 1970 to 1975—to challenge the idea of a rural–urban divide. Chapter 5 looks at the following five years (1975–1980), a period when Upright argues food cooperatives focused their missions and experienced rapid growth across the state as they embedded social values in the goods they sold. The conclusion muses on the legacy of these cooperatives in contemporary society and is

where Upright offers a particularly important service and principle that they may offer to continue their survival: education.

For readers coming to this book from an environmental studies or food chain politics background, there may be some concern that Upright does not attempt to define *organic*, a concept fundamental to the text. Upright is forthcoming in this, clearly explaining that it does not try to define the label's meaning in contemporary society, or its practices in farming. Upright relies on a broad (if imprecise) understanding of its fundamental principles.

Texts on social movements and change frequently appeal more heavily to one sector of interested fields (e.g., political science, public policy, sociology, race and ethnic studies, or women, gender, and sexuality studies). What makes *Grocery Activism* particularly appealing is that the content is accessible to an interdisciplinary audience. This book is recommended to anyone seeking to expand their knowledge on food politics, or to learn more about the role of the Midwest in social movements that are often ascribed to the East and West Coasts. Just like their food cooperative subject matter, *Grocery Activism* is notable for its accessibility for audiences from established scholars to undergraduate students. Combining storytelling with deep, impacting description, *Grocery Activism* is a narrative that brings the Midwest into the conversation on progressive and natural socioeconomic movements.