



Craig B. Upright: Grocery activism: the radical history of food cooperatives in Minnesota

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Purchasing organic food in today's world likely means taking a trip to Whole Foods, owned by one of the richest men in all of history, Jeff Bezos. Although it is hard to imagine organic foods as something other than a luxury item targeted towards affluent demographics, the origin story of the organic foods market is vastly different. Written by Winona State University associate professor of sociology Craig B. Upright, *Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota* dives back into the 1970s to paint a vivid image of the subversive world of organic groceries and food co-ops before the era of Whole Foods.

Upright's writing is both narrative and analytical through a pleasant combination of chronological storytelling and sociological analysis of the history of food cooperatives in Minnesota, making it simultaneously attractive to the scholar and very accessible to the layperson. Upright sets this timeline in the context of other U.S. forms of co-ops, arguing that these food co-ops of the 1970s are a challenge to capitalism and the status-quo unlike many previous co-ops. Upright's recurring argument is that organic foods in cooperative grocery stores were a "hot cause and cool mobilization" (p. 66), meaning an everyday response to the food system's capitalization and increasing use of chemicals and packaging. *Grocery Activism* thoroughly succeeds at making this point and adds to the broader literature on using capitalist markets as a vehicle for social change, but I feel that Upright limited the impact and relevance of the book by not making stronger ties between this brief Minnesotan history and the current neoliberal landscape of organic groceries.

The first section of the book contextualizes both the formation of the organic food market and the rise of food cooperatives as a fitting vehicle for this newly birthed industry. The book's introduction serves the purpose of showing the reader why they should be interested in the topic of food co-ops in the first place. Interspersed personal reflections, photos of food co-ops in action, and scanned materials distributed by food co-ops work to build reader interest in Minnesotan food cooperatives. Chapter 1 looks at past public response to changes in the global food system and examines a variety of thinkers who envisioned a more sustainable agriculture. Upright paints these reactions as the framework for the emergence of organic or natural food production systems. Chapter 2 engages with the broader history of cooperative development in the U.S. and where Minnesotan food co-ops sit within it. Upright covers a number of different types of previous co-ops, arguing that these were primarily market failure corrections that do not necessarily challenge capitalism. In contrast, Upright illustrates how the food cooperatives popping up in the 1970s were more of a social threat to traditional market structures due to their connection to newly birthed organic and natural food products.

The second section of the book provides a sociological exploration of the history of Minnesotan food cooperatives. Chapter 3 investigates the parallel underlying drivers of the organic foods and food cooperative movements, looking at the movements' intersection and eventual intertwining. Additionally, Upright uses this chapter to analyze the geographic differentiation between the emergence of new-wave food co-ops over time in Minnesota. Chapter 4 zooms in on the first half of the 1970s where food co-ops were concentrated in urban areas. Upright uses voting data from the 1972 presidential election to analyze the political orientations associated with the neighborhoods that were home to food cooperatives. Additionally, this chapter examines the compelling "Co-op Wars" where differing ideology on the

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function of food co-ops led to an attempted Marxist takeover of the distribution warehouse fueling all the Minnesotan food cooperatives.

The final section of the book engages with the maturation of the early food co-op movement. Chapter 5 details the aftermath of the aforementioned “Co-op Wars” and how food cooperatives continued to spread into rural parts of Minnesota. Upright emphasizes that this second phase of food cooperative formation was less connected to political underpinnings and more rooted solely in the promotion of buying more sustainable and healthy foods. In other words, Upright shows the movement’s emphasis shifting from the structure of buying food towards the food itself. Lastly, the conclusion looks at the decoupling of the organic food and food cooperative movements. Upright shows that co-ops eventually lost their informal status as exclusive carriers of organic products and how food co-ops thus have adapted, allowing them to persist through time.

Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota is well written and impressively maintains a highly engaging tone and narrative throughout its entirety. In addition to being entertaining, I would certainly describe the book as informative and scholarly. Upright does a great job at blending his sociological research into the book’s timeline without treading too deeply in theory or putting off readers unfamiliar with sociological methodology. Because of these qualities, this book is best suited for undergraduate students with an interest in the sociology of food systems, agriculture, or social movements in general, but anybody

interested in the book’s topic will easily understand and gain some valuable insight from reading it. I would absolutely recommend the book to students and food-curious individuals, as the topic of food cooperatives is not one that is widely understood or studied in relation to food systems or social change. The book is relatively narrow in focus, primarily aiming to take readers through a detailed stand-alone analysis of a brief timeline of cooperative organization around food in Minnesota. Upright clearly meets this goal and occasionally makes nods to today’s neoliberal organic foods industry, but I find myself wishing that he leaned more heavily into this topic like he does in the introduction and conclusion sections. The only weakness of *Grocery Activism* is the limited applicability of the book’s contents beyond itself, as its narrow scope somewhat prohibits bridging this history of food co-ops in Minnesota with the overall literature and history on improving the social and environmental sustainability of our present capitalist food system at large.

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