

## BOOK REVIEW

**Grocery activism: the radical history of food cooperatives in Minnesota**, by Craig B. Upright, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 256 pp., ISBN 978-1-5179-0073-1

Craig P. Upright combines his passions for food and social justice in *Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota*. Upright, a former cook, coffee shop entrepreneur, and activist, employs a narrative style to introduce the reader to the social history of the Twin Cities. Upright argues that the connection of cooperatives with organic food was not inevitable, and he walks us through the historical process of how cooperatives came to be so closely affiliated with the promotion of organic food.

This case study of the development of food cooperatives in Minnesota has wide appeal. It offers something to those interested in environmental and food activism as well as to students of social movements and of food studies. Upright avails himself of the archives at the Minnesota Historical Society, whose holdings include original documents from various cooperatives. He supplements photographs, business plans, and budgets from cooperatives with interviews, unpublished manuscript data from the federal government (The Bureau of Labor Statistics), and census information. Writings, dating to the nineteenth century on organic farming practices and cooperative distribution systems in Minnesota, give the work historical depth.

Upright's main argument is that cooperatives remain relevant today as they are perfectly positioned to cater to the current national penchant for locally produced food and mainstream ideas about social justice. What is more, the author conclusively establishes that cooperatives were foundational to the creation of a viable organic food distribution network that both cooperatives and mainstream grocery stores across the United States benefit from today.

In the first chapter Upright skillfully contextualizes the ascent of organic agriculture. He deftly explains three centuries of change from traditional agriculture with its emphasis on soil viability, and contrasts that with what is the norm in the US today – industrial agriculture with its mechanized labor and off-site chemical inputs. The second chapter takes us into the nineteenth-century history of the development of Minnesota cooperatives and how they were influenced by both national and international movements, such as the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society from England.

Chapter 3 recounts how cooperatives and organic growers found each other in the late 1970s at a time when the US government was discouraging organic food production in its quest to modernize.

The outcome of the mid-1970s conflict over the mission of cooperatives resulted in ever closer coordination between cooperatives and organic growers. Chapter 4 details the competing ideologies cooperatives espoused: one stance emphasized the empowerment of workers by supplying them with cheap, mass produced food to strengthen them for the overthrow of capitalism. Ultimately, cooperatives in the Twin Cities chose a different path; an emphasis on the responsible consumption of healthy food and the transformation of social values and habits. This second approach was less immediately confrontational but resulted in a more pervasive cultural effect nationwide.

Chapter 5 delves into the specifics of the development of the organic food distribution network and its eventual takeover by agribusiness in the 1980s and 1990s. It also explores the

organizational challenges that constricted the expansion of cooperatives and details the changes in labor and organizational hierarchy cooperatives had to make in order to survive into the twenty-first century.

Upright's assemblage of the cause of organic food in the nineteenth century is a necessary context for understanding the history of food activism today. However, reducing this section would have made room for the history of the Scandinavian settler culture in Minnesota, and how this culture itself contributed to the ready adoption of food cooperatives. This history is specific to Minnesota and greater attention to that cultural history would lend more depth and texture to both the local and the national histories of social movements.

*Grocery Activism* is an inspiring story of the establishment of democratic access to good food in places underserved by capitalist markets, both rural and urban. The strength of the book is its identification of cooperatives as providing consumers with the means to participate in social justice movements through their mundane food purchases. The playing out of the mission of cooperatives to create social change from inside capitalist markets is an irony that should not be overlooked. It declares that it is possible for a network of communities to change the market structure along with the values of consumers across the nation.

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