

Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota, by **Craig B. Upright**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 264 pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9781517900731.

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Craig Upright's *Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota* analyzes food cooperatives' unique history as both organizations and arbiters of a certain politics that made available and popularized organic foods. Firmly rooted in a sociology of organizations and economic sociology, Upright offers an important case study within the complex world of radical politics of the late 1960s and 1970s. Replete with hippies, organic farmers, radical Marxists, proto-revolutionaries, communitarians, and societal dropouts, the co-op scene in Minnesota offers a glimpse into the wider politics of the era. In this way, Upright achieves all that he sets out to accomplish by describing how a marginal economic form (cooperatives) played a significant role in taking a previously nearly nonexistent commodity (organic food) and catalyzing a juggernaut in global food production and distribution such that Whole Foods is now a subsidiary of Amazon.

Upright begins with a brief glance at the emergence of organic foods (food) cooperatives in the United States. He then charts the relative strength of food cooperatives in Minnesota with a focus on the late 1960s and 1970s based on key informants, archival material, and voting patterns. With a specific interest in the contentious politics of cooperatives in this era, he dedicates an entire chapter to a hostile takeover event by Marxist-inspired "revolutionaries" and their tactics of squatting in the distribution headquarters to push for a food politics focused on price and access (what would fall under a food justice or equity heading nowadays) and away from an emphasis on "healthy and organic." Upright's argument of affinity hinges on the fact that healthy and organic won out in Minnesota in 1976 during the Co-op Wars primarily because its advocates had incorporated as

a nonprofit and not an official cooperative, leaving the insurgents on the outside looking in. Legal designations aside, the food revolutionaries "proclaimed that 'natural' and especially 'organic' food was a product for the bourgeoisie that worked against the coming workers' revolution. But in its simplest formulation, the issue really centered on what types of beans should be stocked on the co-ops' shelves" (pp. 68–69).

Upright offers the cooperative era in Minnesota as an important yet cautionary tale of organizations challenging capitalism only to be swallowed and appropriated by the same system. Upright concludes, "It's hard to create a lasting institution based upon opposition to the mainstream forces of society, especially if the values you promote become widely shared" (p. 203). Overall, Upright provides an interesting story of organizational and economic sociology during an era of emerging food cooperatives in Minnesota.

Two major things hinder Upright's book from being more interesting to a wider set of scholars. First, by limiting the study to a narrow range of formal organizations (thus privileging longevity and legal documentation), the book misses out on the importance geographic proximity and community bonds of volunteerism played in the emergence of certain cooperatives and the roles key individuals may have played in various cooperatives. The book consistently emphasizes the *consumer* politics of the cooperatives rather than the community embeddedness of the cooperatives as businesses—the volunteers and main actors and those that shopped (sometimes consumers, almost always neighbors). Further, there is little to no engagement with the consequences wrought by the behemoth of agricultural subsidies (to the tune of billions of dollars) that continue to instantiate a dangerous and inequitable food system resulting in higher food prices for healthy food in tandem with differential labor laws that depress wages and marginalize agricultural and food labor.

By adopting a stance of antagonistic movement politics, the observational methods of organizational and economic sociology blind Upright to a whole host of non-measurable

things going on in cooperatives—which leads me to my second major critique. In a book purportedly about cooperatives, Upright undersells their value and much vital social scientific work done on them that could have bolstered the arguments. The absence of Elinor Ostrom's work in particular raises a flag. Similarly noticeable absences include any of the cutting-edge work elevating Karl Polanyi, circular and alternative economies, and local currency. Also absent is any mention of the vibrant (if nascent, at the time) sociology of cooperation (most notably in the work of Henrik Infield between the 1940s and 1970s) that continues to be relegated to the historical dustbin. To be fair, we all make methodological choices, and the lesson we can draw is not one of methodological indifference but more an encouragement that there is much to mine even in our own sociological family tree.

In many ways I think Upright accomplished what he wanted to—the book offers an interesting case study of food cooperatives in Minnesota that helps partially explain how organic foods went from practically nonexistent to the very kind of big business that cooperatives formed to avoid. Students and scholars interested in organic foods, sustainable agriculture, food studies, grocery stores, urban planning, or agri-food studies will see methodological and theoretical flaws, but this case study of food cooperatives offers a significant contribution. Students and scholars new to these fields, though, will find an important and enjoyable jumping-off point to explore the complex and emergent history of alternative food futures while looking, notably, to the past.