

Book Review

Review of “Grocery Activism. The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota”

By Craig B. Upright

University of Minnesota Press. 2020, 264 pages. <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/grocery-activism>.

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Many people are familiar with the adage “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” and its abbreviated version “you are what you eat”. Many people are also familiar with the “Certified Organic” logo that is visibly displayed on many products in grocery stores nowadays. Yet, as Upright reminds us in “Grocery activism. The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota”, the concept of “organic food” was practically unknown before the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, Upright argues that the “organic food movement” eventually became the organic food industry, an industry that has been growing during the last decades and reached over 50 billion \$US in 2019. At the core of this industry are cooperative grocery stores, which created the infrastructure that allowed the organic food industry to develop nationwide. In this book, Upright examines the food cooperatives from Minnesota because the state has a long and vibrant history of progressive politics centered on local and organic food.

The book is part of a growing number of academic studies at the intersection of social movements and markets. The first chapter describes the evolution of the idea of organic food in response to the massive industrialization of the agriculture through the 20th century. This chapter identifies the intellectual origins of the concept of organic food and discusses the role of reformers who challenged power in the political and economic arenas. The second chapter examines the history of the cooperative as an organizational form that not only aimed to improve market efficiency but also to advance particular social agendas. Borrowing Hayagreeva Rao’s terminology, Upright argues in this chapter that the “hot cause” of environmentally friendly food combined with the “cool mobilization” offered by the cooperative grocery store made possible the growth of the market for organic food. The third chapter focuses on the growth of food cooperatives in communities across Minnesota, a state that had the highest number of cooperative societies in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. This chapter provides a detailed count of Minnesota cooperative grocery stores and a description of the way in which US Department

of Agriculture employees and various food experts “derided organic enthusiasts as woefully misinformed about plant biology” (p. 109). Upright argues that the lack of support from government officials and bureaucrats created a vacuum in the market that allowed food cooperatives to satisfy consumer demand for organic food.

The following chapter describes formation of new cooperatives during the early 1970s and shows that these cooperatives were formed mainly in communities with strong progressive attitudes, as measured by the level of support they expressed for the Democratic nominee for president in 1972. The chapter also documents the “co-op wars” of 1976, in which coop members who argued for developing a Marxist agenda clashed with members who were committed to focusing on organic food. One of the most interesting arguments made in this chapter is about the role of food cooperatives as social movement organizations that resisted what Lukes describes as the third dimension of power, through which those in power instill values in individuals that might contradict their self-interests. Thus, Upright argues that food cooperatives attempted to convince consumers to distrust large corporations that made processed food and to become conscious consumers who choose food that is good for themselves and the planet. Chapter five examines the spread of cooperatives during the second half of the 1970s and shows that familiarity with the cooperative organization form, rather than the dominant political orientation of the community, accounts for the emergence of new coops during this stage. This chapter also discusses an interesting fact; while less than 10 percent of small businesses in the United States last only for a few years, almost three quarters of Minnesota food coops have survived more than a decade. According to Upright, this fact can be explained by the fact that Minnesota cooperatives were able to cooperate with one another without exposing one another to the vulnerabilities inherent in a tightly interconnected social system. The final chapter discusses some of the legacies of cooperatives, from preserving the integrity of the organic food label when it was launched by the US Department of Agriculture, to forging collaborative relationships among themselves, to creating a stable distribution network for buying and selling local food.

This book contributes to the productive dialogue between scholars of organizations and social movements by providing a detailed examination of the history of food cooperatives in one state. There are many memorable anecdotes and interesting pictures, and the writing style is accessible to the general public. At the same time, the book’s potential impact on academic research is somewhat limited by the fact that it does not explore all the relevant research questions. One such question is why does Minnesota have the largest number of cooperatives in the country? One of the scholars mentioned in the conclusion claims that cooperatives are the “peculiar institutions of Scandinavians”; indeed, given that many of the settlers from Minnesota are from Scandinavian countries, it is an intriguing possibility that the cultural values and traditions of 19th century settlers played an important role in the establishment of food cooperatives toward the end of the 20th century. Therefore, it remains an open question whether the ethnic composition of communities played an important role for the

food cooperatives' emergence and survival. Another interesting question that is not systematically addressed is what was the influence of the food cooperatives on grocery stores and, more generally, on corporations? It is possible that these cooperatives enhanced not only consumers' awareness about the benefits of organic and local food but also managers' awareness about the possibility of developing a "people, planet, and profit" or a sustainability-focused strategy. Additionally, the book does not engage deeply with theories of social movement outcomes or market emergence. The "hot cause/cool mobilization" dichotomy is helpful for describing food activists' grievances and tactics, but it is too simplistic to explain why grocery activism was more successful in some communities or periods than others. Despite these shortcomings, however, I believe this book will be useful not only for scholars of movements and markets but also for consumers interested in understanding the way in which what they eat shapes who they are, and vice versa.

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