Review of:
Food Activism: Agency, Democracy, and Economy.

By: Brad Jones (Independent scholar)

It is an auspicious time for scholars interested in issues of activism, alterity, and agency. The Zapatista movement, the World Social Forum, Fair Trade, and other forms of alterglobalization continue to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism and the threat to democratic political principles. The international Occupy movement, Arab Spring, and most recently Ferguson, may have receded from front page headlines but the sentiments that animated them linger in the international public consciousness. In 2011 Time magazine went so far as to name “the Protestor” as the person of the year. But resistance, it must be remembered, takes myriad forms; from conspicuous displays of solidarity to subtle, atomized foot dragging.

It is in this context that Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalichi’s Food Activism: Agency, Democracy, and Economy presents itself as a valuable and timely offering. This edited volume makes two particularly important contributions. First, it convincingly argues that food is a critical nodal point through which activist subjectivities are materialized and around which activist practices are mobilized. Secondly, it emphasizes that the ethnographic approach is especially well-suited to illuminate the diverse and nuanced ways in which contemporary global forces are negotiated, appropriated, and challenged by agents in practices of everyday life.

The book opens with an excellent introductory chapter written by the editors. This section contextualizes the case studies to follow within the broader interdisciplinary food studies literature. Much has been written in recent years from a variety of disciplinary perspectives but nowhere has it been brought together in a strictly comparative and ethnographic approach to investigate how globalization and food activism are mutually-
constitutive processes. Appropriately then, the body of the book is arranged in three sections that situate activist practices at various scales—Local Engagements, National Actions, and Transnational Networks. The tie that binds the cases studies together is the editor’s broad notion of food activism as anything that “takes aim at the capitalist system of production, distribution, consumption, and commercialization,” and includes “people’s discourses and actions to make the food system or parts of it more democratic, sustainable, healthy, ethical, culturally appropriate, and better in quality” (6).

In addition to the introduction, Counihan and Siniscalchi have also each contributed original articles that explore a similar topic, the Slow Food movement in Italy, from polar perspectives—a bottom-up (grassroots chapters) and a top-down (international headquarters) approach, respectively. Counihan (Ch. 5) presents a quartet of Sardinian women empowered through food to become agents in the local public sphere, while emphasizing that they are at the same time constrained by thoroughly gendered cultural expectations. Siniscalchi (Ch. 15) depicts Slow Food as a political institution that manifests on various economic registers all of which are informed by market logics, moral meanings, and social interests. Taken together, these Slow Food articles emphasize the salience of a holistic methodological approach that is at once attentive to economic and political structure and to the nuanced ways those structures are challenged in everyday life. Van Daele (Ch. 14), in his exploration of Sri Lankan food activism, well articulates this central theme that runs throughout the chapters; “If one focuses only on the large scale...there is the danger of obfuscating the rich and multifarious ways in which people negotiate their basic concerns through food. An anthropology of food activism can bring this multiplicity of food back into the picture...” (222).

Alongside the seasoned Counihan and Siniscalchi, the volume includes a terrific representation of emerging food studies scholars who explore food activism from various methodological vantage points and from diverse geographic locales. While all the chapters are informative and engaging, several articles stand out. Greg de St. Maurice (Ch. 6) explores the place-making practices that are engaging Kyoto’s unique cultural and political heritage to show that place plays a central role in social movements and food activism. Daniel Reichman (Ch. 11) explores the global coffee trade, a long-standing locus and laboratory of food activism, to ask if transparency and activism are synonymous and shows that this debate in Honduras not only informs the meaning of food democracy itself but that transparency politics render important social and economic realities invisible. Finally, Elizabeth Fitting (Ch. 12) investigates activist discourses on transgenic maize in Latin America to highlight that the process by which heirloom varietals take on
value in contrast to genetically modified alternatives represents an important form of identity politics. She shows that native maize varietals are under threat by the specter of global homogenization yet these flattening forces also encourage local reactionary forms of embedding and entrenchment in terms of community, culture, and cuisine.

The editor’s Introduction provides context and theoretical sign-posts for situating the chapters that follow within the broader scholastic literature. However, the ethnographic essays themselves, given their explicit focus on the themes of agency, democracy, and economy, could speak more pointedly to, for instance, the peasant resistance work of Eric Wolf or James C. Scott, the practice anthropology of Sherry Ortner, and the anarchist anthropology of David Graeber. Another possible critique of the volume is that the net for what counts as activism in the case studies is especially broad. Must activism, to be so defined, lean towards militancy as suggested by Garcia-Parpet (Ch. 7) in the case of French biodynamic viticulture? Can it manifest in such subtle ways as the household resistance practices presented by Garth (Ch. 4) in Cuba? If both count equally as activism, where exactly do we locate the boundaries of the term?

I am, however, inclined to argue the contrary; that food activism is such a progressive way of thinking about points of resistance in the global industrial food system that the initial step towards a coherent definition would come about from exactly the sort diverse case studies the book presents. As the editor’s note, “our choice of an expansive perimeter permits us to include cases located at the boundaries of food activism, through which we can reflect critically on the limits and meaning of the term” (7). Moreover, it should be remembered that activist movements, as anthropologist David Graeber has convincingly articulated, are by definition diverse in their decentralized form of organization—their only loosely-threaded projects, networks, strategies, and aims (Graeber 2004). As the chapters explicitly show, food activism mobilizes around myriad projects conceived within local frameworks rather than any form of overarching ur-theory that guides actions on a global scale. To attempt a restrictive definition of what exactly constitutes a coherent ideology of food activism may very well be inimical to the inclusive, egalitarian ethos of activist practices and projects in the first place. *Food Activism* offers an erudite introduction to an emerging field and fertile subject. The volume appeals to academics, activists, and lay-audiences alike.
References