Dec-2012

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol31/iss2/14

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Review Essay

FOODWINKED

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F. H. King was an early twentieth-century agronomist relieved of his duties at the USDA Bureau of Soils for promoting controversial ideas about soil nutrition. After exiting he visited the Far East, recounting his trip in Farmers of Forty Centuries, or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea, and Japan (1911), a seminal document and inspiration for the contemporary sustainable agriculture movement.

King’s legacy as an agricultural pioneer is maintained by the F.H. King Students of Sustainable Agriculture Club on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, where King taught for over a decade. Every week during the growing season, the group distributes free produce to a few dozen people in front of the library. Not surprisingly, the iconic likeness of King on the group’s t-shirts calls to mind similar images of Karl Marx.

The King produce giveaway I witnessed this summer was entertaining and exhilarating. As I left the spectacle, I drifted across the street to the Wisconsin Union for some local ice cream. Eating my cone by the shores of Lake Mendota, I faced the back side of the Union building. There, I saw a semi-trailer from Aramark, a multinational food services corporation. The truck was unloading food, without fanfare, for the thousands of locals who eat and drink at the Union every day. My vision’s not that good, so I couldn’t see if the Aramark driver was wearing an Adam Smith t-shirt.

Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu’s The Locavore’s Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000 Mile Diet is a broadside assault on the virtues of local eating as promoted by the King students, Polyface Farm owner Joel Salatin, and “rock star” journalist Michael Pollan. The title is a direct rejoinder to the talisman of the contemporary “good food” movement, Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (2006).

Desrochers and Shimizu structure their argument as an intense look at the “L” in SOLE (Sustainable, Organic, Local, Ethical) food. Through the local lens, they hack away at five “myths” promoted by locavores (the 2007 word-of-the-year for the Oxford American Dictionary). The myths are that the local production and consumption of food promote social cohesion, improve local economies, benefit the environment, increase food security, and is healthier, tastier and safer. Labeling these principles as “myths,” the duo concludes that local eating weakens communities, hurts local economies, harms the environment, endangers the food supply, and isn’t good for you. Whether or not you agree with their argument and conclusions probably has less to do with how you eat and more about your alignment with the duo’s political agenda, which is the real point of this book.

The book does a solid job laying out most of the moving pieces one has to consider if one wants to “eat local”; an outsider’s view is always illuminating.
However, the book immediately falters by creating a straw man in its isolation of local eating from the other “SOLE” concerns, its marginalization of health as a food procurement concern, and its total neglect of the role of pleasure. While in any movement there are always outliers who are easy to assail for their orthodoxy (such as adherents of the “100-Mile Diet”) for most local eaters, local is but one among many metrics that figure in the calculus of household and personal food economy. What we choose to eat is a complex issue and this book simplifies it to the point of parody.

And the fact that Desrochers and Shimizu want to battle with rather than engage local eating ultimately derails the book. If the authors admit that “In a market economy, people do not bother tinkering with advances unless they are facing pressing problems” (p. 184), then it’s vexing that they won’t allow for the fact that local-eating consumers see the current state of the industrial food chain as a “pressing problem.”

And why this reluctance to engage? Because ultimately this book isn’t about addressing and working through real concerns about the food system: it’s about promoting a vision of how food consumers should acquiesce to a rationalized system of production. While they certainly don’t hide their lust for the unrestrained free market, Desrochers and Shimizu’s ideological purpose is never more apparent than at the conclusion of chapters two and five, respectively, when we’re told that “Providing the basic necessities of life at ever more affordable prices should be the starting point of all discussions on local social capital.” (p. 57) and “Economic development through trade liberalization is what food security should really be about.” (p. 140) Really? At the very least, foregrounding these foundational ideas as theses rather than conclusions for chapters would have been more intellectually honest. This is a book about unregulated free markets, not food.

It is this intellectual bait-and-switch and the shock-and-awe campaign against “the other side” that undoes a lot of good that a book like this could do. I have been a local food advocate for the past decade. I’ve started a farmers’ market, run a community garden, belonged to a Community Supported Agriculture group, given public talks about local eating, and offered courses in locavorism and globalization. I think local eating is good eating. As constructed by Desrochers and Shimizu, I am the enemy. But I don’t really see it that way. And I’ll say it: The global industrial food system has done a lot of good for a lot of people. But, from either side, there is no need for this debate to be an either/or, winner-take-all battle as presented here. And it can’t be. We can’t all eat local food and we shouldn’t eat food designed to serve stockholders rather than human needs. We need to get to that middle ground between the King students’ free heirloom lettuce and the Wisconsin Union’s industrially assembled Der Rathskeller Burger. This book doesn’t get us there.

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