

# Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

**Title:** Review of “Food, Farms & Solidarity: French Farmers Challenge Industrial Agriculture and Genetically Modified Crops” by Chaia Heller

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## *Food, Farms & Solidarity: French Farmers Challenge Industrial Agriculture and Genetically Modified Crops* Chaia Heller

Durham: Duke University Press. 2013. 352 pp.

In *Food, Farms and Solidarity*, anthropologist Chaia Heller investigates the *Confédération Paysanne* (CP), a union of French *paysans* (peasants) who led a campaign against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that expanded the scope of public debates about GMOs and played a pivotal role in their prohibition throughout Europe. Opposition to GM crops constitutes one aspect of CP's broader challenge to an encroaching industrial agriculture model and neoliberal development paradigm that threatens the viability of small-scale farming. While consumers typically lead alternative food movements in the Global North (e.g. organics), the *paysans'* mission is explicitly in solidarity with peasants in the Global South who are also fighting for their way of life.

Heller's lucid analysis of CP's creative protest tactics employs rich ethnographic detail and critical theory to impart practical insights and theoretical tools that can inspire and instruct anyone who dreams of a more just food system. *Food, Farms and Solidarity* makes valuable contributions to academic scholarship within social movement studies, food studies, and political ecology, though the book's most important impact is its integration of analysis *of* and analysis *for* food activists. Heller's innovative model of activist scholarship makes CP's successes and the analytical tools scholars use to analyze social movements accessible to a diverse readership. When public debates about GMOs erupted in Europe in the early 1990s, discussions revolved around potential risks GMOs pose to human and ecological health. Consumer groups and environmentalists spearheaded anti-GMO activism, contending GMOs were "Frankenfoods" that would incur indelible harm to consumers and the environment. Proponents argued the potential benefits to consumers (i.e., new products) far outweighed the inflated risks. Within this hegemonic "riskocentric" discourse, GMOs were either too risky or the dangers were grossly exaggerated; only scientists had the expertise to back claims for either camp.

When CP began organizing anti-GMO demonstrations in the mid-1990s, they broadened the terms of debate to include GMOs' impacts on producers, and in doing so they expanded the category of experts to include farmers.

For *paysans*, GMOs pose an imminent threat not because they are a health hazard but because they are a political and social hazard epitomizing the instrumentalist logic of capital-intensive agriculture that makes profit-making the primary goal of farming and attempts to render their services obsolete. *Paysans* categorize GM seeds alongside chemical fertilizers and monocultures as technologies that enhance the profit-making capacities of plantation-style farms while rendering smallholder farming "economically inefficient" and thereby unviable.

In contrast to the economizing logic of capital, Heller convincingly argues that *paysans* advocate a "solidarity-based rationality" concerned with maintaining the integrity of social fabrics and human well-being. While farmers have innovated new genetic material through seed saving and trading practices since the advent of agriculture, practices which also foster farmer solidarity, biotechnology affords this power to multinational corporations. As GM seeds are subject to private property law, corporations prohibit farmers from sharing or reusing seeds, and often GM seeds require fertilizers sold by the same company, undermining knowledge networks between farmers. While multinational corporations engineering seeds in labs and selling them to farmers is "efficient," *paysans* see GMOs as detrimental to the social relationships at the heart of exchanges of seeds, food, and knowledge. As such, CP considers GMOs unethical not because they are produced by "unnatural" tinkering with Mother Nature but because it is corporations that do the tinkering and profit from the products of the tinkering.

While CP's immediate aim is to challenge the neoliberalization of European agricultural policies, Heller shows that their solidarity ethic reaches beyond France. By identifying as peasants and networking with peasant organizations such as Via Campesina, *paysans* cultivate unity with the millions of self-identified peasants in the Global South who are also fighting for their livelihoods. While the term "peasant" is often associated with backwardness, *paysans* choose to identify as peasants to assert that peasants are not characters from the past but pioneers of a more ecologically and socially just future.

Heller draws upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork to detail the highly symbolic direct action strategies *paysans* use to capture media attention and provoke shifts at a discursive level. By combining nonviolent protest with performance art and juxtaposing unexpected signs like business suits and cow manure, these protests create a comical or ironic effect that disrupts neoliberal symbolic orders. *Paysans* frequently create "farms of the future" by hauling dirt, hay, and livestock into government offices or

fast food restaurants and then staging a leisurely picnic with farm-fresh food. Another common demonstration is a “crop pull,” in which demonstrators enter a GM crop field, uproot plants, and toss roughage into “hazardous material” bags. The movement’s most famous demonstration took place in 1999, when CP’s spokesperson, José Bové, was arrested while symbolically dismantling a McDonald’s under construction in Millau. When 50,000 demonstrators showed up in support outside Bové’s trial, the *paysans’* cause garnered international media attention. By detailing the *Confédération’s* stunt-like protests and powerful effects, Heller equips readers with the know-how to design their own protests that aim to subvert hegemonic logics.

Heller enlists an impressive array of social theorists including Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Donna Haraway to explain how *Confédération Paysanne* provoked a discursive shift and why their tactics prove so effective in swaying public opinion about GMOs in Europe. Yet unlike most scholarship that would use the movement as a case study to develop theory, Heller explicates abstractions like hegemony and Foucauldian discourse in refreshingly clear prose and applies them to CP’s campaigns so readers can conduct similar analyses of the movements they engage in and use their conclusions to foster more effective actions.

While it has become commonplace for social scientists to call for engaged scholarship relevant beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower, research products that communicate findings in accessible prose without sacrificing analytical rigor remain exceedingly rare. Chaia Heller’s investigation presents an encouraging example of scholarship that truly transgresses boundaries of academic/nonacademic writing. Offering more than a captivating read, this book will ignite conversations between scholars, students, and activists and sow the seeds to imagine and create more ecologically and socially just food systems.

**BOOK REVIEW | JOHN C. JONES**

## *Food Activism: Agency, Democracy, and Economy* Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi

**New York: Bloomsbury. 2014. 251 pp.**

From the biodynamic viticulture of activist French winemakers to the corporate sector-born Utz certification for global coffee trade, *Food Activism: Agency, Democracy,*

*and Economy* is a collection of ethnographic case studies collected and edited by Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi. The editors decided to assemble this book while conducting field research about the Slow Food Movement. Counihan and Siniscalchi take a broad view of food activism, defining it as “efforts by people to change the food system across the globe by modifying the way they produce, distribute, and/or consume food” (3). Their goal for *Food Activism* was fourfold: 1) to document examples of food activism across the globe; 2) to demonstrate the interconnected nature of global food activism; 3) to discuss tensions within food activist movements; and 4) to investigate the interaction between globalization and food activist movements. The editors achieved each of these goals by effectively weaving a holistic examination of food activism across the world. The case studies they have assembled individually suggest both diversity and uniformity within food activist movements across geographic, economic, political, and cultural boundaries. Taken collectively, the editors present a narrative of increasing awareness of self-determination in the face of globalization. This self-determination surrounding food is interconnected with other movements of varying scope across the world. This idea resonates within food system scholarship but also calls to the deeply primal relationship between food and humanity.

*Food Activism’s* chapters are easily readable for anyone with a basic understanding of food system theory and a solid social science background. Common themes include resistance, agency in the face of neoliberalism, democratic populism, local control of production, and the ritual space of food. Counihan and Siniscalchi present fourteen case studies in total, with each chapter of the text addressing one case. The chapter authors are a diverse group of anthropologists and sociologists from across the globe. This diversity extends across geographic location, level of experience, and research interests under the broad food system umbrella. The editors divide the book into three parts, each examining food activism at a different scale. The book’s ethnographies include five local cases, four national-scale movements, and five international movements. Chapter authors examine cases from both the Global North and Global South, including Canada, the United States, Egypt, France, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Columbia. The geographic diversity of the cases supports the editors’ central contention that food activism is truly an interconnected, multi-nodal global system.

Although most of the authors in this volume agree on the definition of food activism, divergent definitions