
ONLINE BOOK REVIEW

Amy Cohen*Ohio State University****Food, Farms, and Solidarity:
French Farmers Challenge Industrial Agriculture and Genetically Modified
Crops***

Chaia Heller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)

In the United States, popular discourse about food is almost always shaped from a consumer perspective: wellness, health, safety, and quality. Consumers are disciplined to worry over their bodies and what they are ingesting. Even ideas like fair trade are couched in the language of ethical consumption and choice: consumers are encouraged to take voluntary responsibility and care for small farmers, who are typically envisioned as a faceless and powerless mass toiling somewhere in the Global South.

Chaia Heller tells a radically different and important story, that of a smallholder producer's movement in the Global North and one with real political clout. Her book traces the development and growth of the famous *Confédération Paysanne*, France's second-largest agricultural union, which is organized around ideas of labor, livelihood, quality of life, worker solidarity, as well as, I should add, good food. The union was formed in late 1980s in the class interests of small farmers and has come to hold 20 percent or more of the seats in the national chamber of agriculture, a configuration of political power inconceivable today in the United States. Early in its tenure, the *Confédération Paysanne* also linked its interests with farmers in the Global South struggling against the inclusion of agriculture in free trade agreements and the dumping of cheap subsidized grains from countries in the Global North. (It cofounded *La Via Campesina*, a transnational movement of peasant farmers, agricultural laborers, and others.)

Heller's gripping ethnography is thus about the possibilities for agriculture in a neoliberal era—what she calls postindustrial agriculture. Postindustrial agriculture is a temporal and political space that combines deregulation with heightened forms of commodification and propertization designed in the interests of large capital. It is governed by a distinctive market rationality that is expressed in the expert's language of efficiency, cost-benefit calculations, and scientific risk. But as consumers experience an increasing lack of control over food systems, postindustrial agriculture is also marked by a

romanticization of the “artisanal” and “local”—ideas, Heller argues, that are easily co-opted by large agribusiness for profit.

Heller, however, also argues that the present moment is marked by genuine counter-hegemonic resistance: the Confédération Paysanne is devoted to food sovereignty, community self-determination, and democratic participation. Moreover, it asserts size, scale, and access to farming as independent ethical values, even if small-scale agriculture will not mean lower consumer prices or more efficient production.

The book’s overarching analytic theme is the distinction between instrumental and solidarity-based rationalities for organizing agriculture and activism, drawing on political ecology, science studies, social movement theory, as well as Heller’s own anarchist sensibilities. Heller illustrates this distinction through her description of the Confédération Paysanne and, in particular, the disparate strategies its members used in the late 1990s to help achieve a de facto ban of GMOs in France. These strategies included extensive efforts at policy reform within the Ministry of Agriculture. Here, union members adopted risk centric language, including a proposal to judge GMOs on a case-by-case basis, given scientific data about potential health and environmental consequences (such as antibiotic resistance and allergenicity). Heller interprets this strategy as an instance of instrumental rationality shaped by farmers’ acute attention to cultivating a public image of themselves as modern, progressive, and open to new technology. She juxtaposes this instrumental logic with the strategies of union members who pressed for a complete ban on GMOs as an unjust form of agribusiness that makes farmers dependent on large corporations for seeds and pesticides, and that destroys local knowledge networks. Here, union members engaged in direct actions such as destroying GMO plants and research, and they used their arrests and legal trials to generate public debate about GMOs. (An aside: an American legal reader will find it fascinating, if also under-analyzed, how exactly activists transformed charges that were presumably of trespass and property destruction into highly detailed courtroom arguments about public morality and the merits of the GMO controversy).

Among the central arguments of the book is that activists should cultivate self-reflexivity about their discursive practices. Even as she admires their creative and disparate strategies, Heller finds her interlocutors at times unaware of how they were participating in hegemonic frames of governance. In the GMO and other struggles, Heller is therefore particularly interested in how union members disrupted dominant narratives, positioning themselves as experts in different debates about food and food quality, and thus moving themselves and others “from instrumental logics to logics based on social justice” (p. 293).

Food, Farms, and Solidarity offers beautiful ethnography, illuminating a complex and nuanced understanding of a social movement that is at once

radical and pragmatic. The book sits productively and inspiringly at the intersection of ethnography and activism, likely reflecting Heller's own years with Confédération Paysanne. On occasion, I found Heller's critique of instrumentalism overly broad, which perhaps reflects THE fact that in her text markets stand for neoliberal globalization. Missing is attention to how the socio-moral values of the smallholders she describes are invariably intertwined with exchange value and thus their own cost-benefit calculations based on (small-scale) agricultural markets. Such analysis would flow readily from Heller's point that left analysts and activists must endlessly interrogate how they are disciplined by and simultaneously able to transgress and reappropriate hegemonic terms—as they look, as she does in this book, “for sparkling chips of what is utopian and solidarity based within a neoliberal world” (p. xii).