



Book Review

***Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons* by Jose Luis Vivero-Pol, Tomaso Ferrando, Olivier De Schutter & Ugo Mattei (Eds.), Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2018, 424pp, ISBN-13: 978-1138062627, price (hardback) £190; e-book £114**

Reviewed by **Annie Levy**¹

Ah, the Curse of Living in Interesting Times when the most far-fetched solutions to the dire predicaments of climate chaos begin to seem logical and appealing. Thus a leading progressive environmentalist proposes ceding back to wilderness the land we use for agriculture, with humans to be fed with artificial products developed and produced in laboratories by businesses for profit. Rationalising the absurd happens in the context of a global food supply dependent on neoliberal ‘enclosure’ (privatisation) of land, seeds, water, labour, markets and futures, on a planet of people increasingly vulnerable to food scarcity and potential breadbasket failures – with major mono-crops being jeopardised simultaneously by weather extremes.

Nevertheless, most of the world’s food is produced by small farmers, many of whom live in poverty but produce real food with limited resources. And much of our understanding of food does remain beyond the monetary, in terms

of critical cultural, medicinal, culinary and social values.

Into such complexity the concept of ‘Food Commons’ is welcome, as a paradigm to think with, and also as practices that need to be recognised as such. *The Routledge Handbook of Food Commons* is an early, major attempt by key scholar-activists to take on the details and problematics of reclaiming thinking about food (and its inputs) in terms beyond commodity value, and towards the many other meanings that underlie its essential roles. The weighty collection of articles under review here is densely academic and sometimes, therefore, difficult to read; and for this reason it might be inaccessible to many activists from backgrounds not trained in this way with words. That’s not a problem per se, though there’s the need for the concepts inside the academy to be facilitated outside, in communities, to be useful and truly transformative.

The Routledge volume also takes on many other issues of contemporary food politics, including food waste and its complicated relationship to schemes addressing hunger (note that there is a new Routledge volume on Food Waste published this month),² and Food Sovereignty as a perhaps competing vision of resistance to an unjust food system. Also included in the book are pieces addressing food as a human right, tradition and nutrition, approaches towards sustainability and diet in this rubric, privatised science and genetic resources, and even a wonderful chapter about human breast milk.

The political nature of seeds seems to be mentioned more in passing than in any particular focused articles. There's a particularly good article on the development of 'Food as a Commodity', which offers a clear post-war history of how we came to be where we are. I personally find the example learned from 'Community-building through food self-provisioning in Central and Eastern Europe' relevant to practical efforts to reinvigorate local food in my part of mid-Wales.

Most importantly, this book must be received in our moment of recognising the crisis-point at which global human society, interdependent and vulnerable, finds itself – on a planet strained to its limits and jeopardised by an increasingly chaotic

climate. Challenging the conceptual lenses through which we see food and the food system can only be helpful, and practical, in this pivotal moment.

The famous cinema exclamation 'Soylent Green is people!' has never seemed less dystopian, in its future vision of the fictitious Soylent Corporation's control of every element of the food system, including human bodies as edible. Resistance to this potential nightmare vision begins, perhaps, with a radical reversal: let's reconsider every assumed aspect of privatisation and marketisation in the systems of land, water and seeds that bring human beings our essential nourishment, and name it a commons. This naming becomes an essential act of re-commoning, and practical imagination and hope. We thus illuminate our relationships with each other around food and its multi-faceted processes and nourishments – and begin the unmasking of the fetish of the commodity that Marx described so insightfully.

Notes

1 **Annie Levy** is a mid-Wales based cook and food writer interested in new ways of thinking about food and community.

2 See Christian Reynolds, Tammara Soma, Charlotte Spring & Jordon Lazell (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Food Waste*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2020.