



Ethical Eating in the Postsocialist and Socialist World, Part 2 of 3

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This is the second part of our special review section on [Ethical Eating in the Postsocialist and Socialist World](#). Check out the first part [here](#).

Is it more ethical to buy raw milk from the supermarket where food safety for your family is assured? Or is it more ethical to buy raw milk sold directly by semi-subsistence farmers along street curbs, but packaged in used Coca-Cola bottles? Even if one decides that it is more 'ethical' to buy from the farmers, does it necessarily mean that the consumers and producers are 'reconnected' through such 'alternative' food networks? And when you can't buy directly from the producers, can you trust the organic certification in your country? For many postsocialist citizens, the transition from socialism to market economy not only resulted in a pervasive decline in morality, but also led to the demise of the moral economy. Yet has it really?

These are just some of the questions that the anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists explore and challenge in this book. The last decade has seen an influx of research concerning the intersection of food and ethical consumption in social science. In spite of this, none of these studies of alternative food networks have looked beyond Western capitalist countries in North America and West Europe. This alone is enough to make *Ethical Eating in the Postsocialist and Socialist World* a must-read for activists and scholars who are concerned about the potential of ethical consumption and the future of alternative food networks. After all, 'many of the foods and food practices classified as "alternatives" in the



capitalist world have been an ordinary part of everyday life for decades in the socialist world' (p.6).

Ethical Eating is, however, a lot more than just filling the geographical gap. It is a timely and theoretically nuanced engagement with big questions like what makes something or someone ethical and what role does the state play in this emerging food movement. Edited by three anthropologists who have a long-standing interest in food and culture, this book brings us eight well-crafted essays featuring six different countries that share 'a common legacy of state socialism' (p.4). Despite the variety of topics, the question of *what is ethical* is a central theme that runs through this book. As the editors remark in the introduction, although the ethical concerns expressed by (post-) socialist citizens may not align with (and in some cases, they even contradict) their counterparts in capitalist societies (p.2), who 'frame their critiques and goals in opposition to industrial food production dictated by neoliberal capitalism' (Ibid), their ethical concerns are 'in fact deeply embedded within ethical value systems concerning health, safety, labour, access, autonomy, and democracy' (Ibid).

Indeed, as the contributors in this volume made clear, 'market socialist and postsocialist conversations about "ethical" foods and "alternative" food movements...frequently take on forms and meanings that differ significantly from those found in more familiar, advanced capitalist contexts' (p.3). In Lithuania, for example, buying raw milk from a vending machine in a supermarket may contradict the principle of supporting small-scale farmers, but feeding one's family with hygienic food is an ethic of care that one cannot deny (p.8; also see Miller 1998).



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In Vietnam, a married woman is 'expected to adopt her husband's culinary standards' (p.156). If a woman's husband is vegetarian, she has a moral obligation



to follow suit. In this sense, vegetarianism is less about combating climate change or advocating animal welfare, but more to do with the observing the 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek, 2010) of maintaining a harmonious marriage. It would be a mistake to ignore these differences or regard these 'ordinary ethics' as 'disqualified knowledge' (Foucault 1980:82).

Another theme that is central to this book is the role of the state in shaping the ethical dimensions of food and eating in (post-)socialist everyday life.

Activists of ethical food movements in North America and Europe tend to place their movement in opposition to the state and the market. But in postsocialist Russia, gardening is a way of cultivating nationalism (p.197).

This kind of 'biogeographic nationalism' is based on the Russian philosophy of *ekologicheski chistoe* (literally 'ecologically clean') (p.189) that privileges all forms of domestic production, even if it exposes the practitioners to potential contamination. The logic behind this is that the Russians believe that 'Russian soil is not just cleaner and healthier than non-Russian soil, but it also has purifying qualities that can compensate for unsafe and unhealthy attributes' (p.199). The Russian example clearly shows that an ecologically clean lifestyle is intrinsic to 'state-oriented economics, politics, and nutrition' (p.206).

Not only does the state continue to play a crucial role in the ideology and practices of ethical eating in some postsocialist countries (p.11), the 'memories of state socialism' (p.10) continue to influence people's perceptions of rural areas where many 'ethical foods' come from. As Klein discusses in his chapter, for many urban Chinese growing up during Mao's revolutionary period, the countryside is 'a place of misery' (p.121). Even today, the countryside is not always imagined as a tranquil sanctuary where one goes to indulge in the 'farmhouse fun' (*nonjiale*) (p.127). If angry farmers or 'backward' minorities are not rooted in the countryside, they could be a time bomb of social unrest that threatens the stability of urban dwellers (p.130). Paradoxically, food produced by the 'bumpkins' (*tu*) in remote mountain areas is deemed as safer and more natural by



these urban Chinese consumers (p.128-129).



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As with most academic writing, the essays in this volume follow a ‘standard’ structure that either begins with a vignette or a summary that outlines the thesis of the essay, followed by four to six sections in which the authors carefully examine the historical and social contexts of their case studies. While this style of writing makes it easy for academics to navigate the plethora of literature in their own fields, general audiences who tend to read from cover to cover may find the texts rather dense when read collectively. I raise this point because I think the insight offered by this book is extremely valuable and relevant for activists or even ordinary consumers; and I worry that some readers may shy away from this important book because of its academic prose.

As the editors of *Ethical Eating* write, ‘the contributors to this book share a commitment to understanding not only how people in market socialist and postsocialist countries articulate a sense of what is good, right, and necessary, but how these perspectives challenge existing paradigms in both scholarly and activist circles about the nature of “alternative” food systems’ (p.3). That is why I wish there were more spaces for ethnographic examples. Personal narratives and story-telling are powerful ways of countering grand narratives like ‘ethical consumption’.

While reading Caldwell’s chapter on gardening practices in Russia, I was so fascinated by her analysis that I wish the gardeners in her chapter could jump out and tell me, in their own words, why gardens and forests render them a sense of privacy (p.204).

Similarly, when Caldwell stated that ‘this sense of privacy is largely psychological’ (Ibid), I couldn’t help but wonder how these Russian gardeners would react! I



guess that explains why Avieli's chapter left a great impression on me. In his chapter on vegetarian ethics in late-socialist Vietnam, Avieli presents us with several striking quotes from his vegetarian informants (p.154). These accounts not only strengthen his argument that under the late-socialist regime, 'serving and eating vegetarian food' is 'political and subversive' (p.163), they also complicate our assumptions of vegetarian ethics. In attending to *other ways of being ethical*, this book makes a unique and important contribution to the scholarships of ethical consumption and alternative food movements. *Ethical Eating* will also be of interest to scholars in the field of postsocialist studies, especially those who are curious about the synergies between morality and social change.

References:

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Caldwell, Melissa L., Klein, Jakob A. and Jung, Yuson (eds.) 2014. [Ethical Eating in the Postsocialist and Socialist World](#). Oakland: University of California Press. 232 pp. Hb: \$65.00. ISBN: 9780520277403.