



Book Review

Plant-Based diets for succulence and sustainability

Edited by K.M. Kevany

Routledge, 2020: 256 pages

Review by Ryan J. Phillips*

As part of Routledge's "Studies in Food, Society, and the Environment" series, Kevany's recent edited volume provides a timely look at plant-based eating in both research and practice. *Plant-Based Diets for Succulence and Sustainability* (2020) includes fourteen chapters divided into four thematic sections (environmental sustainability, human health, animal rights and welfare, and political economy), and is delivered in an engaging yet accessible way appropriate for academic and general audiences. *Plant-Based Diets* is particularly interesting given its focus on Canadian case studies and persistent social issues, with a noticeable number of cases focusing on Canada's East coast.

The citizen-consumer is a ubiquitous concept throughout the book. Most of the contributing authors attempt to strike a balance between encouraging more educated and compassionate market-based (or at least, market-adjacent) activities while also noting the uphill struggles that plant-based diets face in an industrialized neoliberal food system. In chapter nine, for example, Gibbs and Harris emphasize the fact that the profit-driven logic of capitalism and the global industrial food system (largely based on animal foodstuffs) has inevitably resulted in gross socioeconomic inequalities, environmental degradations, and animal abuses. The authors argue that such deeply ingrained systemic problems suggest that some foundational systemic change is necessary in order to reverse, or at least lessen, the detrimental impacts of current capitalistic practices and beliefs. Gibbs and Harris thus identify veganism and plant-based diets as democratic issues, albeit issues that are entirely possible to resolve. Alternatively, Seth et al.'s chapter on "Integrity Economics" emphasizes the need to better educate consumers about the interconnectedness of our food system in order to ameliorate our current market-driven engagements. Seth et al. trace the local origins and market journeys of several plant-based foods within the Annapolis Valley region of Nova Scotia, in order to provide both a metaphorical and literal framework for a more holistic understanding of the food that appears regularly on our

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DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v7i2.417

ISSN: 2292-3071

plates. The citizen-consumer is thus a persistent subtext throughout the entirety of the book, with some perspectives ranging from critical to cautiously optimistic.

Curiously, plant-based meats and meat alternatives are only sparsely mentioned throughout the book, despite the remarkable popularity of (and sometimes contentious discourses surrounding) these products in recent years. In chapter four, Swartz and Laestadius investigate the potential merits and health-halo effects of substituting animal-based foods with plant-based alternatives (such as plant-based burgers and sausages), especially in order to gradually habituate eaters to more healthy plant-based diets. Though interesting, however, Swartz’s and Laestadius’ chapter provides the only comprehensive and sustained engagement with plant-based meats. English (chapter two) highlights the increasing consumer demand for plant-based products (e.g., Lightlife, Daiya, Earth’s Own) and identifies the recently created Plant-Based Foods of Canada consumer organization, which formed in order to “help support the regulatory and market interests of plant food companies in Canada” (p. 26). Still, no analysis is provided regarding why these products have become so popular, nor is any normative position presented as to the role that these products might play in transitions towards plant-based diets. Mehta, Fergusson, and Ali—in what is perhaps the most directly and immediately relevant chapter overall—do provide a brief overview of the health dimensions of plant-based meats (which the authors refer to as “transition foods”). Echoing some of the points raised in chapter four, Mehta et al. note that, while they are not whole foods and they are “highly variable in terms of nutritional value”, plant-based meats are a convenient way for consumers to gradually transition to healthier plant-based diets (p. 89). Overall, it is understandable that plant-based meats do not feature prominently throughout the book, given the overarching themes of health and whole foods diets. Though more focused engagement with the health dimensions of plant-based meat is certainly fertile ground for future research.

While the book’s overall scarcity of direct engagements with plant-based meats is somewhat understandable (given the whole foods focus), there are some chapters in which plant-based foods are barely mentioned or addressed at all. In chapter five, Kirk argues in favour of a sort of renewed localism in which consumers “1) reclaim food as a basic human right, 2) restore food as a common good, and 3) reconnect with where our food comes from and how it is produced” (p. 66), though without sufficiently linking these points to plant-based diets. In chapter seven, Kevany and Asagwara address the nexus between healthy eating and active living. However, chapter seven is a bit ambitious in its scope. What could have been a cautious account of the need to balance plant-based diets with active lifestyles ends-up jumping from one dimension of health to another in a broad and generalized way. Plant-based diets are mentioned, but often seem like an afterthought to the chapter as a whole. Finally, in chapter eight, Baur and Kevany provide a historical overview and contemporary assessment of the farm sanctuary movement, yet the link between this movement and plant-based diets is somewhat lacklustre. The farm sanctuary movement has been a significant development in the plight for animal rights (not to mention a literal life saver for thousands of animals). Yet, there is not necessarily a direct topical link between plant-based diets on the one hand (i.e., what foods we ought to be eating),

and farm sanctuaries on the other (i.e., a specific practice of providing refuge for animals that are protected from being consumed). Though well written and informative, the inclusion of chapter eight in this volume seems a few degrees removed from the main topic, and might have fit more seamlessly in an animal rights or vegan collection. Indeed, chapters five, seven, and eight are all interesting in their own ways, but could have been more directly and deliberately linked to the topic of plant-based diets.

Kevany's edited volume is a great introduction to plant-based foods and diets. While some individual chapters feel out of place, they still provide interesting perspectives adjacent to the plant-based movement. *Plant-based Diets for Succulence and Sustainability* is a recommended read for any Food Studies scholars, activists, or citizens interested in gaining a greater insight into some practical ways of reforming our existing food system.

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