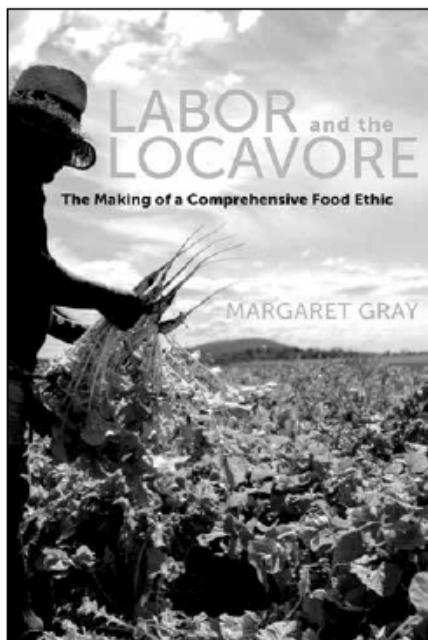


Wake Up Locavores!

Justice for Food Workers Matters

Tom Angotti



Labor and the Locavore
The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic

Margaret Gray

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Tom Angotti is Professor of Urban Affairs & Planning at Hunter College, co-editor of *Progressive Planning Magazine*, and author of *New York For Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate*.

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE biting into a fresh New York State apple. One of the great joys of eating locally-grown fruits and vegetables is to experience real food flavors that beat the synthetic substances produced in the labs of the food conglomerates that manufacture most of the food eaten in this country. Buying from local farmers is also a way of supporting an alternative to corporate agriculture. The fresh produce is organic or minimally treated and kinder to the land. Community supported agriculture, farmers markets and the growing food movements are beginning to break through the iron curtain of 20th-century urbanization that alienated most of us from the land that sustains us on this planet. So I'm glad to be a locavore.

Margaret Gray, however, challenges the local food movements to look beyond the quality, price and safety of food and understand better the lives of the people who produce the food. Based on a decade of interviews with farm owners and workers, Gray compiled a vivid picture of the living and working conditions of farmworkers in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City. Since the late 20th century, most

farmworkers in the region have been undocumented Latinos. Thanks to their exclusion since the New Deal from national labor protections – a compromise that placated Southern growers – and similar New York State exclusions, their wages are significantly lower than average, restrictions on child labor are limited and their jobs are not secure. Gray also probes the precarious economic situation of small farmers who operate at the margin, don't get the generous government support that corporate food conglomerates receive and therefore have to sell at higher prices for a smaller market.

Gray's answer to the locavore's dilemma is what she calls a comprehensive food ethic. "We need to ask how our food choices might help make a better world," she says. This is the main premise of the growing food justice movement, which looks at working conditions at food factories, restaurants and supermarkets as well as conditions on farms. Gray sees a comprehensive food ethic as opening up the possibilities for systemic change.

Gray describes the work of New York's Justice for Farmworker's Campaign and tells how efforts for reform were thwarted

by farm owners. Many farmers, who themselves may struggle to make ends meet, profess sympathy for the lot of their workers, but Gray found that paternalism instead of solidarity was the predominant sentiment. She concludes that we should:

... support local farms to build a food movement that incorporates workers. Buy local! The more vibrant we can make regional agriculture, the more prosperous our farmers will be and the better positioned they will be to pass on their profits to their work force. . . . But tell farmers what you want your purchase to support, much in the same way that consumers do in the instance of pesticide practices and animal treatment.

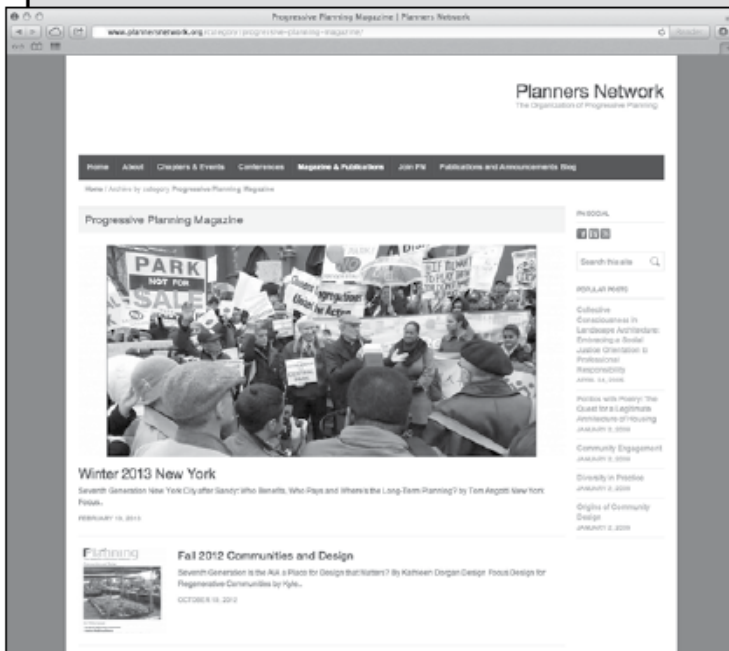
According to a 2012 report by the Food Chain Workers Alliance, “The food production, processing, distribution, retail, and service industries collectively sell over \$1.8 trillion dollars in goods and services annually, accounting for over 13 percent of the United States Gross Domestic Product.” Over 15% of all jobs in the country are in the food system.

Improvements in the lot of food workers is bound to increase food costs, not an attractive prospect for consumers. But if we consider the enormous waste in our food system – transporting food halfway around the world, throwing away more than we eat, the costs of treating a host of food-related illnesses like diabetes and obesity – there is more than enough room to make up the difference.

Monocultures, fracking and genetically modified products are undermining the remarkable diversity in local food production. Global “free trade” has increased the flow of tasteless imported produce. However, the alternative should not be to return to a system of small-scale farming that has exploited slaves, sharecroppers, immigrant workers, contract labor and small farmers who work hard only to find themselves struggling to support their own families. Margaret Gray reminds us that a progressive transformation of our global and local food systems cannot be achieved without securing justice for all food workers. **P2**

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