

From Farm to Table: Making the Connection in the Mid-Atlantic Food System

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Abstract:

A review of *From Farm to Table: Making the Connection in the Mid-Atlantic Food System* by Mathew Hora and Jody Tick.

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Article:

From Farm to Table is Hora and Tick's response to their customers' requests for more information on the current U.S. agricultural and food system. In this book the authors make clear steps towards educating the public about the structure of the agriculture and food (agrofood) system and identify some of the current food debates from historical, cultural, economic, and natural environmental perspectives. As an educational tool this book informs those interested in how farm products reach local communities and the mechanisms that operate in the modern food system, domestically and internationally. Their focus is clear and succinct; they analyze the production, distribution, and consumption patterns of, primarily, fresh farm products in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. This region specifically includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. They conclude with the Capital Area Food Bank and the variety of activities that local organizations are engaged in that coordinate food access to under-served populations.

The authors recognize that in the U.S. there has been a marked impact on the agro-food system left by the industrialization, consolidation, and standardization of the system. Their book highlights the divisions between the pre-industrialized and industrialized models of the agro-food system and the impact the industrialized model has had on the environment, food quality, rural

communities, and the like. As Hora and Tick point out, there are significant impacts on the landscape and its people, resulting in, "supermarket chains and wholesalers merging, fruit and vegetable growers expanding to remain competitive and consumer tastes changing. More people are likely to eat out, younger people are less likely to cook at home, Americans are eating more unhealthy foods, and childhood obesity is on the rise." Members of the Capital Area Food Bank comment that access to good, safe food is a moral right. Yet, one-in-three children are at risk of going hungry in Washington, DC.

In addition, the authors illustrate how the public in the U.S. has distanced themselves from their food providers—farmers. However, they are quick to note that it is not just the eater or consumer's fault that this cultural food transformation has occurred. Concurrently, corporations have taken over the food production, distribution and consumption system, making it very complicated for the public and farmers to connect directly, if at all.

Hora and Tick substantiate their claims, drawing on a wealth of statistics presented in easily read charts, tables, and graphs. Although the aggregate data they present are primarily for Mid-Atlantic region states, their total picture makes it difficult to refute the impact that the consolidation and standardization of the agro-food system has had on local economies, farmers, and the eating public. Nevertheless, as one reviews all these facts and figures, the authors offer readers with a series of alternatives for farmers and consumers to consider. The authors place an emphasis on supporting a local agro-food system, one that is equitable for farmers and the public.

For this book, the objectives are for reporting on the pathways of food and how they are affected by changes in the food system. More specifically the objectives are:

- To explain the basic operations of the food system;
- To analyze the productive capacity of regional fruit and vegetable production;
- To catalogue the location of food outlets;
- To assess the current state of food security; and
- To describe how the structure of the local food system affects the low-income population of the area.

There are three chapters to this book. Each chapter takes on a specific sector of the agro-food system— focusing on production, distribution, consumption, and food access for the Mid-Atlantic region. The statistics and figures are compelling and are useful for anyone wanting to inform themselves of the current state of things for this region.

In Chapter One the authors examine farming practices, noting the rise in industrialized, chemicalized agriculture. Unfortunately, the environment is only a backdrop to farming, and it is left out in the discussion. Even though the authors mention the increase in frequency and amount of pesticides used in conventional agriculture, the authors only mention that many of the chemicals are water soluble—and thus may leach away. More could be presented on the potential for genetically modified seeds to influence the environment, or water and air pollution

resulting from the high density of livestock (poultry and hog farms, etc.) raised on corporate farms and the high levels of waste produced. Other areas that might have been given further consideration include the aging out of farmers, loss of biodiversity, excessive packaging of processed foods, and reduction of available landfill space. Making a direct human, cultural, and environmental link underscores the interface with the major issues surrounding industrialized agro-food production system.

In Chapter Two the authors examine the distribution system for marketing fresh farm products in the U.S. The dominant agro-food system in place now is based on consolidation and vertical integration, and it is especially designed for the large-scale mono-crop producers.

The authors point out the intricacies of vertical integration, "where a single company controls the flow of a commodity across two or more stages of food production." Corporations that need to rely on multiple sources for their commodities must have multiple ways in which they obtain the products (contract farmers, brokers, wholesalers, etc.), domestically or internationally.

Such buyers are interested in price and reliable access to the appropriate quantity of quality farm products. Taste is not generally on these food purchasers' radars. Storage and durability of a commodity is more desirable. Clearly, farmers get "the short end of the stick" in this multi-handed, multi-pocket industrialized system, for they earn less than twenty cents on the dollar.

The industrialized agro-food system is dependent on a reliable, inexpensive, refrigerated transportation system using trains, ships, trucks, and cargo planes. This is also the most expensive part of the system, for it is the most energy intensive when coupled with the distance the fresh farm product travels. In the industrialized system the food chain is sometimes a long and complicated one, resulting in fresh produce taking particularly long journeys from farm to table. The average non-local item travels 1,300 miles from farm to plate.

A very brief description of this distribution process is offered to illustrate the connection between large-scale production and the fast food industry. The authors note there has been an increase in the number of restaurants and food services joining the fast food industry. Specifically, the food production, distribution, and marketing system have evolved into one that caters to the fast food industry and super grocery stores. Supermarkets play an important role in the food chain. Some supermarkets obtain their fresh produce from warehouses rather than directly from farmers. There are some supermarket chains that do, however, operate their own warehouses and purchase directly from farmers and transport to their various stores. Advertising contributes to what is purchased at the supermarkets with weekly ads drawing in the public to their stores.

In response, however, Hora and Tick point out a viable alternative, that of direct marketing and the important role direct marketing plays for small-scale farmers. Direct marketing is an alternative to the industrialized approach and ideal for small-scale farmers who have less volume of product to sell than large-scale farmers. Direct marketing approaches include farmers markets, community supported agriculture arrangements, roadside stands, and pick-your-own operations. These direct approaches enable the farmers to get fresh farm products from *their* farms to tables. The distance a farmer travels to market can sometimes be a problem. Some small-scale farmers are traveling over two hours in one direction to sell at the nearest farmers market. Nevertheless, Hora and Tick emphasize the importance of partnerships and loyalties that emerge with this "whole market approach," where farmers sell their own product directly to the end users

(consumers, chefs, etc.). Moreover, by reducing the number of hands on the product as it journeys from farm to table, more of a dollar goes directly in a farmer's pocket.

The public (consumers/eaters) plays a significant role in this agro-food system, especially in purchasing farm products. For many it will mean going shopping at supermarkets, while for others it may mean relying on the food service industry using fast foods, quick foods and prepared inexpensive meals. This is a growing trend in the U.S., but it does not always help the farmers, as previously mentioned.

Another emerging trend highlighted in this book is the increased interest in natural foods in the retail industry. At present it does not command the largest market share of farm product sales, but it is on the rise, note the authors. The statistics and figures presented in the section are interesting, for they illustrate a variety of comparisons within the U.S. and internationally. However, we are left with the question of what role farmers play, or can play, in the global fresh farm product arena. Clearly globalization has had an influence on U.S. farming practices and markets, especially for those larger farmers who cannot, and do not, utilize direct marketing outlets. But what about the thousands of small-scale farmers and the younger generations who opt out of farming because of the many obstacles inherent in the industrialized agro-food system?

In Chapter Three, the authors focus is on consumption and food access. As the authors correctly point out, food access means not only having the money to buy food, but the means to get to the food. The authors present commodity data for each of the six Mid-Atlantic States and the District of Columbia to illustrate how diversified some of the states are when compared to others in this region. The authors do want the readers to ponder, "[w]hat will our children and future generations have to eat?" Not only is this a local issue for many areas in the Mid-Atlantic States, it is a national issue. Who will be the future farmers, especially now that the national average age of a farmer is 55? Where will they farm with the increasing rate of urban sprawl? These are significant questions, for we are all eaters and future generations will need food to eat.

Throughout this book the authors highlight problems with the existing industrialized agro-food system. This very rich nation with its surplus of grains, dairy and livestock products fails to provide adequate access to food for low-income households. The poor of the U.S. have lower buying power, as well as less access to markets and restaurants that purchase directly from farmers. Sometimes what enters into such communities is fast food restaurants and small groceries. Less often are they provided access to direct marketing outlets, such as farmers markets. As noted throughout this book, the current U.S. diet relies heavily on processed foods. For many underserved populations in the U.S. this also means they have fewer opportunities to consume fresh farm products.

With their experience at the Capital Area Food Bank, Hora and Tick know there is hunger in our nation's capitol. They point out that 65,610 residents are hungry nightly. A number of organizations help to provide a food safety net to populations that are food insecure. "The emergency Food Assistance network is composed of food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens operated by non-profit agencies and churches." These organizations solicit donations of surplus or salvaged goods from the food industry. Second Harvest, a gleaning non-profit organization,

assists in providing food aid. Increasingly, accessibility to food for low-income people is in demand. The authors note a 19 percent rise in demand for emergency food supplies. In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Nutrition Program there is assistance in the form of coupons for women, infants and children (WIC) and senior citizens, specially earmarked for use only at farmers markets. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to serve farmers and the eating public fairly.

Overall this book serves as a useful resource for those interested in the Mid-Atlantic agro-food system. It is not a theoretical book, nor one that specifically examines anthropological perspectives on agriculture and food. For applied cultural anthropologists who are interested in the U.S. food system, this book provides a brief overview on the production, distribution, consumption, and access of the U.S. food system. For readers who are interested in getting to the meat of the basic issues quickly, this book provides a timely analysis of agriculture and food trends as reflected in the Mid-Atlantic region.