

**Book Review:**

**Isa Pearl Ritchie 2020. *Food Freedom Community. How small local actions can solve complex global problems*. Te Rā Aroha Press. 306pp; ISBN 9780473519605**

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The central theme of Isa Pearl Ritchie's book, published two years ago and based on her PhD-thesis, could not be more timely: food crises have increasingly become the subject of public interest in recent years. Of course, this should not obscure the fact that hunger is and has since long been a painful everyday experience for countless people worldwide; even before global crises such as climate change, corona pandemic and the Ukraine war exacerbated the world food situation. However, the central theme of "Food Freedom Community" is not food *crisis*, but creative and alternative approaches in the spirit of food sovereignty, which the author reveals in a mindful and detailed way based on a rich in-depth ethnography and "genuine stories that inspire hope" (Ritchie 2020: 14). Consistent with the views of her participants, Ritchie describes deliberately *local* practices that nonetheless point the way to addressing *global* problems. Based on an ethnographic multi-sited in-depth study, the author highlights local and localised food initiatives with a special focus on Whaingarao, a small beachside town on the west coast of the Waikato region in New Zealand's North Island.

After a general introduction to her research interest and the overarching theme, the author briefly explores the (activist) history of Whaingarao and provides personal impressions of local everyday realities through extensive passages of direct quotations. She introduces the main characters of her study and links their narratives throughout the chapters to an empirically-based discussion of values, ontologies, and economies of locally lived food initiatives. A detailed discussion of her conceptual approaches, with a particular focus on the key concepts of tension and paradox, concludes the book - followed by a postscript that includes an outlook on trajectories of personal stories told in the chapters and a method reflection. The author describes her methods, research interests, and theoretical approaches as "different coloured strands" that she weaves into a *Kete* over the course of her doctoral research (ibid.: 263).

A central strand that runs through the book is the idea of connectedness. The fact that alternative food initiatives are always much "more" than the food they produce is already reflected in the title "Food Freedom Community". Communal practices of alternative food cultivation and distribution go far beyond a critique on food production, but question normalised premises of society or dominant social systems as such (cf. Baker 2005; Neo/Chua 2017; White 2011). Ritchie reflects that the ontology of connectedness underlying food sovereignty is diametrically opposed to the ontology of alienation prevalent in the corporate food industry – a finding that indicates a significant intertwining of food ideals with broader societal values and ethics.

The alternative practices of food production and distribution that Ritchie describes could be framed as "social action" which differs praxeologically from habitualised ways of social life and creates "counter-infrastructures" (Nettle 2014: 3). Ritchie follows a similar train of thought when she highlights the activist potential of food initiatives to link these to Graeber's analysis of "direct

action." She contextualises her ontological differentiation between connectedness and alienation analogously to the distinction Graeber makes when he assigns to activists an ontology of imagination that contrasts with the ontology of violence in dominant power structures. The author highlights the distinctive features of the local activist potential and elaborates on her participants' emphasis on creativity and diversity, which is accompanied by a preference for a constructive approach over activism that is "focussed around being in opposition to the mainstream" (Ritchie 2020: 120). Ritchie argues that this particular activist dimension of food initiatives is rooted in the experience of paradox which creates tension and, thus, the potential for change. In this sense, she characterises Whaingaroa as "a proactive culture of positive resistance" (ibid.: 121).

Another thread of thought links the central concept of connectedness with Māori cosmology. The author highlights the convergence and compatibility of environmental and Māori values while acknowledging that concepts like *Kaitiakitanga* and *Whakapapa* differ epistemologically from an environmentalist stance and, more fundamentally, that Māori or indigenous people cannot be considered as homogeneous groups with uniform value systems (ibid.: 149). With reference to Vandava Shiva, she contrasts the globalising corporate food system and corresponding concepts of ownership with indigenous perspectives that consider human agency as deeply interconnected with local ecosystems. Against this backdrop, the author draws stark parallels between ecosystem and society, and conceives of capitalism as a form of colonisation that includes "the intellectual monoculture of Western science" (ibid.: 149). This notion is very relevant to historical and contemporary conflicts related to colonial landscape practices and structures in Aotearoa New Zealand. It would be valuable to pursue this discussion further, such as in the context of colonial ecologies that have irretrievably deformed the country's sceneries (cf. Ginn 2008).

Ritchie opens an interesting discussion on partly conflicting values and explores concepts of the "local", "organic", "ethical" and "healthy" - ambiguous terms that are conceived of as "complex tensions between idealised values and practical realities" which continuously shift between personal, environmental and social spheres (Ritchie 2020: 147). This empirically-based reflection points to the heterogeneity, frictions, and entanglements within alternative food initiatives.

The author also illuminates critical dimensions of food sovereignty, which she frames again in terms of paradox and tension. She addresses the frequently discussed problem that sustainable production and consumption practices are more often than not a privilege of certain socioeconomic milieus. These reflections tie into discourses around "the production and reproduction of whiteness in the alternative food movement" (Guthmann 2008: 431). This line of thought could be deepened by linking it to current literature on environmental justice. Applying the emic concept of the "green bubble", Ritchie explores local discourses around gentrification and socioeconomic conditioned opportunities for choice. In this context, the author highlights the disparity between the financial precariat and "rich lives in terms of agency" that her participants often describe (ibid.: 255). Elaborating very illustratively on questions of privilege, the author does not go analytically beyond the current state of discussion.

Ritchie unfolds her arguments over long and expansive passages of direct quotations that correspond convincingly to her method of storytelling. Occasionally, some terms seem to be taken for granted here: the concept of culture, which is made fruitful to explore various fields of actions – such as food culture and supermarket culture - is not reasonably derived and defined. Likewise,

the idea of community, placed prominently in the book's title, is used without reference to critical discussions.

The telling of local stories makes the book a very enjoyable read, although quotes and arguments are sometimes repeated throughout the chapters. Overall, this is a very readable and inspiring book that provides an empirically grounded and rich insight into local food practices. Following the stimulating threads woven together in this *Kete* in book form as a reader is very valuable and capable of stimulating thought and action.

## **References**

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