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Book Review: Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, from Sustainable to Suicidal

Miguel A. Quintana
University of New Mexico

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BOOK REVIEW

Animal, Vegetable, Junk: A History of Food, from Sustainable to Suicidal by Mark Bittman (Mariner Books, 384 Pages; 2022)

“*[T]he conspicuous consumption of limited resources has yet to be accepted widely as a spiritual error, or even bad manners.*” —
Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*

Let Mark Bittman be the first to tell you that food is the single most important factor affecting life on earth. In *Animal, Vegetable, Junk*, Bittman guides readers through a history of food from pre-human evolution to the present before introducing general recommendations for building a more sustainable future. Bittman argues that, ultimately, the history of food has forced organized society to make an existential choice: either change the way food is grown, produced, and distributed, or risk a world in which our most precious resources are too scarce for sustenance.

Animal, Vegetable, Junk explores the history of food and agriculture in three parts. The book’s first part, *The Birth of Growing*, highlights the history of farming and the human diet beginning with early hominins and ending with late nineteenth-century American agriculture. Early human evolution enabled humans to obtain food from new sources using new methods such as fire and tools. These early advancements led humankind to vary their diets and form communities to help with the gathering and preparation of food. The culmination of these factors catalyzed the Agricultural Revolution. Once agriculture became global, the resultant changes were swift; market economies, exploration, conquest, inquisition, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and famine followed.

History teaches that, sometimes, what is necessary becomes detached from what is just. Bittman argues that the Agricultural Revolution pulled the thread, unraveling the stitch that bound the necessary and the just. The rise of unfettered market economies—those that treated food as commodities—operated with abject detachment from morality and justice. This, as Bittman points out, can be seen by looking at the West’s conquest of eastern European, Asian, South American and African countries for the sole purpose of land acquisition and extraction of resources. Likewise, the rise of slavery in the countries most interested in commodity-based agriculture exemplifies this phenomenon. It is also of note that the patterns of food production created by global slavery soon become the norm.

The succeeding section, *The Twentieth Century*, follows agriculture through the Industrial Revolution, the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and the wars of the early- and mid-1900s. During this time, Western countries began developing industrial farming operations and consolidating farms into fewer, larger monopolistic companies. Further, government inaction and laissez-faire regulatory schemes that primarily focused on protecting large industrial farming operations worked hand-in-hand with consolidated corporate control of food supplies—particularly in the United States. Additionally, labor laws fell detestably short of protecting agricultural workers and often explicitly excluded food and agricultural workers (especially small farmers in the South). Farms became factories and laborers became machines

all while food became a brand. Processed food was popularized around wartime in the late 1930s and early 1940s which led to some of the worst changes to human diets in history. Eventually, mass farming, genetically modified crops, and concentrated animal feeding operations (a.k.a. “factory farms”) rose to the prominence that is commonplace today.

Just as the previous eras created the historical social conditions surrounding agriculture, the twentieth-century created the ecological and economic conditions surrounding agriculture in a fraction of the time. Bittman makes the argument that largely unfettered market economies are responsible for significant injustices and deep-seated systemic issues in agriculture. A primary goal of the industrial agriculture industry is to produce a surplus of goods. In advancement of this goal, the industrial agriculture industry has maintained poor labor conditions, contributed to a dramatic decrease in public health—attributable to preservatives and hyper-processing and devastated the ecology of farmlands on a massive scale.

Fittingly, the book’s final part, *Change*, asks the reader to remain hopeful as it surveys contemporary farming and agriculture. Presently, we are feeling the cumulative effects of ecological degradation and harm done to the climate, environment, and ecology throughout centuries of harmful agricultural practices. Contemporary agricultural practices are at odds with sound ecology and sustainable farming practices. Additionally, economic growth in market economies is approached as if infinite, while natural resources are famously finite. There are movements toward sounder agriculture, and a more sustainable food economy, but that momentum is often met with immense pressure from big business and government.

Hope is key to Bittman’s vision of a more sustainable and healthy future. Although there is significant resistance to reshaping our agricultural systems, there is a path forward. Central to Bittman’s step towards a better future is agroecology—a relatively new term that refers to methods that incorporate sustainable ecological practices into agriculture. Additionally, he presents four tenets of adequate change of agricultural-economic systems. The first pillar is farming. Primarily, Bittman suggests removing subsidies for commodity crops in favor of health-giving and soil-healthy crops. Pillar two is labor, specifically protections for food and agriculture workers. The next pillar is nutrition. Changes to nutrition would include stronger regulation of processed food and increased transparency and reliability of food labels. The fourth and final tenet is access and affordability which focuses on making healthy choices more affordable and accessible than unhealthy choices.

The intrigue of *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* lies in its accessibility. The book is clear and easy to follow for readers of all backgrounds. The book is particularly well-suited for both readers with no background in history and agriculture as well as those with experience in the subject. The book excels at providing a critical counter-narrative of history through its perspective from the point of view of consumers and people, rather than institutions and governments, in stark contrast to traditional historical narratives. The book is well researched but not overburdened with reference to authorities for every point. While the chronological structure of the book aids accessibility by situating the reader in a distinct historical period, it is occasionally unclear about its temporal references. However, this does not affect the readability of the text. Above all, *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* does not try to be

something that it is not. While it may not be a textbook or a treatise, it is nonetheless intellectually stimulating and formative of a broader understanding of its subject.

Animal, Vegetable, Junk, by virtue of its accessibility, can fit squarely into a handful of genres. For one, it is a history book looking at the evolution of agriculture alongside human society. In addition, it is a social critique on agriculture and its evolution as a practice. Additionally, it is a short treatise on the social and economic issues that have prevailed throughout history as a direct result of agriculture. This book can also be understood as a supplemental history of the creation of certain areas in the law. That is, despite *Animal, Vegetable, Junk*'s lack of intentional focus on substantive law, the context it provides to understanding the law is valuable. This book provides essential framing as to the motivations of labor law, environmental law, agriculture regulation, and advertising as well as to the motivations of agencies such as the USDA, FDA, and Department of Labor. More than anything, this book is a primer for change. For those interested in anything from policymaking to making lifestyle changes and everything in between, *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* provides sound recommendations and the background to support it.

Even if your inquiry into *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* ends on this page, the broader movement for a more equitable and sustainable food system carries on. *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* is a call to arms highlighting how we got here and leaving it to us to change the systems we endure. We do not have to settle for junk when the instrumentalities of production are in our hands, but we are obligated to remain hopeful and think boldly and swiftly.

Miguel Quintana
Class of 2024
UNM School of Law