“I want to show that the power to demand goodness in food—as defined by cultural norms of what makes food safe, natural, moral, and appetizing—has introduced new forms of domination and vulnerability into postcolonial food commodity networks” (p.55). So Susanne Friedberg posits her argument in *French Beans and Food Scars*, a detailed exploration of two postcolonial green-bean production networks.

The first, between Burkina Faso, a former French colony, and France, is a failed attempt to replicate peasant family farming. In West Africa in the early part of the twentieth century, the French aimed to re-create the national ideal of rural, countryside farming, or “farming organized around the family unit” (p.65). Friedberg explains that this kind of agriculture was enforced not only to “socialize” the black African but also to extract as much wealth as possible from the resource-rich terrain of Upper Volta. The later trade of green beans, however, suffered from the disruption to traditional Burkinabé ways of farming centered around extended kin networks. Indeed, the French were lax in providing resources to African producers to adopt a new way of fresh fruit and vegetable production, not to mention a new purpose: trade.

In Zambia, both colonialism and the postcolonial green-bean trade have taken somewhat different shapes. The British attempt at the industrialization of southern Africa was underscored by the belief that wage labor was to be the “great civilizer” (p.97). Zambians were forced to live on reserves and work for white farmers and mining companies. The history of farming for trade that followed was marked with political unrest and difficult market conditions (p.105).

Friedberg’s research goes a long way toward showing how present production and export practices in both postcolonial Burkina Faso and Zambia continue to be affected by the historical power of the wealthy nations who import their produce. In both countries the traditional ways of sustenance farming were upset by colonial ideals and practices of extracting wealth and civilizing Africa. Yet, true economic independence of either country would eliminate the cheap labor of vulnerable Burkinabé and Zambian citizens.

Friedberg further shows that European food scares cause consumers to close ranks by demanding stricter and more complex production and trade standards. Spotted vegetables become sacrileges that, to European consumers, may signal mistreatment of field workers or unhygienic shipping practices. At the same time, Friedberg offers more than a glimpse into a counterplot to the powerful actors that force vulnerable countries to conform to increasingly rigid production standards. For her book is also about power in unlikely places: farmers in both Burkina Faso and Zambia go about their work in ways that do subvert the power of globalized food commodity networks. If outgrowers are late with a payment, for example, farmers might use the fertilizer (paid for by the outgrowers) for their own crops.

Friedberg draws attention, most important, to the fact that while consumers in developed worlds might consider ensuring the social welfare of field workers or providing traceability for each and every flat of beans to be necessary parameters of production, each new standard that is introduced into the green bean network creates new layers of complexity for pack house workers, field hands, farmers, and intermediaries. The stories she tells about British and French colonialism in Burkina Faso and Zambia reveal countries whose foodways and livelihoods were reshaped by white settlers but also whose continued vulnerability toward those countries is seriously exacerbated by specific and general consumer demands. The demands of consumers in wealthy nations come at a high price to the people whose work must keep pace with increasingly rigid production standards.

Friedberg’s writing is primarily pedagogical, but its immediacy and straightforwardness is compelling. Through her multiple levels of analysis and increasingly complex and forward-thinking arguments, she slows down the fast-paced media hype of food scares and methodically navigates the complicated mazes of two distinct food commodity networks. At the same time, both her tone and her analysis continually command attention to the details that transform her research into stories: the color of farmers’ faces or importers’ specifications for perfect green beans. She chooses her words carefully, and for that reason her lessons feel effective. The reader is guided time and again toward the knowledge that nowhere are scarcity and plenty more unequally distributed than in foodways. With frankness, Friedberg shows that in food commodity networks, history and culture do matter; they are not homogenized by global markets.

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