The World of Soy

The World of Soy explores what many view as an alternative, foreign, or new food. Little could be further from the truth. In fact, as the essays in this volume show, much of our world is about soy. The three editors, all anthropologists, ably direct the reader’s attention to the ways in which the various chapters interconnect, to both each other and to current political, economic, and social issues.

The volume is in two sections, moving from background information on legumes generally and soy more specifically to the second section, with chapters focused on soy (as food, or as economic opportunity) across regions. The World of Soy approaches soy not only from the perspective of globalization, but also cross-culturally. The ethnographic focus on soyfoods—and soy agriculture—enriches the state of present knowledge of not only the current status of soy, but also the possibilities for the future of soy and humans together.

Taken together, the essays are a detailed mosaic of soy, from ancient times to the present. The first section, with chapters on legumes in nutrition, the early uses and evidence for soybeans in China, soy’s place in Western food habits, and genetically engineered (GE) soy, gives readers a foundation for reading the second section. Entitled “Ethnographic Studies of Soy’s Acceptance,” the second section ranges as widely as the first. Within, readers learn not only about historical and contemporary uses of soyfoods in China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, the U.S., Brazil, Bangladesh, and West Africa, but also specifics about soy preparation. Delightfully, several chapters discuss local dishes in detail, including some minutiae of preparation (see chapters by Tan, Mao, Ozeki, and Nguyen). In other cases, the work ably demonstrates how attention to culture is central to changing acceptance of foods, as in the case of Osborn’s chapter on the West African adaptation of soybeans in making the traditional seasoning daddawa and adoption of soybean curd in place of cheese. Many essays face head-on what can be done to raise the standard of living for more people and how soy might contribute to solving the global problems of hunger and poverty. The conclusion takes up themes woven throughout: soy as ancient and modern, soy as commodity and culturally laden foodstuff, and soy as not just industrial commodity but also as nutritional powerhouse for the future.

The World of Soy has no real weaknesses, as it sets out to define current knowledge about soy. However, there is one important issue that was not raised in the chapter “Genetically Engineered Soy” (Du Bois & Sousa). If we embrace GE soy—the authors present compelling evidence that it could save human-kind—we are also agreeing to increased farming-by-monoculture, even if not by huge industrial companies. Monoculture farming not only reduces the ability of small farmers to retain some land for subsistence growing (i.e. kitchen gardening), it also sets up an unstable economic situation in which they are reliant on both a single crop which could fail and on the cycles of purchase associated with the need for industrial seed, fertilizer, and pesticide. Monoculture cannot provide the required human omnivorous diet; it is cropping for cash, so when there is cash, people can purchase what they need, perhaps. This reduces the ability to produce and consume locally, and affects not just a given farmer, but also other members of the community. Although the editors do address monoculture in the conclusion, the chapter that sets out to provide a balanced view of genetically engineered agriculture should have at least tipped its hat to the problem.

Readers will include those who are not only interested in food and culture academically, but also those who seek information about public and commercial policies towards soy agriculture and soy foods. I would highly recommend the book as useful for shaping the future of human thinking, both because chapters will be of excellent use in teaching (in anthropology, but also marketing and public policy) and for indexing effective strategies to alleviate hunger and poverty.