

# Book Review

**Farming for Us All: Practical Agriculture and the Cultivation of Sustainability.** By Michael Mayerfeld Bell, Susan Jarnagin, Gregory Peter, and Donna Bauer. 2004. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, USA. 299 p. US\$22.50, ISBN 0271023872, paperback.

Three decades before *Farming for Us All* was published, I was lucky to be a junior member of a Center for the Biology of Natural Systems research group led by William Lockeretz and Barry Commoner. The National Science Foundation was funding us to study the implications of higher petroleum prices and spot energy shortages for Corn Belt farming. The research included a multi-year comparison of organic farms and neighboring operations managed under more conventional regimes. We visited some of the same Iowa counties as Bell and his colleagues, and met some of the same farmers. Though the focus was primarily economic and agronomic, we garnered tantalizing glimpses into the (social) construction of an alternative agriculture. For these reasons and others, I read this book with considerable interest. I was not disappointed.

Last year I assigned *Farming for Us All* as reading for a senior undergraduate and graduate seminar on the sociology of agriculture. We learned about contemporary changes in Midwestern agriculture and about the development of an increasingly sophisticated and complex sustainable farming movement. The book also taught us much about conceptualizing a research problem, conducting field research, and presenting the findings with sensitivity to multiple audiences. Thanks to an engaging writing style, reader-friendly design, and intelligent use of photographs, we were entertained as well as informed. I have since recommended the book to other graduate students who are conducting field research. I plan to teach with it again and expect to keep learning as I assimilate more of the central arguments and detailed side-discussions. It is a book to read and reread.

While this volume generated a positive reception from students, it is also well suited for informed and motivated readers with an interest in farming and new agricultural movements. Though some may find the discussions of conceptual problems and research strategies a bit rarified or abstruse, such topics are covered for the most part in the *Intermezzo* segments that appear at the end of each of the main sections of the book. These segments can be skipped by those who find such digressions of limited interest, though chances are few readers will elect to do so. The scholarly foundations of this monograph are confirmed by the extensive notes on sources, terms, and related debates in the social sciences, and by the long list of references. In

these departments it does not skimp, but nor does it overpower or distract the reader.

While satisfying to the academic, this book focuses on practitioners and on the practical ideas that they co-generate. This is accomplished thanks in no small part to the strong alliance that the author maintained with practitioners and activists Susan Jarnagin, Gregory Peter, and Donna Bauer. With Bell, they carried out a decade of participatory field research (1994–2003) with several dozen Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) households and similar numbers of their neighbors. They also had extensive discussions with their non-farm associates in universities and other organizations. PFI was founded in 1985 by farmers looking for a way to respond to community decline, forced exodus, and environmental degradation. They were convinced that it must be possible to farm in economically and environmentally sound ways on moderate-sized farms that support community life. They hoped to promote this by organizing and sharing new forms of on-farm research and they were soon able to form a small research alliance with Iowa State University. By the early 2000s there were several hundred member households, about half of them directly involved in farming.

The writing of the book was mostly done by Bell, a sociologist. He reflects systematically on his learning journeys in the fields and farmyards of the Midwest, and is occasionally self-critical about the limits of his own agronomic knowledge. Nevertheless, he demonstrates breadth and intellectual maturity when he incorporates insights from sociology, history, social psychology, gender studies, agronomy and institutional economics. He writes with authority and appears justifiably confident in his ability to learn from the field and to make sense of details in ways that help us to answer larger questions.

Following an extended and informative ‘Overture’, the main arguments are explored in three parts that make for natural breaks when the book is being used in a course. The initial section focuses on ‘The Uncertain Landscape of Industrial Agriculture’ and serves up revealing portraits of large and small farmers wrestling with the pressures and contradictions of the agricultural economy. It provides, for example, stellar passages on the workings of the ‘market’ for rental land and on the moral economy inhabited by renters and landlords; on the declining practice of neighboring; on time management in farming households; and on the aspects of farming most valued by women and men.

Parts II and III focus on ‘The Culture of Cultivation’ and ‘The Sustainable Landscape of Practical Agriculture’. Bell investigates the ‘cultivation of knowledge’ and propagation

of the self in (economic) landscapes that can be demanding and unforgiving. He sees farmers—still a male-coded category—as having to negotiate positive identities in communities that included landlords, employees, family members, neighbors, creditors, competitors, and advisors (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories). Choices with respect to farming practices, investments, and diversification are strongly linked to self-concepts and to one's membership in 'communities of knowledge'. These are networks of knowledge generation, exchange, and validation that connect people to trustworthy and useful information (useful in that it is consistent with one's own philosophy of farming).

Bell views all farmers as being wrapped up in the phenomenology of farming. This involves taken for granted approaches and techniques that are invoked even when one has doubts. Deep involvement with the practice of farming is intertwined with identity. 'What you know is who you are'. Farmers continue to farm because it is an identity and because, as an all-consuming endeavor that involves working with/against nature and intense social interactions in the overlapping arenas of gender, class, status, and ethnicity, it provides a phenomenal 'phenomenological buzz'. If this identity is involuntarily surrendered, as when farmers are forced off the land by economic circumstances, they may be susceptible to the identities offered up by others, including far-right groups such as militias and 'Patriots'.

Bell sees the PFI as a leading instance of a wider movement to develop new ways of being a farmer and of farming. He argues that the sustainable agriculture movement involves more than an alternative set of farming methods and social relations. It also calls forth a different social practice of agriculture that can be summed up as a different way of relating to difference—viewing it more as an opportunity for learning than as a threat. Farmers involved in such groups, he argues, learn to take into account more perspectives, experiences, and interests, and to incorporate these into ways of practicing agriculture that involve more dialogue (and less monologue). According to Bell, and to many of these innovative farmers, this dialogue should ultimately include us all because we all have a vital stake in developing and supporting a practical, sustainable agriculture that cares for farmers, animals, and the land even as it produces quality foods in abundance.

The terrain under investigation here is the interplay between dominant and widely promoted commercial-industrial approaches to farming, community, and nature, and alternative approaches such as those of the PFI. While

PFI households share many characteristics and views with their non-affiliated neighbors, farmers who convert/switch to such new ways of farming often experience a kind of watershed transition—what Bell labels a phenomenological rupture. The new farm and the new self come together. The conditions and contradictions that contribute to such transformative changes include a varying mix of economic stresses, health and other environmental concerns, spiritual dissonance, doubts about the veracity of mainstream truth claims, and exposure to alternative development ideas in other venues. Such changes are also promoted by the sharing of on-farm research, group problem solving, other forms of networking and mutual support and (occasional) support from personnel in the co-operative sector, universities and government. Modest funding for sustainable agriculture from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture has likewise been influential.

While this volume incorporates many new insights and proposes some intriguing new conceptual tools, it is not always fully grounded in the sociology of agriculture literature on which it surely builds. It contains fewer references than one might expect to authors from that field who have studied the restructuring of the farm sector, farm households, farm work, the development of the organic sector, environmental conflicts and the sociology of agricultural resource management. Theoretical discussions are deliberately brief but sometimes over-simplify the intellectual debates that are revisited and reworked. There are tradeoffs when producing a book of manageable size for a wider readership.

Bell and his coworkers have investigated the social processes that block or promote changes in agrarian worldviews and identities, and in agricultural practices. The research opens interesting windows on the household- and community-level dynamics that underlie both adherence to convention and significant (non-conventional) innovation. We learn about rotational grazing, ridge tillage, hoop houses for hogs, and about conducting robust on-farm research using randomized, replicated, narrow-strip paired comparisons. We also learn much about the genesis of grassroots social change in North America and how to understand its complexity. Both the approach and the findings have broader relevance for researchers and social actors working in many sectors.

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