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Book Reviews

Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community. By Thomas Lyson. 2004. University Press of New England, Lebanon, NH. 136 pp. US$16.95, ISBN 1–58465–414–7, paper back.

Written as part of the Tufts University series on civil society, 'Civic Agriculture' is rural sociologist Thomas Lyson's conceptual language for identifying and analyzing the recent emergence and growth in the US of one 'new agriculture'. Grounded in community-based food production and sales, civic agriculture—according to the author—not only meets consumer demands for fresh, safe, and locally produced foods but also 'creates jobs, encourages entrepreneurship, and strengthens community identity'. Expressed in such enterprises as farmers' markets, community gardens, community supported agriculture (CSA), and farm-to-school programs, Lyson positions civic agriculture as a viable alternative and counter-strategy to the socially, economically, and environmentally destructive practices he associates with the conventional industrialized and globalizing food system, particularly the other 'new agriculture' that is based in biotechnology and genetically modified plants and animals.

Chapter 1 expands the framing of this country's agricultural structure as increasingly dualistic, with civic agriculture on one end and industrial agriculture on the other. Driven by 'neo-classical/market-driven economics', the industrial end is characterized by commodification of a narrow range of bulk food products, concentration in the food processing and retailing sectors, and a systematic distancing and uncoupling of food production from its consumption. Chapter 2 provides a concise and quite excellent history of how the form of American agriculture shifted from a local, self-sufficient system of food production and distribution in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries to its current industrially organized, corporately dominated, and globally managed form. This analysis is significantly aided by the use of conceptual tools that are well grounded in the social science literature: de-skilling and technological replacement of labor, commodification and the rationalization of economic relationships, externalizing and diminishing the significance of non-market relationships, technological treadmills, corporate food-chain clusters, interlocking corporate directorships, and oligopolistic pricing and profit taking.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue the interplay between history and socio-economic forces and formations. Highlighted are several long-term trends that have shaped (and reflected) America's food and agricultural system over the past century: (1) decline in the number of 'farming occupation' farms; (2) concentration and consolidation of food production in a small number of very large farms; (3) specialization of food commodity production by region of the country; and (4) severance of the linkages between local food raising and eating. The analytical discussion is aided considerably by a selection of very readable and informative data tables highlighting the historical erosion of farm numbers and concomitant increase in farm size and dependence on purchased inputs, a parallel erosion of enterprise diversity on farms and resulting concentration by farm and region of the system's primary food commodities, a third historical erosion of the share of food consumers' dollars going to the farming sector of the food system and, appropriately for this book, a listing of the world's largest food processing and retailing corporations at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Examples and stories also illuminate the analysis. My favorite is the saga of the Green Giant food company. Begun at the turn of the twentieth century as a regional vegetable-processing company in Minnesota, Green Giant tumbled through the next hundred years being sold, divested, and re-sold by no less than four major multinational food companies, coming to rest at the turn of the next century back in Minnesota as only a brand name acquired by General Mills.

Chapters 5 through 7 focus on the civic agriculture end of the food system duality. Consistent with the book's style and strengths, the analysis is grounded in theoretical and conceptual tools that the author revives from less-well-known voices from the social science literature … to the rich benefit of readers across a wide spectrum of experience with these issues. The first voices speak about the strengths and advantages of collective or community problem solving relative to individual problem solving and competition. As Lyson indicates, 'Community problem solving rather than individual competition is the foundation of civic agriculture'. Excellent conceptual tables in Chapter 5, describing alternative models of agricultural development, show that these alternative strategic orientations are not only deeply rooted in different philosophical approaches (pragmatism versus neo-classical economics) but also correlate with quite different approaches to scientific analysis, organizational models, political processes, and notions regarding social change.

Amplified are the voices of a group of social scientists working under commissions from the US Congress in the post-Second World War 1940s. Focusing on the relationship between the concentration of economic power at the community level and the social and economic well-being of local residents, the commissioned scientific studies showed quite clearly that communities whose economic bases were

composed of many, locally owned firms manifested higher levels of well-being than communities where the economic base was dominated by large, absentee-owned firms. Sociologists C. Wright Mills and Melville Ulmer discovered these patterns with regard to non-agriculturally related communities in three eastern states. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt found similar patterns of community well-being associated with agriculturally dependent communities in California, one surrounded by a diversity of smaller farms and the other surrounded by large-scale, corporately controlled farming enterprises.

This fundamental insight regarding the importance for community well-being of a diversified, local economic structure sets the direction for the rest of the argument regarding the capacity and value of civic agriculture. Pivotal to civic engagement is the role of an 'economically independent middle class' that provides leadership for a range of networked and collective community problem-solving and community-building activities. Examples of the products of independent farmers networking among themselves and with other community actors are discussed in Chapter 6 under such civic agriculture headings as specialized agricultural production districts, community-supported farming, restaurant agriculture, community gardens, urban agriculture, farmers' markets, and farm-to-school programs.

What is the future for civic agriculture? Lyson is both realistic and optimistic. He recognizes that in its current state of development, civic agriculture does not represent a significant economic challenge to the conventional agricultural and food system. Given the power of its principles, he does envision a time, however, when forms of civic agriculture may generate sufficient economic and political power 'to mute the more socially and environmentally destructive manifestations of the global marketplace'. This vision is grounded in a well-argued premise that civic agricultural enterprises can be significant participants in larger community-based, industrial/production districts and strategies around which modern, technologically sophisticated economies can be organized. Community-oriented economies spring from quite different development models than do corporate-oriented economies. Such models open up opportunities to increase the scale of civic agricultural enterprises to regionally identified, values-based food supply chains that engage midsize farms, ranches and regional food processors, use significant amounts of farmland, spur regional policy initiatives, and supply regional supermarkets as well as local farmers' markets. Given the increasing shakiness of the policy, petroleum, and security supports under the globalized commodity food system, Lyson's civic agriculture in its current and expanded forms looks increasingly attractive.

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Agroecology in Action: Extending Alternative Agriculture through Social Networks (Food, Health, and the Environment). By Keith Douglas Warner. Forward by Fred Kirschenmann. 2007. The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA. 291 p. $25. ISBN 0262731800, paperback.

Keith Douglas Warner's *Agroecology in Action: Extending Alternative Agriculture through Social Networks* reconciles two disparate fields—agroecological farm practices and appropriate support systems. He presents a social networking model for creating a more sustainable agriculture through new developments in agroecology. The author asserts that '[a]groecology cannot be transferred as a technological package. It can only be facilitated by social learning' (p. 224). University professionals in many colleges of agriculture work in a system in which even the minimal type of outreach expressed through 'technology transfer' type extension has been eclipsed by agribusiness. But in the context of advocating an agri-food system that rejects agrichemicals, farm concentration and intensive monoculture row crops, Warner suggests we must also reject a top-down method of disseminating information. The adoption of agroecological practices is best encouraged by first-hand knowledge of neighboring farmers' success with these strategies, which is why social learning is so essential to its facilitation. Warner describes this process in a series of case studies.

This work emphasizes speaking about agroecological practices to conventional farmers, not to the choir. It is a welcome approach, and difficult to find in work on alternative agriculture that has come out of California in recent years, much of which has a limited relevance due to that state's favorable biophysical attributes and a cultural climate that is conducive to alternative agriculture. Warner accomplishes this broader relevancy by situating agroecology as a compilation of practices amenable to conventional agricultural structures, rather than as a complete and disparate sustainable system. He thus narrates the efforts of wine grape and almond growers in California, Wisconsin potato farmers, and their many allies who have developed networks sharing ecologically appropriate production practices as well as economically profitable approaches to branding those practices.

The first chapter posits healthy ecological systems as a public good. Warner draws from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as he briefly describes some of the harmful environmental impacts perpetrated by industrial agriculture. He then describes the potential and growing role of agroecology in ameliorating these harms. He introduces Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Bruno Latour's circulatory system of science as the basis for his own model of 'interactions between components of a farming system and farm management decisions'. In Warner's 'agroecological partnership model', all participants engage with all four loops of Latour's system, including nature, scientific colleagues, clients and public representation. Collectively,