COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

We turn now, or rather return, to an example of what it means to think in a both/and way in relation to farming and the food system, and the economy in general. We will be looking at a form of economy that transcends the tenets of free market laissez-faire or measures of state intervention in the economy—a both/and approach to farming.

Value-Based Food Supply Chains and Community Supported Agriculture

The compounded problems of agribusiness could be summarized in one word: *degrading*. Degrading of the farmer who meets his needs less and less; degrading of the land, plants, and animals; and the environment treated as commodities. The dictates of an economy based not on meeting needs (not just human but of land, plants, animals, and all future generations), but on return on the dollar lies primarily on not paying for real costs. Many alternatives have sprung up, which we could place under the heading of "value-based food supply chains" (value chains, in short). In simplest terms these are consciously established food supply chains in which economics is rendered transparent and profits equitably distributed along the chain. Value chains are established in order to differentiate food according to added values such as local, sustainable, or organic; grass fed beef; fair wages, and so on, in order to garner higher revenue in exchange for better produce for consumers and environment alike.

In staying with the both/and kind of thinking we have entertained thus far, value chains do not depend on a capitalistic laissez-faire view of things, nor do they require state interventions in the economy. They are new economic models that try to promote a transparent and collaborative economy, and a departure from all past models.

Value chains can achieve two results. First, a fairer share of profits all along the food supply chain, which means most of all greater margins for the farmers, those who presently suffer the most from the workings of the free market as we saw in the example of US corn. Second, a determination of prices that reflects what it really costs to produce, especially in farming; in other words, a shift from a money-based economy to a needs-based economy. A fair price for farm produce is that which allows the farmer to operate in ways that cover all his needs as a human being, and enables him to continue to

operate in balance with nature. It is a radical proposition whose implications have not been fully grasped and sought on a larger scale.

At its best, when a value chain extends all the way from the producer/farmer to the consumer, the food chain can acquire some degree of independence from the market; prices can reflect true costs and cover all parties' needs. There is a great variety of value chains, but most of them stop at the level of wholesale or retail, not yet consciously at the level of the consumer.

Among all the examples of value chains we could look at, below are some examples that have been documented in the United States.

Classical Value Chains:

- to *wholesale*: Shepherd's Grain[1]
- to *retail*: Good Natured Family Farms, an alliance of some 40 farmers with a retail chain;[2] Organic Valley;[3] Red Tomato[4]
- to *consumers*
  - Corbin Hill, including nonprofits and CSAs[5]
  - Farmers to You[6]
  - Good Earth Farms (internet sales from 5 farms)[7]

Food Hubs

- Farm Fresh RI[8]

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[1] Larry Lev and G. W. Stevenson, *Values-Based Grain Supply Chains: Shepherd's Grain*, 2013, https://cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/shepherdsgrainfinal050713.pdf.
[2] Shonna Dreier and Minoo Taheri, *Innovative Models: Small Grower and Retailer Collaborations: Good Natured Family Farms and Balls Food Stores*, 2008, http://ngfn.org/resources/research-1/innovative-models/Good Natured Family Farms Innovative Model.pdf.
[3] G. W. Stevenson, *Values-Based Food Supply Chains: Organic Valley*, April 2013, https://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/organicvalleyfinal071613.pdf.
[4] G. W. Stevenson, *Values-Based Food Supply Chains: Red Tomato*, 2013, https://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/redtomatofinal082213.pdf.
[5] Nevin Cohen and Dennis Derryck, *Corbin Hill Road Farm Share: A Hybrid Food Value Chain in Practice*, 2011, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/corbin-hill-road-farm-share-a-hybrid-food-value-chain-in-practice/.
[6] https://farmerstoyou.com/.
[7] G. W. Stevenson, *Values-Based Food Supply Chains: Good Earth Farms*, 2013, https://cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/goodearthfarmsfinal061313.pdf.
[8] Nathaniel Brooks, *Farm Processors Community of Practice Case Study: Youth Builds Job Skills through Local Food Processing*, 2017; see https://www.farmfreshri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/HK-2017FINEcasestudy.pdf.

- Intervale Food Hub: combining the CSA model[9]

Multi-stakeholder Co-ops
- Fifth Season Cooperative, Viroqua, WI[10]

CSA Coalitions
- Fair Share, eastern WI[11]

Single Farm CSAs

At present I will just turn my attention to the simplest possible example of value chain—community supported agriculture, or CSA—for the simple reason that this is the most concrete, elegant, small-scale achievement of a whole new way of rethinking the farming economic model. It stands as an illustration for more complex elaborations of the idea of a collaborative economy. It is in fact hardly ever called a value chain; it is the example at the end of the spectrum because it links directly farmers and consumers without the intermediaries, which are common members of a value chain.

In many farms CSA is used as the sole economic model. When that is the case, the farmer gets the full value of the food dollar for all his production. Those who come closest to the CSA model—sometimes even incorporating aspects of CSA—are so-called food hubs, which aggregate and distribute a mix of organic and local produce, working collaboratively with the farmers. It has been estimated that food hubs can give back to the farmer 75 to 85 percent of wholesale revenues to the farmers.[12] This does not mean that the farmer

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[9] Michele C. Schmidt, Jane M. Kolodinsky, Thomas P. DeSisto, and Faye C. Conte, "Collaborative Aggregation, Marketing, and Distribution Strategy Increasing Farm Income and Local Food Access: A Case Study of a Collaborative Aggregation, Marketing, and Distribution Strategy That Links Farmers to Markets," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 1, no. 4 (2011): 157–75. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2011.014.017.

[10] "The History of Fifth Season Cooperative," https://foodservice.gbaps.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_484711/File/Our District/Departments/Food Service/Farm To School/Farmer Biographies/Fifth Season Cooperative.pdf. See also Margaret Lund, *Solidarity as a Business Model: A Multi-Stakeholder Cooperatives Manual*, 40–43, https://community-wealth.org/content/solidarity-business-model-multi-stakeholder-cooperatives-manual.

[11] See https://www.csacoalition.org/. Originally formed in 1992, it was called Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition; see Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms—Farm Supported Communities* (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 2000), 87–90.

[12] Jason Jay, Hal Hamilton, Chris Landry, Daniella Malin, Don Seville, Susan Sweitzer, Peter Senge, and Andrew Murphy, eds., *Innovations for Healthy Value Chains: Cases, Tools &*

is able to sell all his produce through the food hub; it most often remains one of his strategies. For this reason too, a farm operating solely as a CSA offers an ideal model to explore.

CSA stands under our eyes as a matter-of-fact phenomenon, though we most often fail to see what a departure it can be from anything of the past. This is because CSA can be seen and set up either as a functional system with its pros and cons, or as a radical departure from the past of traditional farming. It all depends on where we want to stop. For the purpose of this exploration we will turn not just to CSAs in general but to those formulations of CSA that form an ideal in moving away from market logic. For the purpose of this chapter, we are interested most of all in following the radical and complete departure of thinking possible in the model.

CSA History

CSAs started in Europe and Japan in the 1970s; in Europe the CSA movement was fostered by biodynamic farming. In Japan Teikei (meaning "partnership" or "collaboration") was started in 1971 by a group of women concerned about the destructive trends they were seeing in farming all around them. CSAs were introduced in the United States in the mid-1980s. The two very first CSAs in the United States were Indian Line Farm in Massachusetts and Temple-Wilton CSA in New Hampshire, in 1986 through Robyn Van En and Trauger Groh respectively.

The 2007 estimate was of some 1,700 CSAs with around 100,000 members. These vary in size from operations with 3 to 2,100 shares. The larger clusters are formed around the Northeast; the Twin Cities; Madison, Wisconsin; and the Bay Area, California.[13]

From a functional perspective community supported agriculture presents many attractive elements: the fact that the farmer knows ahead of the growing season who will support him and what he can count upon; the capital made available by the high proportion of people who will pay their full share ahead of the month or of the season; not having to worry about marketing at the peak of the season when farmers face so many demands; the direct relationships with customers and the possibility of immediate feedback . . .

Methods, Sustainable Food Lab, May 2008, http://web.mit.edu/~jjay/Public/papers/InnovationsForHealthyValueChainsv15.pdf.

[13] Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En, *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2007), xv, 6.

enough reasons to stop there. They are similar to the reasons for stopping at functional trisector social thinking, without proceeding further to ideal threefolding into which we have presently moved. That there is more is obvious when we just look at how CSA was birthed in Germany.

What we presently know as CSA saw its beginning at Buschberg farm (near Hamburg, Germany) when a group of biodynamic farmers realized the growing constraints faced by organic and biodynamic farms in the 1960s.[14] In order to make ends meet, most farms had to rely on low-paid foreign workers, and even so their work only generated low returns. The farmers wanted to get out of this vicious cycle. They wanted to create what they called "solidarity farms" in which the responsibility and weight of farming was distributed between farmers and community members. Beyond that they wanted to change the traditional relationships of farming to land and of farmers to wages.

Through a cooperative arrangement, the land was held in trust and a risk-sharing agreement was designed in partnership with the Co-operative Bank in Bochum. The nonfarmer members were given access to a line of credit of 3,000 Deutsche Mark, which they could turn to the farmers as farm capital for establishing a working budget. Members shared in profit or losses. If a profit was generated, it would be divided among the members; if a loss, the community members agreed to make up for the difference. We can see from this what a radical departure CSA presented from a farm running like a farm business operating in the open market.

Thinking Beyond the Market

There is in fact a deeper thinking behind the scheme that turned out to be the CSA. It has its ground in some common sense observations that laymen and farmers alike have made over the centuries.

We have already seen in the previous chapter how little free market logic applies to farming. As we have seen, ideally land needs to be addressed from a perspective other than that of the market, one that does not equate it to a commodity. The same is true for farming, which cannot be equated with any other businesses. When farming operates like other businesses, it has lost its uniqueness, that of being able to work as a closed system, with subsystems that support each other in a closed system, particularly the integration of field crops and animal husbandry that produces organic fertilizers. Unlike other

[14] Information that follows is taken from http://buschberghof.de/wirtschaftsgemeinschaft/solidarische-landwirtschaft/.

businesses, the land can be so managed as to become almost completely self-supporting and need very limited to no external input.

To these basic matters of fact we can add that land has many more than one value, as authors Groh and McFadden bring out in their book *Farms of Tomorrow*. Among these functions are:

- producing healthy food
- fostering a healthy self-preserving environment for present and future generations, one that can even be improved
- serving as a basis for culture and education and therefore needing to be a resource accessible to all

CSAs can transcend the boundaries of the market, or at least take great strides in this direction. Knowing that there are varieties of legal property arrangements for CSAs, we will here look at an optimal situation, not necessarily the most common: a CSA where the land has been bought back and removed from the market, being held by an ad hoc land trust or nonprofit corporation, very much in line with what Bushberg Farm tried to give birth to. We do this to illustrate the highest potential that can be achieved through CSA.

<u>Thinking Beyond the Past</u>

CSAs are not placed in the choice between a return to the past or a continuation of present trends into the future. They predicate something totally novel. Through a different relationship to market forces, CSA farmers and members can acquire a new relationship both to land and to the social community that lives around it and/or depends on it.

So what do CSAs do differently from a regular organic farm? Essentially they predicate that farm operations have to be taken away from the market logic and market forces and that the farmers who operate it are the ones who can best see the needs and productive potential of that piece of land. Farmers are the ones who can cater to the needs of the land by producing healthy food, preserving/improving the environment, and rendering the land accessible to those who live in its proximity or contribute to its well-being.

With this goal in mind, Groh and McFadden recognize three sets of overlapping goals; the spiritual/cultural, the social, and the economic.

- Cultural: for future human beings to live in healthy bodies most likely to develop their full potential; for the land to be managed in optimal conditions, to preserve/improve its potential for future generations. For this the separation of land, property, and farm operations is essential. To better understand this aspect of CSA, we must envision the CSA as an ideally enclosed entity which has a being of its own, which plays a part in the whole like a cell or organ plays it in the human body. It is for this reason that we will refer to a *farm organism* to contrast the farm as a living being to a farm as a business.

  As part of their cultural role, farms can play an educational role for schools and/or for particular segments of the population; individuals with special needs, homeless, underprivileged, youth at risk, and so forth.
- Social: equal access for all to healthy food, optimally regardless of economic background. A whole new array of social relationships come into being, varying with the CSA's legal and organizational structure: between farmers and members/shareholders, among people who share in the risk of the operations, and possibly between other CSAs or farm associations. A rich new social tissue is added to the physical basis of the land.
- Economic: farms can become more self-sufficient, diversified, and run more economically, not just profitably, therefore with fewer external inputs of substances and energy. A farm should be able to maintain high fertility without external inputs, generate a surplus of food for the community, and generate its own seeds.

Let us look at each of these aspects in sequence. The cultural dimension relates the CSA to an understanding of nature, the farm organism and the larger tissue it is part of. It looks at matters of skills, personal gifts and education. Here freedom of informed choice is paramount.

The cultural dimension of CSA covers the whole planning of the farm organism. This goes down to the forming of a budget, and is assigned to the specific expertise that only the farmer and people with farming knowledge can cover. Farmers need to be given autonomy, though their budget will later be submitted to the members.

The visionary aspect we are looking at is important in terms of the support the farmers will receive from the community. They need to strike a balance between ability to carry the day-to-day with the right engagement, and the ability to pull back, observe, and envision in accord with nature.

Typical questions of the cultural area of concerns are:

- What is a good crop rotation that fits the needs of the particular farm?
- What animals would help most maintain and enhance fertility?
- What pastures should rotate and which should be kept permanent?
- What tools and machinery should be used?

It is important that practical initiative takes its departure out of the area of the needs of the farm organism as they are understood by the farmer, and only later to consider the legal and economic ramifications. This will predicate the ideal that the land, the capital invested in the operations, and the farmer's labor should not be considered as disposable commodities by the whims of the market.

The social aspect includes legal and social relationships, written and unwritten. An example is the legal relationship between active farmers and legal owners of the land, whether this be a community land trust or individual landlords. Some of the social questions are

- What are the personal needs of the active farmers?
- How can we support the farmers and the farmers' families?
- Should we have equal-cost shares or should we have flexible options considering the socioeconomic reality of the shareholders?
- Should we exchange products with other farms? How would we deal with these?

For these questions, a consensus needs to be reached through fully participatory processes. Involving a multitude of interests and stakeholders is something that requires that some members, or organizing committees, turn their attention to how best to generate common ground and decision-making approaches that have everybody's buy-in.

One of the most enlivening possibilities offered through CSA is that of building new kinds of communities where traditional ones no longer survive. Entering a CSA means in fact entering direct but complex relationships with the earth and other people. Participation takes commitment: members pay money upfront, have to pick up food at the farm or central drop off, have to figure out what to do with the food, are tied to what nature produces seasonally, and must learn new ways to cook and process food. Likewise, members acquire a new relationship with earth, and a new relationship with people: celebrating together social occasions and festivals, the most obvious ones being the solstices and equinoxes

Finally, matters of community building can go even further. Considerations of a CSA's social function concern also the possible access to the land for the benefit of the larger community, not just its shareholders. More and more CSAs allow access to, or act specifically as educational farms for, various populations.

Where CSAs really present new, wide horizons for the future is in their offering a completely new economic model. In fact we could say that they are truly economic whereas the model of agribusiness, profitable as it may be, is the antithesis of true economy. When strawberries, even organic, are produced in California for the Northeast market, the amount of energy that the fruit provides to its consumers is a small fraction of all the energy applied in growing, shipping, conserving, and distributing them. It is society that pays for the shortfall, not to mention the subsidies that go into making this model possible. In contrast, with CSAs not only are all these costs either eliminated or drastically reduced, but consider that the quality and freshness of CSA produce cannot be matched in any other conventional or organic distribution chains.

Fostering a Collaborative Economy

CSAs embody a new kind of economy, which stands in contrast to a market economy: an economy in which each player listens to the needs of the others, instead of placing self-interest at the center as in Adam Smith's idea of the free market. CSAs potentially allow the greatest amount of people and the greatest variety of stakeholders to associate with farming, plus a greatly varied demographic range of ages, occupations, and incomes.

In working within a CSA, farmers and members identify needs and work out of them in an altruistic mood. The shareholders are really committing to the preservation of the farm organism, its needs and those of its stewards. This is a way to take the economy of the free market out of center stage.

In this new kind of associative economy, the focus shifts from fighting for our own needs to listening to the needs of the other stakeholders and seeing how all needs can be met and how new synergies can emerge. It is in effect a major cultural shift.

CSAs' new economy has far-reaching consequences. An example: some crops could be difficult to grow in a given US region; hence the need to partner with farms in another part of the country. CSAs of the Northeast have interest in partnering with grain-producing farms of the Midwest. But in the spirit of

CSA economy, they will not just purchase the grain. They will cover all it takes to grow the grains in that part of the Midwest, all the needs the farmer needs to meet while he is growing them. In fact they will share in the risks or benefits of the harvest, whether there is a crop failure or abundant yield.

Groh and McFadden give us an enticing definition of what this economy could be: "Identifying needs and covering these needs with the least effort (the least input of energy, substance and labor) is true economy."[15] We can see how this stands in opposition to operating for profit.

CSAs and Thinking in Threes

Why is then CSA an example of an economy that thinks in three? Where do we find the synthesis between two extremes? Capitalism only looks at the freedom of the individual and believes in such a thing as an abstract force of the market that tempers it. The farm becomes a business. Socialistic farm models, now mostly in the past, all but kill the freedom of the individual in the name of equality. The farm will tend to resemble an institution. The CSA is neither a business nor an institution, but a living organism.

In the CSA idea, the farmer is selected to further the interests of the land itself and of the community. Ideally he is chosen because of his keen understanding of the land and the community around it. The farmer is freed to pursue the development of his individuality in accord with the needs of the land. The land trust or nonprofit that ensures the future uses of the land for benefit of environment and community has no resemblance whatsoever with a government agency. The selfish profit motive of capitalism and the equalitarian view of human beings are reconciled at a higher level with the maxim "to each according to his needs." The objective place of individual human needs replaces the notion of the survival of the fittest, or the seemingly generous but abstract notion of human beings' equality in economic terms.

Subscribing to a whole other notion of what a farm is, a whole other way to see the role of the farmer and the role of the market, a whole other way to "purchase vegetables" pays rich dividends to all parties involved. Here are some the potential advantages for farm and farmers:

- The land can build increasing fertility and sustain a very diverse ecosystem.
- Farmers can be sure of a set income since the whole community shoulders the risk. They can have an easier work schedule and be better stewards by observing how their crops grow.

[15] Groh and McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited*, 36.

- Farmers don't have to market during the growing season, their busiest time of the year.
- They can alleviate the temptation to overproduce due to economic pressure.

Among advantages for shareholders are the following:

- CSA products have unique levels of freshness and quality. Consumers know where the food comes from and can offer immediate feedback, thereby improving quality.
- Consumers and farmers bypass the middleman and obtain savings. CSAs bypass the intermediary costs of transportation, packaging, processing, storage, and marketing, which add up to 75 percent of the average food price. We are moving toward an economy in which consumers pay the true cost of the produce, and the farmers receive the full consumer dollar. The Food Bank Farm CSA calculated that the cost of a share ($450) would buy the equivalent of $750 at a local supermarket, and $1,150 at a natural foods store. A similar study conducted by Equiterre, Quebec, found members' savings adding up to somewhere from 10 to 50 percent on costs of organic foods.[16]
- There is little waste; even "unaesthetic" produce can readily be used

And other advantages accrue to the community at large:

- The preservation of open spaces and farmland makes the community a more satisfying place to live.
- Since CSAs need to plan for generous crop yields to alleviate for weather patterns and to be able to cover members' needs, all of the surplus will not be destroyed to satisfy market demands but can be made available to those in need (e.g., food pantries).
- Money remains in the local economy.
- Farms can be places to bring people together around a variety of common concerns. The farm can lend itself to educational and recreational uses for the larger community and particular groups.

Note that all the advantages contribute to the development of a true economy from all perspectives: reducing costs, increasing efficiency, reducing waste,

[16] Henderson and Van En, *Sharing the Harvest*, 214, 218.

linking most efficiently producers to consumers with the greatest amount of feedback loops. It is true that producing a great variety of crops renders further mechanization difficult. However, this adds motivation and interest to the farmers and is a plus on the consumers' end.

CSAs within the Constraints of the Neoliberal Economy

The kind of collaborative economy for which CSA or other value chains set the ground rules is based on knowing and understanding each other, and operating from the ground of needs to be fulfilled. We have shown that CSA secures the satisfaction of needs with the least expenditure of energy, resources, and materials. Ideally a well-integrated farm with a rotation that includes pastures and farm animals will have little need for extra inputs. And in most scenarios, very little is lost of what is produced.

A shift to a new economy cannot happen until we affirm new sets of values and build the ground for a new culture. As a matter of fact, CSAs can only be established through a firm commitment to new values, through the support of a surrounding culture.

The disastrous consequences of neoliberalism amount to a complete alienation from the environment and from local cultures, and ultimately induces a complete alienation from self, the ultimate anticultural endeavor. The life-negating values shoring up elite globalization will only be countered when life-affirming values have sufficiently taken hold of society as a whole, or in pockets of it and expand from there. In the immediate this means creating settings in which nonprofits and businesses can operate outside of the free market.

CSAs represent an ideal of great potential, but at a very small scale. To maintain its strength within the global market implies taking the bull by the horns and scaling up. As Trauger Groh realized from his farm in New Hampshire, "The community farm has no future without a network in New England of 100 or so similar farms that can support each other through trade and association."[17] Traveling for the last four months in preparation for this book, the fragile health of CSA was a leitmotif that I sadly encountered all too often.

Meeting the challenge that Trauger Groh invites CSAs to overcome means facing two of the paradigms of which we will talk about next:

[17] Groh and McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited*, 112.

- Bringing a large number of CSAs to collaborate in spite of their differences: functional CSAs versus more idealistic CSAs, small and large ones, differences of perception as to what constitutes quality food, etc.
- Building organizational models that are neither too rigid nor too loose; some in which the farmers can invest their time knowing that generally speaking they have little to spare; and forms that can preserve a variety of interests without compromising any single one

These are two challenges we will face in the next chapters:

- How to bring a variety of stakeholders to work from common ground in spite of their differences (Chapter 3)
- What forms are most natural and organic that can sustain common action, while preserving autonomy and a variety of coexisting interests (Chapter 4)