

C. Clare Hinrichs and Thomas A. Lyson (eds.): Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability

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I approached this book with excitement and hope because its contributors are some of the most thoughtful and insightful analysts of alternative agrifood systems working in the US now. In many ways, the book met my hopes.

It is an excellent survey of numerous alternative institutional arrangements, showing how, where and why each is working or not working. It is the best current reference on many alternative institutions in agrifood systems in the US (with a few excursions into exemplary institutions in other industrialized countries, such as the Label Rouge poultry production system in France and development of a label of origin as a trade advantage in Charlevoix, Quebec). In the second section of the book, the authors integrate practitioner-level insights with academic analysis of alternatives ranging from the most local—community-supported agriculture and farmers' markets—to food policy councils and regional dietary guidelines. In the third section of the book, the importance of place-based strategies is emphasized. The chapters in this section examine how the characteristics of specific places determine the success and challenges of various alternative institutions and practices, including direct marketing options in Washington State, farmers' markets in Puerto Rico, the developmental paths of organic farming in Michigan, and sustainable agriculture and alternative land-access models in southeastern Vermont. As a compilation of studies on food system alternatives, this book would supplement a graduate or undergraduate course on the US food system usefully.

Unfortunately, not all of my hopes for the book were realized. In the first place, I wanted more synthesis and less

compilation—an indication of the meaning in sum of all these institutional arrangements, and what that tells us about the current status of US food systems. The authors acknowledge this lack, to some extent. In the final chapter, Hinrichs and Barham describe the efforts they have documented as a “growing hum of initiatives” in which “distinctive melodies, born of circumstances, resources, interests, and needs [can be detected]” (345). But what are those melodies? Like many others, I am excited by the “hum;” but it is time to start singing together.

Second, the book does not deliver a “strategy for sustainability” or for “remaking,” in the sense of clear guidance of what needs to change and in what order and how, for our food system to become more sustainable. This is a tall order, of course; and again the authors recognize the lack: “Despite the many accomplishments of efforts to remake the food system, it seems clear that these efforts do not as yet present us with a comprehensive, coordinated plan of action for the future” (354). I would have liked more discussion of this, in a book that talks about “transformation” and promises “strategies for sustainability” in its subtitle. While many signs of hopeful change are documented, they seem more like a small flock of chickens pecking at stray pellets that have fallen out of a feedbag than pointers for how to rip open the feedbag or make our own feed according to a recipe of our own choosing. That is, the alternative strategies and practices described in this book are fine; but they don't seem to be striking fatal blows at the system that has degraded landscapes and communities across the country, contributed to a generation with a lower life-expectancy than its parents because of diet-related diseases, and accumulated vast amounts of wealth and power in a handful of companies and boards of directors.

While the authors may have decided not to explore real strategies for sustainability for good reasons, it would have

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been helpful at least to have some discussion of the indicators of sustainability that cut across their projects. What were their criteria for deciding whether given programs or practices are “sustainable” or “transformative?” Many of the issues that are part of the contemporary discussion of sustainability in agriculture are almost invisible in this book: weaning agriculture from fossil fuels, reducing reliance on synthetic pesticides, stopping the nutrient hemorrhaging from cropping systems and livestock operations that is destroying marine ecosystems, climate change, water use efficiency, habitat preservation, humane treatment of animals, improving abusive and exploitative worker conditions, paying farmworkers livable wages, improving new farmer access.

Third, the dualistic conceptual framework that emerged at several points was not very useful to me. This came out in the contrast in the first chapter between “civic” and “conventional” agriculture, and in several other chapters. Civic agriculture does not seem strong enough to support all the claims made on its behalf. Some of the authors struggled with whether evidence of stronger producer/consumer relationships and localized food systems really demonstrate stronger communities, greater democracy and social inclusivity, and a viable strategy for change that will address the most deep-rooted problems with today’s agrifood system. The second framework, described by Stevenson, Ruhf, Lezberg and Clancy in Chapter 2 and distinguishing warrior, builder and weaver work toward inclusion, reformation and transformation, is more nuanced. A third framework, briefly considered in the final chapter, is neoliberalism and its discontents. “Localization” and “globalization” sing in counterpoint throughout the chapters. But agriculture and food systems are changing along several dimensions now, and looking at alternatives on different spectra simultaneously might have provided greater analytic depth.

Other minor weaknesses emerged that are common to edited volumes. Authors made valiant efforts to refer to the themes laid out in the first two chapters, but some chapters

fit those frameworks more closely than others. For example, the chapter on food deserts is interesting and useful; but it does not focus on alternative institutions that would address the problem. The distinctions between the second and third sections were not always clear to me, although individual chapters are well written and generally present a clear thesis and support for it. But especially given the untimely death of the second editor well before the completion of the book, the quality of editing is commendable. The introductory and concluding chapters are excellent bookends, introducing and summarizing the challenges of remaking the agrifood system.

In sum, this book does much of what it sets out to do. While not providing sheet music for a sustainability strategy, it at least sets the key and gives some musical themes. It stands as a welcome contribution to agrifood system reform from scholars and practitioners in the land-grant universities (with a few additional authors from non-governmental organizations and other institutions of higher education), balancing the many ways that land-grant universities have helped create current agrifood system problems with a thoughtful survey of ways that agriculture can serve the public good. We can only wonder how much more the land-grant universities could have fulfilled their public service mission and how much deeper the scholarship on strategies for sustainability might have been, if the majority of US agricultural funding and attention had been focused over the last half-century on supporting the kinds of alternatives described in this book, rather than the agriculture they seek to reform.

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