

BOOK REVIEW:

FARMING FOR US ALL: PRACTICAL AGRICULTURE AND THE CULTIVATION OF SUSTAINABILITY BY MICHAEL MEYERFIELD BELL. PUBLISHED IN 2004 BY PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, STATE COLLEGE, PA. ISBN: 0-271-02386-4 (HARDBACK), 0271023872 (PAPERBACK), 296 PAGES

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The concept of sustainability is one that is both rich in promise (Brundtland 1987; UNCED 1992) and fraught with contention (for a review see Newton and Freyfogel 2005). As a goal, management of a resource that facilitates its continued capacity to provide benefits for future generations is certainly desirable and subject to little debate. What sustainability entails exactly is, however, a contentious topic. A particularly telling critique of the concept involves the difficulties in sufficiently accounting for the various aspects of sustainability ranging from the ecological to the economic and to the social relations associated with the use of a given resource. Several questions arise that illustrate the complexity of attempts to assess or demonstrate sustainability. Is a given management practice sustainable if, despite ensuring future access to a resource, it does not allow for viable economic and social reproduction? What social conditions are necessary in order to promote and enable more sustainable management of a resource?

It is in reference to the latter question that *Farming for Us All* offers a welcome addition to the spectrum of literature on sustainable agriculture. In the book, Michael Bell provides an analysis of sustainable agriculture that both informs and challenges the academic reader. By linking an analysis of farmers' access to agricultural knowledge to their adoption of management practices of varying sustainability, the book provides a wide-ranging examination of the factors surrounding agricultural production and adeptly relates these to the discussion of social sustainability. The resulting presentation moves our understanding of the social aspects of sustainable practice from an exclusive focus on nature-society relationships to include greater awareness of relevant societal relations as well. For Bell, social sustainability involves the farmers' ability to engage as actors in the construction and development of knowledge around agriculture.

The book excels in its presentation of factors which make high input, high subsidy agriculture socially unsustainable. The issue of environmental sustainability—an analysis that is arguably beyond the scope of the book—is, however, treated in a less comprehensive manner. The basis for Bell's analysis is a series of interviews conducted with farmers in the State of Iowa (USA). A team of researchers associated with Bell interviewed both a number of farmers who were entrenched within the dominant production paradigm driven by high inputs and government subsidies as well as a group (the Practical Farmer of Iowa, PFI) that was exploring alternative practices. The latter group, Bell argues, have found a means to approach a socially sustainable agriculture defined by dialogic knowledge that incorporates multiple

sources information. He further implies that, as an alternative to what is widely held to be an unsustainable agricultural system, this group's practices are environmentally sustainable.

Bell establishes the structure of his discussion through a comparison of the approach to farming adopted by the majority of farmers in Iowa (in that sense, conventional farm practice) and that of PFI farmers. The introduction provides a brief presentation of the 'solutions' promoted within PFI as well as context to explain the objectives and the methodology of the research. The goal of the book is the development of a new system of knowledge from which to approach sustainable agriculture—one that is based on the concept of conversation and dialogic exchange that Bell draws from the work of Bakhtin. Finally, the introduction prepares the reader for the somewhat unconventional structure of the book, which confines the discussion of theory and methodology to 'intermezzos' inserted in breaks in the presentation of data. Bell suggests that this allows the non-academic reader to focus on the narrative behind his argument by simply ignoring the intermezzo sections. Those readers intent on following the theoretical and methodological logic that Bell employs are invited to do so in the intermezzos.

The first section includes three chapters which define the parameters of unsustainable farming in Iowa. The chapters in the section are distinguished by their relative scope, ranging from a broader scale of national agricultural policy and its localised impacts, to that of rural communities, and, finally that of farm households. The first two chapters provide relatively familiar perspectives on the constraints within US agricultural policy that promote unsustainable practice and the impacts of the changing sociology and geography of farming on the sustainability of rural communities. The third chapter focuses more exclusively on the tensions and stresses within farm households that result from existing conditions of farming.

The second section of the book includes two chapters, both of which explore the identities and systems of knowledge employed by conventional and PFI farmers in Iowa. This section traces the emergence of an agricultural knowledge system that is more dialogic in nature and transcends more familiar presentations of sustainable agriculture. The identity of the conventional farmer is deeply embedded in external definitions of good agricultural practice received from 'experts' who prescribe findings and recommendations without facilitating a reciprocal exchange with the farmers. As a result, the conventional farmers pursue strategies—including the pursuit of larger farms, larger machinery, and more effective chemical inputs—that provide them with a sense of control and self awareness. Farmers following PFI strategies are shown to have similar objectives of control and identity, but are less likely to be defined by reliance on established structures of knowledge creation. The identity of the successful PFI farmer is defined by an active engagement with knowledge—both in locating its sources and in creating it. Of particular interest is the capacity of PFI farmers to locate valuable knowledge from 'conventional' as well as alternative sources. What determines the value of such knowledge is not its source, but the ability of the recipient to actively engage with its implications and apply it to a given situation.

The final three chapters of *Farming for Us All* describe the pathways by which participants engage the practices and approaches of PFI: the transition as farmers realised the need for change and saw the promise of the PFI approach; the

development of new, more sustainable, approaches to farming; and the development of the new farming identities that emerge within the PFI approach. The principal factor in this process is the cultivation of a farmer's ability to access relevant information and to experiment and develop practices and technologies appropriate to the capabilities and objectives of the farm household. Not only are different practices employed, but the rationale for adopting these practices is not defined by conventional aspects of farming identity.

The intermezzos that interrupt the Bell's presentation of the conditions of agricultural production (both sustainable and unsustainable) in Iowa, while unconventional, contribute to the goal of encouraging dialogue with the text. By introducing commentary on the methods and theory underlying the research only after the reader has been drawn in by the narrative structure of the book, Bell encourages the reader to contemplate and assess the value and accuracy of the book's statements. The relatively brief academic asides provide intriguing nuggets leaving the reader clamouring for more. Rather than signifying an lack of completeness, the intermezzos as written further contribute to a strategy of eliciting active response to the knowledge that is presented.

In his conclusion, Bell challenges his readers to engage in several responses, which he expects will contribute to a more sustainable agriculture. The simplest challenge to the academic reader interested in agricultural sustainability is that of becoming a more conscientious consumer of agricultural products. In Bell's terms, this is an integral step towards developing a more dialogic agriculture, facilitating interaction with the producers and processors of what we consume. Through this process, preferences regarding the product can be expressed, and the conditions which limit or facilitate conformance with such demands can be understood. The greater challenges arise in his admonition to bring a similar dialogic approach to research and the representation of that research. This involves, on the one hand, assuming a more humble attitude toward our knowledge and toward the subjects of our research. On the other hand, it also involves a more pragmatic approach to the creation of knowledge and theory which discourages monolithic and entrenched theoretical and methodological approaches. Part of this process includes an acknowledgement of the potential value to sustainable management of knowledge systems embedded in conventional agriculture. *Farming for Us All* is itself an attempt at a more inclusive form of knowledge production, speaking first to a more popular audience and asking the academic reader to go along for the ride. As much as dialogue is the goal, however, the constraints to this objective inherent in a published work are also evident, readers being unable to immediately engage the author and, thus, the research.

Overall, *Farming for Us All* provides an accessible and engaging vehicle with which to approach the concept of social sustainability in the agricultural sector. Whereas the specific case study is somewhat dependent on the structural context of Iowa agriculture, the conclusions which Bell derives should resonate in a variety of situations. In particular, his plea for more open exchange between research on agriculture and the objects of that research identifies a tool for the promotion of sustainability. As such, the book should assume an essential place in the library of anyone interested in the analysis or promotion of sustainable agricultural management. It would also be an excellent addition to the reading list for upper level undergraduate and (likely with more emphasis on the intermezzo sections) post-graduate courses on rural sustainability. As a classroom text, it would complement a

group of readings more specifically addressing environmental and economic aspects of sustainability as well as those employing social capital, sense of place and triple bottom line as alternative approaches to social sustainability.

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