

C&A

Culture and Agriculture

#24

Winter 1994
Number 50

*Bulletin of the
Culture and
Agriculture Group*

A Few Words About This Issue...

The articles in this issue range widely in their geographic and subject matter focus — from animal agriculture to agroforestry, from the Old Order Amish to Toronto food policy. Yet, despite this diversity, they share a common element. Each author, in his/her own way, takes issue with popular arguments and/or methods, calling into question their accuracy, and thus utility, for furthering our understanding of existing agricultural/food systems.

McCorkle persuasively argues against those who uniformly condemn animal agriculture. She notes that the highly publicized “cattle battle” is founded on an industrial model of livestock production. As a consequence, the realities of farming and food production in developing nations and the essential socio-cultural and ecological interdependence maintained among animals, plants and humans are ignored and seriously jeopardized.

Den Biggelaar uses his study of agroforestry in southern Rwanda as a vehicle to understand something of the history and diversity of indigenous knowledge systems. He recognizes that even well-respected, emically-based methods are not sufficient to reveal the full array of existing agroforestry knowledge. Rather, multiple methods of both emic and etic persuasion have the advantage of profiling variations in local knowledge and practice.

Kusnetzky et al. argue that proponents of sustainable agriculture in their search for agrarian models have erroneously idealized the Amish. The authors do not deny that many aspects of Amish community life are exemplary and worth cultural consideration. They caution, however, that simplistic representation is dangerous. Without more realistic and critical assessments of the internal contradictions and constraints associated with this lifestyle, the authors feel, we will be hampered in our attempts to construct a “truly alternative organization of farm life.”

Finally, McRae documents the remarkable formation, organization and work of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC). From its very inception, the TFPC challenged prevailing attitudes related to agricultural policy and food security. It argued that the existing agrofood system was contributing to increased hunger and poverty, declining food quality and environmental degradation for Toronto's residents. Over the last three years, TFPC programs have addressed these concerns and the TFPC has become an institution for on-going social and political reform.

In This Issue . . .

The 'Cattle Battle' In Cross-Cultural Context

by Constance M. McCorkle p. 2

Differentiating the Nature of Agroforestry Systems and Agroforestry Knowledge among Farmers in Southern Rwanda: Participatory and Formal Approaches as Complementary Methods

by Christoffel den Biggelaar p. 5

In Search of the Cllmax Community: Sustainability and the Old Order Amish

by Lara Kusnetzky, Jeffrey Longhofer, Jerry Floersch, & Kristine Latta p. 12

So Why Is the City of Toronto Concerned about Food and Agriculture Policy?: A Short History of the Toronto Food Policy Council

by Rod MacRae p. 15

In Search of the Climax Community: Sustainability and the Old Order Amish

by

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To many in the alternative agriculture movement, the Old Order Amish are a window into the future, even a guidepost on our way to a sustainable society. They are depicted as successful farmers with an exemplary lifestyle, embodying all the requirements of sustainability—production practices and the desired family and community formations (Huntington 1993). A relic of tradition, they have been singled out to represent real or imagined pasts.

What is missing from these discussions, however, are the myriad ways in which the Amish are entangled in market capitalism, divided against themselves and the outside world; their often contradictory and problematic relationship with the nation-state, with technology, and the marketplace is not fully explicated (Longhofer 1993). Where some farms and communities have become large and wealthy at the expense of others, social class tensions are left unexamined. Where Amish women work in the fields or for wages in local restaurants and bakeries and earn incomes in cottage industries—while simultaneously managing the domestic sphere—the gendered division of labor is largely ignored.

In this essay, we will describe how advocates have uncritically portrayed the Amish as a possible model for “sustainable” production. We argue that the use of the Amish to discuss sustain-

able agriculture leads to an unfortunate problem common in oppositional history writing: social heterogeneity and contradiction remain unexplored.

Sustainability and the Climax Community

Wes Jackson, a leading advocate of sustainable agriculture, poses this question: “Is the Jeffersonian ideal of the family farm and strong rural community mere nostalgia or a practical necessity in a world of declining energy and material resources?” (Jackson 1990:134). For Jackson, industrial, fossil fuel-driven agriculture leads to a fundamental failure of stewardship. The Amish, in contrast, are portrayed as the most “ecologically-correct farmers in America” (Jackson 1980:11). Jackson observes that, like a “natural ecosystem,” Amish farms are homeostatic (Jackson 1984:215), operating as an interrelated system where energy is recycled and cultural information replaces the inputs of conventional farming (Jackson 1984). Moreover, “for the Amish, *resilience* lies with that sufficiency of people” (Jackson 1984: 216). *Nature*, for Jackson, is the model for a sustainable agriculture, and the Amish are as close as one can come to its human manifestation.

Wendell Berry, perhaps the most prominent spokesperson of agrarian-

ism, maintains that Amish farming is a successful and surviving example of the traditional, self-sufficient, smallholder. He feels the constraints the Amish place on involvement with the external world help to maintain their integrity and independence. For Berry, family and community “fulfill directly, humanly, simply, and quietly nearly all the functions that we have delegated to our obtrusive, inhuman, indifferent, clumsy, expensive, institutions” (Berry 1977:212). He observes that on an Amish farm every person has a place and purpose. This wholeness is also clear to any visitor to an Amish community, for it is reflected in their well-tended fields, their animals, buildings, houses, and in their understanding of the value of work (Berry 1984).

Gene Logsdon (1986), Marty Bender (1984), David Orr (1992), and Stinner et al. (1989) also argue that Amish self-sufficiency, scale of operation, low-tech inputs, and reliance on family and community labor yield a sound and productive economy. All concur, however, that Amish success is influenced by more than their productive strategies. Mutual aid, labor exchange, face-to-face interactions, and densely compact communities combine to allow the Amish way of life to flourish. The “fact that this now sounds utopian to some,” Orr argues, “is a measure of how much we have

forgotten about our past or choose to dismiss about future possibilities" (Orr 1992:174).

To exactly what sort of life, to what and whose values, to what kind of domestic and community articulation are advocates of sustainable agriculture referring? Their use of the Amish has at least two serious implications: the problem of writing history using oppositional categories; and its outcome, the inadequate conceptualization of the units of production, households and community.

Oppositional History

In looking back toward the future to find relief from the present, we invariably idealize virtue, obligation, stewardship, community, and the natural economy. We present a mystified history, a history that does not account for the real social injustices and struggles that accompany nature's exploitation in the process of agricultural production (Williams 1973:35).

Advocates account for problems with conventional agriculture by turning to an imagined past, a past often used to celebrate and idealize today's Amish; thereby, positing an unproblematic and linear development from an ordered past to a disordered present (or, from a disordered past to an ordered—Old Order Amish-like—modern present).

Sustainable agriculture positions itself in opposition to a conventional one, where it draws on the rhetoric of Jeffersonian agrarianism to imagine a time in the past when small communities of family farmers lived in accordance with nature's rhythms. In essence, a time when social relations were not subservient to the market, when the family's economy was natural and moral, an oppositional history that in effect substitutes "one form of domination for another: the mystified feudal order replaced by a mystified agrarian capitalist order" (Williams 1973: 39).

William Roseberry argues that through this oppositional writing of

history "we . . . [impose] on the past the preoccupations (not to mention the ideological battles) of the present." (Roseberry 1988:426). And in so doing we produce "pseudohistorical" accounts of the past and ignore the pos-

family labor. Moreover, in many Amish communities even the use of horse-drawn technologies can result in higher or lower productivity—as Gavin Smith has argued in a discussion of simple commodity producers more



sibility that what has been conceived as archaic, as traditional, is rather the product of the unfolding of distinctly modern structures to which it has been opposed (Roseberry and O'Brian 1991). The Amish are not transparently simple, nor have they come into being or persisted outside the forces shaping conventional farming.

Amish persistence is of course remarkable, but their outward appearance—dress, use of draft animals, horse-and-buggy technology, language, and rejection of media—leads the uncritical eye to conclude that they are simple and traditional. In particular, Amish dress and language cause the casual observer or true believer to conclude that there is remarkable homogeneity.

Reality, however, presents a very different picture. Their apparent simplicity conceals levels of differentiation among and between households, communities, and church districts. Though Amish families own property and privately accumulate wealth—this accumulation is retarded by the fact that households cannot indiscriminately purchase labor-saving technology—some households differentially benefit from more fertile land, diversification, closer proximity to markets (including the tourist trade), and larger pools of

generally—and this differential household productivity diminishes the need for community labor and cooperation (Smith 1985:102-103).

Though ideological controls on the use of technology, together with pre- and postmortem inheritance (discounted land prices, and equal division of wealth among siblings) make private household accumulation of wealth work toward expanding new Amish communities, it is clear that Amish communities and households cannot thoroughly resist the effects of market economies.

Future Research

Yet having recognized that we cannot reduce the Amish to a simple folk society does not mean that advocates for sustainability should view their existence with indifference. Many are understandably impressed, even encouraged, by Amish reliance on local community institutions. Because they cannot be understood as strictly simple commodity producers or independent family farmers, we must clearly specify how their domestic units articulate with the larger community, local governments, and the nation-state.

We have argued elsewhere (Longhofer 1993) that community for-

mations help mediate the influences of the economy and state policy (e.g., out migration, social security, Medicare, welfare, and government agricultural programs) and avert the commodification of Amish reproduction cycles. Many households, for example, rely on gardens, and Amish women produce a significant proportion of their family's clothing. These practices limit dependence on the cash nexus.

By not substituting capital for newer technologies, the need for cooperative labor is created and contributes to the development and expansion of communities. Amish resistance to commodification, then, is certainly worthy of note in our future discussion of sustainable forms of production, household and community. However, the increase in external relations and occupations—especially in areas dominated by tourism—has resulted in fewer inter-household ties and production relations have become increasingly disarticulated from the community.

It is likely that these households will progressively lack the resources to commit to the continued reproduction of community social relations. But the degree to which households are integrated into the community and are formed or destroyed by external forces cannot be known in an *a priori*, formalistic manner. Research on sustainability should discover, not construct or invent, how Amish community formations, control over technology, and mutual aid obscures private property-based relations of production and facilitates the persistence of community production.

If we are to study the Amish, we must begin with their actual histories, not those that suit our respective ideological agendas, or those imagined and then projected onto the Hollywood screen. If their society offers advocates a guidepost to a sustainable future, it will be discovered through examination of their resistance to commodification. After all, alternative agriculture must first emerge, then persist alongside a commodity-driven

agribusiness. And to do so, as Allen and Sachs (1993) have noted, new forms of community, domesticity, and property relations will be required.

In the continuing discourse on appropriate units of production, we must be cautious about how the debates are framed and the questions posed. Otherwise, our arguments will become indistinguishable—as is evident in much of the literature on sustainable agriculture—from those prevalent among New Right commentators. For the Right and many in the alternative agriculture movement, family is not only God-given, but may be based on essential differences between men, women, and children (Berry 1992). Biologically, from this standpoint women must be mothers and can be fulfilled only through motherhood and mothering. This constitutes the foundation of women's roles. Men are—as naturally—economic providers and patriarchal heads of farm families.

Research questions must examine how gender, class, religion, and ideology, have uniquely resulted in Amish differentiation. How, for example, have their religious ideologies and labor processes reproduced their strict gendered division of labor? Does their private ownership of land and technology foster stewardship? Could an aggregate of isolated Amish-like communities constitute a model for a decentralized, place-specific, alternative agriculture? By assessing how the Amish have become culturally distinct, how they assert differentiation, and at what social costs, we can then consider the limits and potentialities of their community formations. Only in this way do we stand to gain by their example in conceptualizing a truly alternative organization of farm life.

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