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Changing the way America farms: Knowledge and community in the sustainable agriculture movement

Neva Hassanein

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If agricultural information is tightly bound to place, then local farming networks have a major role to play in understanding and negotiating competing knowledge systems. In Changing the Way America Farms, Neva Hassanein addresses questions concerning why certain agricultural knowledge systems are promoted and in what kinds of environment are they produced and exchanged.

Hassanein's thesis is simple: that the key element to producing social change in agriculture is the exchange of knowledge among farmers in their local networks. To test this thesis, Hassanein examined the production and exchange of knowledge in sustainable farming networks in Wisconsin, a state in which such networking is fairly well advanced.

According to Hassanein, networks by their very existence pose challenges to the authority of agricultural science. Networks can be organized around a variety of sustainable agricultural initiatives or around specific topics, and Hassanein offers case studies of each in Changing the Way America Farms -- The Wisconsin Women's Sustainable Farming Network whose members are engaged in a multitude of sustainable agriculture initiatives and the Ocooch Grazers Network which is organized for knowledge production, dissemination, and activism around intensive rotational grazing and its associated practices. The technique is indeed popular; Hassanein noted that in Wisconsin alone, as of spring 1995, there were eighteen grazing networks dispersed across the state. Hassanein speculated that grazing networks are one of the most prevalent type of sustainable agriculture networks (certainly, at the time of the study). Precisely because of the site-specific knowledge generated by a grazing network, it might be an ideal place to confirm and expand upon theoretical ideas that have emphasized the role of the physical place in the generation of local knowledge. For her second case study, Hassanein chose the Women's Network for the possibilities of exploring gender-related concerns in the generation of local knowledge for sustainable agriculture.

Changing the Way America Farms is volume 12 in the Our Sustainable Future series published by the University of Nebraska press. It is one of the more place-specific studies in the series, in contrast to other volumes that are more global in scope such as Building Soils for Better Crops: Organic Matter Management, Agricultural Research Alternatives, Future Harvest: Pesticide-free Farming, Green Plans: Greenprint for Sustainability, and Making Nature, Shaping Culture: Plant Biodiversity in Global Context.

In the six chapters of Changing the Way America Farms Hassanein discusses key knowledge and theoretical issues that have emerged in sustainable agriculture, methods of data gathering including participant observation and in-depth interviews for the two-year study period, her own situatedness in the work with an essay on "My role in the field", the two case studies as informal social movement communities, and how network members generated "local" knowledge which later became socialized in exchange. She also considers explanatory theoretical frameworks, and wisdom earned from the case studies in the form of at least some generalizations for sustainable agriculture practice.

The text focuses on the production and exchange of practical knowledge in agriculture. Hassanein believes that such knowledge "is not only the purview of a relatively small number of people in universities or laboratories but a human capacity that can be developed and enriched in everyday life" (p. 28) and that it includes substantive and technical information but also the ideology that shapes how such information is constructed and exchanged.

In citing the work of others, Hassanein offers other terms for such systems including "tacit knowledge", "craft knowledge", "indigenous knowledge", and "situated knowledge". But, as she points out, citing Jack Kloppenburg, "Our task is not to choose a single best science from among...variously situated knowledges but to acknowledge that each might be useful for different objectives" (p. 32).

An important point she makes is that local knowledge, perhaps best described as "slow knowledge", accumulates gradually and incrementally. In effect, the "wisdom earned from lessons learned" takes time. Further, it may be difficult to communicate the information to others who have not experienced the field situations themselves. Certainly, one could imagine that such knowledge is learned and absorbed at differing levels and rates, with some individuals attaining mastery more quickly than others. Networking would be critical, then, in assisting in the learning and transfer of local, practical knowledge.

For the Ocooch Grazers Network, the farmers looked to farmer discussion groups in New Zealand as a model, which relies almost exclusively on permanent pastures to sustain one of the lowest-cost dairy industries in the world. In this grazing system, the farmer divides her or his land into small areas or paddocks, using portable fences and watering systems, and rotating the animals among the paddocks. Applying this information to Wisconsin, each of the members of the grazing network experimented in various ways in seeding and maintaining pasture and then would gather to share stories, for example, via a series of pasture walks held at various farms.

The networking was critical to uncovering key components of the system such as when a paddock was ready to be grazed, how best to physically arrange the pastures, and what ecological factors are important (e.g., the relative amounts of leguminous to nonleguminous crops, reevaluations of what is a weed), and how to synchronize lactation of the dairy standard, the Holstein cow, which is bred for production rather than reproduction, to optimal grass growth in the area.

In contrast, the Women's Network, as suggested by the name, focused on women in agriculture who have a variety of experiences and interests. These included raising sheep, processing wool, growing basil, managing and marketing organic flowers, and raising produce for the local farmer's market.

In each case study, Hassanein provides information on organizational profiles (membership, leadership, activities, and linkages with university and government agencies), experiences and information sharing, skill attainment (how learning occurred, experiential and otherwise), and organized network events to share knowledge. Both networks resulted in the creation of personal and group identities that were place-specific to physical and social location (social status or gender) -- an identity that does not necessarily extend to national movements. As Hassanein notes, members of the Ocooch Grazers varied in the extent to which they articulated an environmental ethic, and indeed, identified with a national sustainable network.

Thus, network members related to each other on a local, practical level rather than on a national level, i.e., "true blue" rather than "global green". Instead of shielding themselves with jargon and activist ideologies, their search was a more pragmatic one, particularly in the grazer's network -- for a way of life that was challenging, independent, even enjoyable.

For both networks, the emphasis on information sharing was on problem solving, e.g., accessing financial credit, devising marketing strategies, creating training opportunities.

Of the two networks, the Women's Network focused more on activities for political consciousness raising, including conferences and a quarterly newsletter. The Network maintained a local, "true blue" component as well with its work parties and field days, so important given the small-scale nature of its operations and uniqueness of products. The network members were united more by their shared social location -- their gender identity and keen interest in challenging gender stereotypes and relations in agriculture, and identifying as women farmers -- resulting in a strong identification as women farmers despite the fact that in 1994, only about two-thirds of the women on the membership list were actively engaged in producing and marketing agricultural products.

Early in the text, Hassanein situates the network activity in the history and philosophy of agricultural knowledge systems. She covers considerable ground, acknowledging some of the great leaders in low-input farming such as J.I. Rodale, founder of the Rodale Institute in 1939 who believed in farmers relying on their own common sense and "scientific gumption".

A welcome addition to her review of the literature would be Richard Harwood's essay in Sustainable Agricultural Systems (1990) and Waltner-Toews work on ecosystem health (1996). To advance the review of agricultural knowledge systems, the work of Francis et al (1990), Kromm and White (1991), Lev et al (1993), and Rzewnicki (1991) would enrich the discussion.

It also is worthwhile to consider the work of pioneers in the social and economic assessment of industrial agriculture trends. Hassanein mentions the 1941 work of Carl C. Taylor. Landmark social science scholarship that addresses productionism and its impacts include H.W. Quaintance's 1904 publication on the influence of farm machinery on production and labor, the USDA's 1940 special report on technology on the farm, C. Horace Hamilton's and B.O. Williams' 1939 articles on social effects and recent trends in the mechanization of agriculture, Robert T. McMillan's 1949 publication on social aspects of farm mechanization, and Alvin L. Bertrand's 1951 publication on agricultural mechanization and social change as well as the more contemporary work, in the past thirty years, of Andrew Schmitz and David Seckler with tomato harvesters, Perkinson and Hoover's study of tobacco farming, Friedland's social impact assessment studies in California, and Jack Kloppenburg's early work in biogenetic technology (Berardi, 1984). Hassanein cites the work of some of these scholars and mentions numerous others, primarily those who have opined since the 1970s on mindless productionism.

Such productionism has a profound effect on knowledge attainment -- undermining farmers' experiential knowledge of low-input agriculture particularly given the time it takes to learn it. For, outside of biogenetic and industrial agriculture, farmer's learning, literally, is at least as slow as the production cycle with which he or she is working. Besides dramatic shifts in the cultural value ascribed to time, such productionism also alters the concept of food itself, promoting extreme foods such as industrial strawberries with little resemblance to local, "native" varieties in taste, appearance, and hygiene.

Networks such as those described in the text attempt to counter rampant fetish-like productionism. Such fetishism is however understandable when reviewing the close historical relationship of industry with the land grant university research system as mentioned by Hassanein. Her book is, in fact, an attempt to replace this power relationship with a more democratically educational one, as farmers try to wrest themselves from technological treadmills and agricultural (tenure) ladders implicit in the work of mainstream agricultural extension services.

Through the use of these two case studies, Hassanein offers an in-depth look at alternative -- perhaps dominant in some parts of the country -- ways of imparting knowledge in agriculture. Such an approach to knowledge exchange is similar to that of activist-critics of other dominant systems -- in medicine, in education in general, and in the arts. Rather than rely on a hierarchical system of information transfer, usually controlled by institutionalized extension programs, these farmer networks offer a more democratic view of information sharing, seeing

network members as equals who share their experiences and idiosyncratic knowledge. Such an approach is transformative. In the Wisconsin dairy case, the dairy farmers identified themselves much more as grass farmers than as dairy farmers. For the women's network, inclusion in such a group was, in their own words, energizing, empowering, affirming, and inspirational, in other words, transformational.

Further, the sense of self- and community-identity that results from the networking process fosters a generosity of spirit and skill in reaching out -- "to neighbor", which, as Hassanein discusses, is still a verb in many parts of the rural United States, and involves trading ideas and collectively refining common sensical approaches to farming. The creation and exchange of such local, personal knowledge in effect constitutes social movement activity as exemplified by these two networks -- one shaped by the physical location, the other by the social location, although there are probably elements of each informing the groups' experiences and knowledge building. Thus, the networks are achieving social reversals as well as technical, promulgating reversals through shared experience whether it is a conference, a field day, or a shared catastrophic weather event.

In a real sense, network members are building community as well as a learning environment in which knowledge is constructed and exchanged, creating strong personal and group identity. Such identity is built, in part, with the social support that the group provides for active members.

Hassanein's highly readable text makes a strong case for incorporating a knowledge dimension in social movement theory and in the strategic importance of local approaches to social change. For many reasons, such an approach is seductive -- for the powerful economic advantages bestowed as well as for the emphasis on self learning, as vital as any physical resource to the human spirit. Ironically, for an economic sector of the economy that barely "counts" in the U.S. Census as an economically viable activity, agriculture is nonetheless a sector capable of modeling the learning and creativity critical to leading a full and rich life, grounded in both a social and physical environment.

Changing the Way America Farms is a book written with singular clarity and purpose. It is a text that could be adopted in both undergraduate and graduate classes (for its qualitative research methodology and design), interested individuals, and groups who are looking for ways forward for building community. Farming groups, in particular, would find the work useful in how to embrace risk and site-specific knowledge, seek alternatives to technological trajectories, and learn how to learn, i.e., to reap lasting dendritic as well as social connections.

The book in sections could have been a bit more broad in scope, e.g., with text and appendixes providing information on networks other than those in Wisconsin, and with additional information regarding origins of the networks and numbers of members. Also, a glossary would have been a welcome addition. Yet none of these minor criticisms detracts from Hassanein's inspired narrative on the importance of networks to

social change by learning from farmers who have eschewed conventional high-input farming systems for those that are more low input, and, in so doing, have exercised tremendous creativity in the producing and marketing of their products.

In short, Hassanein showcases agricultural knowledge systems that emphasize quality of life, enjoyment and satisfaction, independence, and putting the meaning and place back into farming. Inevitably, such knowledge systems serve to politically and socially transform individuals as well as communities. As Hassanein notes, in quoting Carl C. Taylor from his 1941 publication on trading ideas with neighbors, "A meeting of friends...is the grass roots of democratic organization, and a trading of ideas among neighbors is the way to make democracy work" (p. 190).

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