

Community Supported Agriculture Can it Become the Basis for a New Associative Economy?

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This essay is based on the opening talk at the fifth annual Community Supported Agriculture Conference hosted by the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association in January 1994 at Kimberton, Pennsylvania. The talk was entitled "Freeing the Farmer: CSA—the Catalyst for a New Economy." The author is a member of the Harlemville Community Economic Association in Harlemville, New York, which is working to develop new social and economic form for agriculture.

The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement in the United States is now eight years old. The idea of establishing a new basis for agriculture arose from conversations between Carlo Pietzner and Harmut von Jeeze in the late 1970's at Camphill Village, Copake, New York, a community dedicated to the care of handicapped adults, which includes a Biodynamic farm. The idea was taken to Europe, developed to a limited degree at a few farms and brought back to the United States. The first two farms in the United States to operate on a CSA basis were in Wilton, New Hampshire (initiated by Trauger Groh, 1986), and in South Egremont, Massachusetts (initiated by Jan Vander Tuin, 1985). Four years later there were 37 identifiable projects in the United States and Canada. The Biodynamic Association reports that there are now approximately 400 such projects in the United States alone.¹

What is Community-Supported Agriculture?

"In its starkest terms, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a concept describing a community-based organization of producers and consumers. The consumers agree to provide direct, up-front support for the local growers who will produce their food. The growers agree to do their best to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the needs and expectations of the consumers. Within this general arrangement there is room for much variation, depending on the resources and desires of the participants.

"If there is a common understanding among people who have been involved with CSAs², it is that there is no formula. Each group that gets started has to assess its own goals, skills, and resources, and then proceed from that point."³

As indicated above, the practical arrangements vary from farm to farm. The up-front consumer support may be a verbal or written agreement to help meet the farm's annual budget with a lump-sum payment or a series of payments. The give and take

¹ The Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, located in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, provides information Biodynamic agriculture and a listing of CSA farms in each state. For assistance telephone: 1-800-516-7797.

² CSA here refers to farms based on the CSA concept.

³ Trauger Groh and S.H. McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow* (Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Inc., Kimberton, PA, 1990), p.7.

interaction and cooperation inherent in the CSA's practical arrangements create certain possibilities:

1. For farmers to know the needs of the community before beginning to work the land.
2. For the consumers to have an opportunity to express to the farmers what their food needs and financial limits are.
3. For commitments to be consciously established between farmers and consumers.
4. For the farmers' needs to be recognized, thus freeing them to serve the community.

I was aware of the CSA movement in this country from its beginning and had many opportunities to speak with participants about the conceptual basis and practical arrangements associated with various farms. During the early years of the CSA movement I was managing a farm store on a 400-acre Biodynamic farm that marketed the farm's products along with products from other sustainable farms regionally and nationally.

Altogether I had accumulated nearly twenty years of experience working in small businesses at a variety of level—production, distribution, marketing, and retail and wholesale sales. Thus I was able to gain some insight into agricultural economics and the workings of the economy in general. As store manager I made every possible effort to promote sales of the farm's products and to obtain equitable prices. I also made efforts to educate consumers as much as possible about the methods and needs of the farm, through conversations in the store, meetings, newsletters, workshops, and farm tours. But in the end my impression was that *under the existing economic conditions* there was a gap between producers and consumers that could not be bridged. The marketplace, with all the economic forces working through it, acts more as a barrier than as a bridge between producers and consumers.

It was with great interest that I entered into conversations concerning the CSA movement. Many of the initial conversations focused on the role and position of agriculture in the economy. For many farmers, their experiences had led them to the conviction that sustainable agriculture cannot survive under present economic conditions. Fluctuating market prices often do not meet the costs of production; escalating real estate prices inhibit the creation of new farms; and a nature-based production that is susceptible to climatic changes creates a higher degree of risk than industrial production. It is for good reasons that an increasing number of Biodynamic and organic farmers are becoming bitter about their experiences in the market. This has created in them a desire to seek a new social and economic basis for agriculture.

I met with three perspectives concerning the relation of agriculture to the economy:

1. Agriculture should be removed from the economy altogether. It is primarily a cultural activity of tending and cultivating the land, and the food that is produced is a by-product of this activity. Therefore the nature of agriculture is different from that of industry.

2. Agriculture is a part of the economy. But true agriculture that does not exploit nature cannot compete in the economy as does industry; it needs special conditions in order to function. For instance, most sustainable farms are not in a position to pay land mortgages based on existing market values. Therefore, ways need to be found to make land available for agriculture at low or no cost.

3. Part of agriculture is in the economy and part of it is not. Adherents of this perspective usually cite the activity of harvest as the dividing line. Cultivation, planting, and growing up to the point of harvest is seen as a cultural, tending activity. Once harvesting takes place, the food takes on a commodity character and enters the economic process.

All these perspectives are based on the feeling that true agriculture, which has not been converted to agribusiness, cannot survive in an economy in which there are fluctuating prices, little consumer loyalty, escalating land prices, and the exploitation of natural and human resources. But the reason for rejecting these conditions should not merely be because they are inherently inappropriate and harmful, no matter what is being produced and consumed. In the existing market the farmer meets the same forces and is compelled to compete out of the same self-interested and profit motive as every other producer. A farmer who still maintains a living connection with the land is in a unique position to offer a perspective on the effects that such economic conditions have on nature. And therefore, it makes sense that such farmers would be among the first to reject some of the main components of our present economy. But rather than trying to withdraw farming from or insulate it against the negative aspects of our present economy, it would benefit everyone in the long run if agriculture could be seen as the place to build up an economy on a new basis. The most basic necessity of earthly life, food, can provide the starting point for moving from our present government-guided, production-driven market economy, which is based on competition, to an independent, associative economy based on consumer needs and conscious, rational decisions between producers and consumers. [See "The Distribution of Wealth," *The Threefold Review*, Issue No. 9, Summer/Fall 1993.]

How the CSA movement could be instrumental in making such a step, and to point out some of its weaknesses, are the objects of the remaining part of this essay.

Meeting Consumer Needs

Our existing economy is production-driven—that is, the focus is on keeping businesses alive and profitable for as long as possible even if a product is not really needed. A recent example of a new product that meets no real need and is created purely to expand production and to generate profits is Bovine Somatotropine (BST), a hormone that is injected into lactating cows to increase milk production. There is presently an overproduction of milk in this country with many dairy farms going out of business. The federal government initiated a dairy herd buy-out program several years ago to encourage farmers to stop farming. What could be the reason for producing a product no one asked for and for which there is no real need? The chemical industry stands to make hundreds of millions of dollars each year, as farmers will be enticed to buy and use such a product because of the possibility of increased production and a stronger competitive position in

the market. [See Michael Wildfeuer, "A Dairyman's View of BST," *The Threefold Review*, Issue No. 3, Summer 1990.]

One of the dynamics that is essential to most if not all CSA projects is a dialogue between farmers and consumers regarding what should be grown. Practically, this can happen in various ways: through surveys, meetings open to farmers and consumers, or conversations at the food distribution site. The aim is to determine in general what kinds of vegetables and how much of each kind consumers are interested in.⁴ In this way the farmer/gardener learns the needs of the community before planning the garden. This is a step towards overcoming the element of chance or uncertainty in the existing market. For highly perishable products such as vegetables, this eliminates considerable waste. A local commercial vegetable grower in Columbia County, New York, once related that he wasted about 30% of his harvest each year due to a fluctuating market demand (quantity) and food that didn't meet the market standards (quality) of appearance, size, and so on.

Consumer Commitment

It makes no sense for consumers to express their needs to farmers and/or producers without some kind of commitment on the consumer side. There is usually some form of verbal or written agreement or pledge between the consumer and the farmer, with the consumer saying, Yes, I want you to provide me with my food needs, and I agree to take the food you produce and agree to support you and the farm; and the farmer saying, I agree to perform the service of tending and cultivating the land and providing you with the food that you need.

Freeing the Farmer: Overcoming Self-Interest

In the farmer-consumer association, once the farmers have an idea of what the community needs are, they draw up an annual farm budget, taking into consideration all the costs associated with cultivating and harvesting the produce, along with the needs of all those who agree to provide the service, and their dependents. Dialogue and negotiation take place around the needs of the consumer and the entire cost of production in order to meet those needs. A share price is then established. In connection with this share price, the farmers make a commitment to produce a certain amount and variety of food to the best of their ability based on expressed consumer needs.

In this dynamic there arises the possibility for the farmer to be relieved of the necessity of trying to create enough profit to make a living and to focus on offering a service on behalf of a community. It is usually the case that a farmer or any producer in the existing economy, no matter how altruistic, must be motivated by self-interest in order to secure a living. In the CSA movement the potential exists for the farmer to be freed from such self-interest, and freed to offer to meet those needs. Most farmers in our present food-distribution network have no real connection with the people who consume

⁴ The CSA movement is primarily focused on vegetable and fruit production at the moment, although some farms are expanding into milk, meat, eggs, grains, and honey. The references in this essay will be to vegetable production.

the food they produce. The foremost thought is, how can I generate a profit in this sale so that I and my dependents can survive?⁵

Land as a Commodity: CSA and the Land Trust Movement

In a society where land is bought and sold as a commodity, land prices and land taxes are some of the biggest obstacles to obtaining and operating a profitable farming operation. For this reason some CSA projects establish a land trust. There are two basic types of land trusts: Land Conservation Trusts (LTC) and Community Land Trusts (CLT).

Land Conservation Trusts are used primarily to stop development:

“An increasing number of people are becoming concerned with the environmental dangers of uncontrolled growth leading to the proliferation of poorly planned and unaesthetic housing overrunning wild lands, wetlands, open space, and so on. In response, many groups have formed private Land Conservation Trusts, either to buy land, or to hold development rights on land in order to ensure that development does not overtake all the land in their towns. To date there are some 700 such Land Conservation Trusts in the U.S., with the number growing rapidly.”⁶

Because agriculture is not seen as development in the conventional sense, LCTs sometimes have become the basis for agricultural production. A LCT that holds the development rights requiring that certain types of development cannot take place does not remove the commodity character of land but merely depresses its market value, since development is not possible and land is therefore less attractive to investors.

Unlike a Land Conservation Trust, a Community Land Trust is set up to promote development:

“While providing access to land is the primary purpose of a Community Land Trust, it is also concerned about the environment and good land-use planning for housing, farming, and so on (ie., planning that does not overcrowd the land, that protects wetlands, wild areas, etc.).

“A Community Land Trust, under its lease agreement, limits the use of certain portions of the land that may be protected for environmental reasons. The lease agreement includes a land-use plan.... Any change in land use from the designated use in the land-use plan would have to be agreed upon, not only by the lessees on the land but also by the board of the Community Land Trust. In this way, both the broader community as well as the lessees are protected from any land-use change that might be harmful or merely profitable to some individual. Nevertheless, there may be important reasons for making some changes in land use, and the Community Land Trust, unlike land set aside under acquisition by Land Conservation Trusts, provides an important degree of flexibility.... The Community Land Trust is designed to serve the broader community with the emphasis on the productive use of the land.... The Community Land Trust is concerned with providing access to land for families, farmers, etc., who otherwise may be unable to gain such access.... The Community Land Trust, therefore, is designed to serve

⁵ See “Theosophy and the Social Question,” by Rudolf Steiner, *The Threefold Review*, Issue No. 10, Winter/Spring 1994, for an elaboration of the evolution of human labor.

⁶ See Robert Swann, “Community Land Trusts: Is Profit on Land a Natural Right?”, *The Threefold Review*, Issue No. 3, Summer 1990, p. 17.

the common good—not simply to hold land in common. Ideally, a Community Land Trust will actively undertake to acquire land by gift or purchase for whatever purpose serves the needs of the broader community.⁷

An important point to consider with land use is that when we buy and sell land we are buying and selling a human right. Think for a moment: Who can exercise the right to use a portion of the land? It is those people with enough money in their pockets to purchase it. Rights of use are determined by economic power, often disregarding the need of the community. In most cases, small, diversified, sustainable farming operations cannot compete with industry and wealthy individuals in obtaining land, and consequently land is often priced out of the market as far as agriculture is concerned.

Sharing Risk

In addition to committing themselves to supporting a farm over a given year, CSA consumers often carry a large part of the risk associated with a season's harvest. In the existing market system, where a farm usually has no connection to consumers, the risks connected with injury, crop failure, or fluctuations of market prices are carried by the farmer. Based on the principle that a farmer's needs must be met even if there is a crop failure, consumers in a CSA project usually pledge to carry the operational risks.

Over the years the CSA projects have had several opportunities to test this principle, from poor harvests due to droughts to complete crop failures due to heavy rains and flooding. Understandably, the results have varied. It is one thing for consumers to make payments even when the harvest is deficient or nonexistent. But, there is another important factor that should also be taken into consideration in relation to sharing risk. If a farm's harvest is deficient, and a family's food needs are not met, the family still needs food. And if the CSA farm cannot meet those needs, where can the consumers obtain their food? It can only be from the market economy that they have avoided by joining a CSA. In the situation where consumers alone carry the risk, they are dependent on the market as a backup. Oddly enough, the CSA movement is still dependent on the market system for its existence. The question is, how can the CSA movement itself develop so that it becomes a self-sustaining movement, just as the farms that it seeks to support strive to be self-sustaining? How efforts can be made in connection with CSAs to distribute risk in a conscious and responsible manner beyond a specific group is addressed later in this essay.

Eliminating the Need for Government Social Services

One of the interesting results of a community of consumers working together is that people become increasingly aware of each other's needs and the purchasing power of the various members. Through human interaction, people get to know one another and their life situations in an open and inoffensive manner. Through this process, the community often becomes aware of those who may not be in a position to carry a full share of the farm's budget. In addition to adults who can find no work or are incapable of working for a living, there are many people who are working but do not receive sufficient income to make ends meet. Although the CSA movement cannot address these problems

⁷ Robert Swann, pp. 17-18.

directly, there are various ways within the context of a CSA project to help people in need. Members in some CSAs pay a small amount extra so that for every 25 families, one full share is carried by the group, which means that one family could be provided with food at no cost or several families at reduced cost.

Also, it is common for a CSA to arrange to have the leftover food go to a food bank, soup kitchen, or directly to families in need. The aim is that nothing goes to waste. This is possible because of the dynamic of producers and consumers cooperating together and sharing perspectives of the economic process instead of trying to sell at the highest possible price, or buy at the lowest possible price.

One could imagine that if this dynamic were fostered, little or nothing that is produced would be wasted, and the necessity for such things as government food stamps would diminish along with the social stigma attached to them.

The Community in Community Supported Agriculture

A crucial element in CSA projects is the degree to which the feeling of community exists among the consumers and farmers. In many of the successful CSAs there is a sense of connection among the consumers through the other activities they participate in. If a CSA has a number of individual consumers who do not have any connection to each other, then efforts have to be undertaken to develop a sense of community. Presently, this is usually carried by the farmers who promote the farm as a center of community activity.

For many people who live isolated lives, this sense of belonging to a piece of land and a group of people connected to a farm can be a gratifying and life-sustaining experience. There is also the potential for other initiatives related to the farm to begin, such as housing or a school.

This element of community is just as important as the practical arrangements that take place. It provides the incentive to continue working in new and creative ways even when social problems arise. In his *World Economy* lectures, Rudolf Steiner describes how a community spirit is an essential element in any producer-consumer association and how it will be there if there is a real give and take between human beings working together.

The economic process can only be sound when... a wise, self-active [intelligence] is working within it. And this can only happen if human beings are united together—human beings who have the economic process within them as pictures, piece by piece; and, being united in the associations, they complement and correct one another, so that the right circulation can take place in the whole economic process.

Of course, the right mentality is needed for such a thing as this, but the mentality alone is not enough. You may even found associations, associations whose members have a great deal of economic insight; yet if something else is not contained within the associations, all their insight will be of little avail. Something else must be contained in the associations, and will be contained in them once the necessity of such associations is recognized. There must be in them the community spirit—the sense of community, the sense for the economic

process as a whole. The individual who immediately uses what he buys can do no other than satisfy his own egoistic sense. Indeed he would come off very badly if he did not satisfy his own egoistic sense.

As [an individual person] in the economic life, he cannot say, if someone offers him a coat for 40 francs: 'Oh no, that price does not suit me; I will give you 60 francs for it!' That will not do; at this point the individual within the economic process can do absolutely nothing. But the moment the life of associations enters the economic process, it is no longer a question of immediate personal interest. The wide outlook over the economic process will be active; the interest of the other fellow will actually be there in the economic judgment that is formed. In no other way can a true economic judgment come about. Thus we are impelled to rise from the economic processes to the mutuality, the give and take, between man and man, and furthermore to that which will arise from this, namely, the objective community spirit working in the associations. This will be a community spirit, not proceeding from any 'moralic acid' but from a realization of the necessities inherent in the economic process itself.⁸

The dynamic of farmers and consumers sharing perspectives and experiences in a CSA project creates the potential for what Steiner calls an economic intelligence, which cannot arise in our present market system where chance and necessity prevail instead of intelligence.

Summary: Creative Potential, Weaknesses, and Challenges Facing the CSA Movement

Creative Potential

The CSA movement creates possibilities for a new social and economic basis for agriculture as follows:

- (1) Frees the farmer from having to seek profits in order to make a living.
- (2) Determines in advance what and how much to produce; creates a needs-based rather than production-based economy.
- (3) Reduces waste at the production and distribution level.
- (4) Relieves the farmer from carrying all the risk.
- (5) Encourages consumers to eat locally grown food whenever possible and farmers to expand local varieties of food.
- (6) Creates a dynamic whereby consumers and producers can go beyond their own self-interests.
- (7) Helps consumers to know the human and environmental conditions under which the food they consume is produced.

⁸ Rudolf Steiner, *World Economy: The Formation of a Science of World Economics* (Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1977), pp. 132-133.

Observed Weaknesses

- (1) The CSA movement is still primarily producer-or-farmer-driven. The farmer out of necessity is actively seeking new social forms. Consumers often have other options and therefore are not driven by necessity.
- (2) There is still a tendency for the farmer to be production-oriented and not open to consumer needs.
- (3) Whereas the overall needs and wants of the community are taken into consideration, there still needs to be more flexibility in meeting individual or family needs. If a farmer does not actively work to meet the real needs of the consumers, wasted food will result at the consumer level. This inevitably leads to consumers losing interest and dropping out of the CSA project.
- (4) Even though consumers carry the risk of crop failure or other mishaps, the CSA is still dependent on the market as a backup.
- (5) Even though consumers have an interest in working socially with a local CSA farm, there is still little interest in developing associative forms that enable them to obtain the rest of the food they consume in a socially responsible manner.
- (6) Some farms do not actually develop a detailed farm budget in order to determine the complete cost of production but rather revert to a what-the-market-will-bear mentality in determining a share price. In this situation it is not possible for consumers to recognize and know the true needs of the farmers.
- (7) Too much of the legitimate work in supporting a CSA project is done through unsupported volunteerism. This inhibits the possibility of creating appropriate flexibility and growth and leaves many consumer volunteers “burned-out.” The we-can-do-without-the-middleman mentality often prevails where legitimate distribution service should be recognized and supported just as the farmers’ work is recognized and supported.

Challenges and Opportunities

- (1) Increase consumer involvement. The future potential of the CSA movement lies in the possibility of consumers taking more initiative and developing a greater sense of social responsibility for all the food they consume. It would be helpful, for instance, if a publication focusing on responsible, conscious consumerism would be established.
- (2) On the production side, a greater sense of efficiency in relation to farm scale must be developed so that farms can meet the needs of the community in a healthy economical manner. The old drive for efficiency in order to obtain profits must be replaced by a striving for efficiency based on a sense of responsibility to the community.
- (3) More cooperation among CSA farmers needs to be developed in order that part of the risk can be shared at the production level. Otherwise, the consumers will of necessity have to rely on the market to replace shortages occurring on CSA farms.

- (4) Consumer groups from different CSA farms need to communicate and share insights, ideas, and ways of associating together. A shared risk fund could be created by a collection of consumer groups. Also, the greater needs of consumers that are not met by single farms could be evaluated and relations developed with other farms so that all needs could be obtained in a socially responsible manner.
- (5) One of the greatest challenges will be to develop an ongoing educational process so that farmers and consumers can relearn what it means to be responsible to the greater community. Presently, the farmer provides much of the educational activity, but this needs to be done on an extended basis through adult education programs, study groups, and workshops. In this way the CSA movement can develop a more conscious relation to broader social problems and issues.
- (6) CSA farms can become the focal point for removing land from commodity circulation by connecting with the Community Land Trust movement. There is the further potential of encouraging a broad base of community endeavors on land trusts, rather than focusing on a single activity such as housing or farming.

Conclusion

The desire to found new social and economic forms lies at the heart of the CSA movement. Its potential for growth is only limited by the participants' thoughts, feelings, and will. As a person who has worked in small businesses I do not believe that there is any lack of technical skill or specialized knowledge available to the movement that would prohibit it from growing and contributing in a healthy way to social life. Setting up and operating a CSA is less complicated than establishing a conventional retail store. Nor would organizing CSA consumer groups in a cooperative association with a variety of farms and processors in order to obtain all one's food year round be any more difficult than operating a conventional distribution company. In fact, such associations could be operated more simply and efficiently. The only thing that keeps us from establishing agriculture on a completely new basis, where reason prevails instead of the chance of the marketplace, where self-interest is balanced with an interest in our fellow human beings, where human and natural resources are not exploited, where production is based on acknowledged needs, and where a sense for community can be experienced even in matters of economics, is the lack of the will to do it.

It is not a complicated task, but it does require that people who participate be personally willing to give up old habits of thought and action regarding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. To give up old habits is not easy, but it is essential in order to create new social forms befitting the human spirit.

