CHAPTER 10

Think Globally, Act Locally

Case 40 – Community Supported Agriculture –

Study Questions

1) What is the definition of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)? What is the business model it uses and what are the motivations for farmers to create CSA farms and for consumers to invest in them?

2) What are supposed to be some of the benefits of CSAs? What are some of their drawbacks?

3) What are some of the moral values proponents of CSAs hold? Are these values different from those who advocate for more conventional forms of farming? Explain the similarities and differences in the moral values held by CSA and conventional farming advocates.

Advocates define Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as simply “a community-based organization of growers and consumers.”1 Yet, since their introduction into the US from Europe and Japan in the mid-1980’s, CSAs have become considered pragmatic “saviors” of the ideal of the smaller, rural farm. As a system of mutual support, groups of consumers agree to buy shares of produce from local farmers and pay lump sums at the beginning of each growing season. Farmers reciprocate by supplying agricultural goods to these consumers. Transparency and sustainability are taken to be two basic virtues of CSA schemes. Consumers know directly the origin of the produce (often grown organically or biodynamically)2 and are promised it is fresh, safe, and naturally grown. In return, farmers are guaranteed the financial support necessary to

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1 Trauger Groh and Steven McFadden, Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms, Farm Supported Communities (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 1997). Community Supported Agriculture farms are referred to as “CSAs.”

2 By biodynamic agriculture, I mean a farming method that strives to build and maintain soil fertility through the use of manures and composts from the farm. See Dorothy Suput, Community Supported Agriculture in Massachusetts: Status, Benefits and Barriers, Master’s Thesis. (Medford, MA: Tufts University, 1992), p. 18. Or as stated in the Brookfield Farm CSA brochure, “Through a balanced crop rotation and application of bio-dynamic herbal preparations the farmer regulates the composting process and stimulates the life activity of the soils and plant[s].”
operate since they receive financing for the year’s crop production “up front,” enabling them to produce a wide variety of crops otherwise not economically viable to grow.

CSAs are part of both the “sustainable agriculture” and “locavore” movements. Defining what locavore means is relatively easy—eating food grown close by. But what does sustainability mean? Devising a precise definition is more problematic, since there are several competing candidates both in content and scope for what sustainability means in the agricultural context. One helpful way of defining it is in an economic and ecological sense. Economically speaking, one important variable is whether CSA farms can last over time, which requires some minimal level of economic viability. Ecologically speaking, we need to know whether CSA farms have a dramatic impact on maintaining and improving the environmental conditions of the land. This latter factor is significant, since agriculture is inherently disruptive to the natural environment. It is naive to say cultivation of any sort does not change the natural order of the ecosystem to which it is attached. The question is how to create an agriculture that even in its alteration of the environment does so in a way optimally “in sync” with the natural surroundings.

To fully flesh out this notion of sustainability in these twin economic and ecological senses, we might put together two different sets of criteria. The ecological efficiency strand is borrowed from environmental ethicist William Aiken’s work on eco-humanistic agriculture. First, we examine how the land is being used, particularly since in contemporary agriculture there is a finite and rapidly dwindling supply of arable land, even in America, which often serves as a paradigm case for agrarian abundance. Secondly, the sustainability of agriculture is based on local adaptation. This encompasses what is grown, how it is grown, how much of it is grown, as well as how these factors relate to the peculiarities of the local ecosystem. Third, any analysis of ecological efficiency

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6 Donald Worster notes the tradition of this vision of bounty, for even the US Bureau of Soils proclaimed (in 1909) that soil “is the one resource that cannot be exhausted; that cannot be used up.” See his Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 28–29.

7 Aiken, “Ethical Issues,” p. 278.