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Down to Earth Realism

Mosaic Farms

WENDELL BERRY

The key recommendation of the 2013 UN Trade and Environment Report is “that farming in rich and poor nations alike should shift dependency away from high-input monoculture by taking the mosaic approach and boosting support for small farms.” Based on broad practical experience and keen analysis, author Wendell Berry has been advocating this for decades, citing the Amish farms of North America as evidence for the success of biological and cultural complexity.

There is no want of evidence that the small farm, if properly ordered, equipped, and managed, is highly productive, kind to the land, and economically workable. This being so, we may ask why it has so few advocates in the colleges of agriculture, in government agricultural agencies, and in agricultural journalism.

The reason, I think, is a general one, and is to be found both in what we call our economy, and, because an economy is a cultural artifact, in our culture. For complex reasons, our culture allows ‘economy’ to mean only ‘money economy.’ It equates success and even goodness with monetary profit because it lacks any other standard of measurement. I am no economist, but I venture to suggest that one of the laws of such an economy is that a farmer is worth more dead than alive.

A second law is that anything diseased is more profitable than anything that is healthy. What is wrong with us contributes more to the 'gross national product' than what is right with us. Let us take a healthy marriage for example: a man and wife who produce from their own small farm or homestead or town lot as much as possible of what they eat, and provide on their own as far as possible for other needs; who therefore have work at home for their children; who therefore have 'home life' and all that that implies. Such a couple may contribute immeasurably to the health of the nation, even to its solvency. But they are not good for the nation's business, for they consume too little.

If this man and wife were to get divorced, their contribution to the economy would increase spectacularly. Their household, with all its productive motives, means, and energies, would be dissolved, and its members would live by consumption. Their dependence on the industries of food, style, transportation, entertainment, and so on would be greater. So probably would their dependence on the industries of drugs, medicine, psychiatry, counseling, and the like. They would be worth far less to themselves, to each other, to their community, and to the world—but far more to the economy.

So it is in agriculture. The small Amish farms, for example, are extraordinarily healthy. They are far more productive than consumptive, they support families and communities, and they preserve and improve the land. Surely our nation would be healthier if it contained several million such farms. And yet Amish farms have received virtually no attention from students of agriculture—the reason being, I think, that these farms are more profitable to the farmers than to those corporations whose livelihood has been the ruin of farmers. They consume small quantities of chemicals and commercial fertilisers; they use simple machines that last as long as machines ought to last; they use virtually no petroleum; they do not look upon indebtedness as a desirable temporary condition, much less a desirable permanent one; they grow their own sustenance.

But take, say, fifteen eighty-acre Amish farms and join them together in the ownership of an 'agribusinessman,' who will get rid of the livestock, take out the fences, buy the large machinery necessary to farm on a big scale, and plant all twelve hundred acres in corn or corn and beans. Health will decline in everything from the soil to the community; soil loss may rise as high as six bushels per bushel of corn. This farmer-as-agribusinessman will be a lifelong extravagant consumer of everything he needs, from fuel to fertiliser, from credit to extension courses in 'stress management.' He will be a good citizen of the economy. But whether he knows it or not, and sooner or later he will know it, this economy proposes to ruin him, as it has ruined millions of others, and sell him out to

a bigger agribusinessman who wants to 'handle' 2400 acres and help the economy even more.

To disregard the small farmers is to forego one of the essential means of understanding the large ones. To disregard the comparatively independent farmers, such as the Amish, is to ignore the only available standard by which to measure the performance of the critically dependent ones. It is to turn aside from the critical questions of size and scale. It is, in short, to fall into the same trap that the conventional farm publications have already fallen into. The farmer who grosses \$800,000 a year becomes more attractive than the farmer who nets \$50,000 a year. That the \$50,000 may be netted on a farm much smaller, much better farmed and cared for, is simply left out of account.

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The same flawed solution to the same dilemma seems to hold, less understandably, in the colleges of agriculture: the same dependent's allegiance to 'economy of scale' and 'purchased inputs.' Anyone who listens to an early morning farm program on the radio will be aware how seldom a university expert will propose a remedy that is not for sale. What they have accomplished is the virtual substitution of credit for brains.

Some months ago I attended a clinic for farmers on the growing of alfalfa. The university experts—a different expert for each problem of alfalfa—held forth in the front of the room. In the back of the room were the displays and salesmen of seed and chemical companies. The farmers, significantly, were in the middle, expected to run directly from advice to purchase. The farmers' own tax dollars were thus being spent to advise them to patronize corporations that would benefit far more than the farmers from that patronage.

Because of this virtually self-enforcing orthodoxy—this plutocracy masquerading as 'agribusiness'—the defenders of the small farm are in decline along with the small farmers. It is not a well-paying defense. To advocate the survival of the small farm is necessarily to advocate a set of solutions that cannot be sold or bought, but are the free birthright of a community—and there are few employers for that. Nevertheless, the small farms still have defenders— and, I trust, will continue to have them.

To these defenders I want to suggest that it may be impossible to defend the small farm by itself or for its own sake. The small farm cannot be 'developed' like a product or a program. Like a household, it is a human organism,



and has its origin in both nature and culture. Its justification is not only agricultural, but is a part of an ancient pattern of values, ideas, aspirations, attitudes, faiths, knowledge, and skills that propose and support the sound establishment of a people on the land. To defend the small farm is to defend a large part, and the best part, of our cultural inheritance.

Defenders of the small farm (to use only the most immediate example) must take care never to use the word 'economy' to mean only 'money economy.' We must use it to mean also—as the origin of the word instructs—the order of households. And we must therefore judge economic health by the health of households, both human and natural.

These little Amish farms thus become the measure both of 'conventional' American agriculture and of the cultural meaning of the national industrial economy. To begin with, these farms give the lie direct to that false god of agribusiness: the so-called economy of scale. The small farm is not an anachronism, is not unproductive, is not unprofitable. Among the Amish, it is still thriving, and is still the economic foundation of what John A Hostetler (in *Amish Society*, third edition) rightly calls a healthy culture. Though they do not produce the record-breaking yields so touted by the agribusiness establishment, these farms are nevertheless highly productive. And if they are not likely to make their owners rich (never an Amish goal), they can certainly be said to be sufficiently profitable. The economy of scale has helped corporations and banks, not farmers and farm communities. It has been an economy of dispossession and waste—plutocratic, if not in aim, then certainly in result.

What these Amish farms suggest, on the contrary, is that in farming there is inevitably a scale that is suitable both to the productive capacity of the land and to the abilities of the farmer; and that agricultural problems are to be properly solved, not in expansion, but in management, diversity, balance, order, responsible maintenance, good character, and in the sensible limitation of investment and overhead. Most significant, perhaps, is that while conventional agriculture, blindly following the tendency of any industry to exhaust its sources, has made soil erosion a national catastrophe, these Amish farms conserve the land and improve it in use.

But what is one to think of a national economy that drives such obviously able and valuable farmers to factory work? What value does such an economy impose upon thrift, effort, skill, good husbandry, family and community health?

In spite of the unrelenting destructiveness of the larger economy, the Amish—as Hostetler points out with acknowledged surprise and respect—have almost doubled in population in the last twenty years. The doubling of a population is, of course, no significant achievement. What is significant is that these agricultural communities have doubled their population *and yet remained agricultural communities* during a time when conventional farmers



Three examples of 21st C farming; young professional growers worldwide are turning their backs on fossil fuel dependency in order to do things 'better not bigger'.

Below; Les Jardins de la Grelinette provides a good living for a young family from 1.5 acres of intensive vegetable production using almost zero fossil fuel and no tractor.



PHOTOS [HTTPMODERNFARMER.COM](http://MODERNFARMER.COM) / PUBLIC DOMAIN / LJD LG



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Economy of scale makes no sense for it requires the ruination of neighbours. By substituting people and livestock for fuel, Amish farmers succeed in retaining agricultural communities at a time when conventional farmers are failing by the millions.

have failed by the millions. This alone would seem to call for a careful look at Amish ways of farming. That those ways have, during the same time, been ignored by the colleges and the agencies of agriculture must rank as a prime intellectual wonder.

Amish farming has been so ignored, I think, because it involves a complicated structure that is at once biological and cultural, rather than industrial or economic. I suspect that anyone who might attempt an accounting of the economy of an Amish farm would soon find himself dealing with virtually unaccountable values, expenses, and benefits. He would be dealing with biological forces and processes not always measurable, with spiritual and community values not quantifiable; at certain points he would be dealing with mysteries—and he would be finding that these unaccountables and inscrutables have results, among others, that are economic. Hardly an appropriate study for the ‘science’ of agricultural economics.

The economy of conventional agriculture or agribusiness is remarkable for the simplicity of its arithmetic. It involves a manipulation of quantities that are all entirely accountable. List your costs (land, equipment, fuel, fertiliser, pesticides, herbicides, wages), add them up, subtract them from your earnings, or subtract your earnings from them, and you have the result.

Suppose, on the other hand, that you have an eighty-acre farm that is not a ‘food factory’ but your home, your given portion of Creation which you are morally and spiritually obliged ‘to dress and to keep.’ Suppose you farm, not for wealth, but to maintain the integrity and the practical supports of your family and community. Suppose that, the farm being small enough, you farm it with family work and work exchanged with neighbors. Suppose you have six Belgian brood mares that you use for field work. Suppose

that you also have milk cows and hogs, and that you raise a variety of grain and hay crops in rotation. What happens to your accounting then?

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To start with, several of the costs of conventional farming are greatly diminished or done away with. Equipment, fertilizer, chemicals all cost much less. Fuel becomes feed, but you have the mares and are feeding them anyway; the work ration for a brood mare is not a lot more costly than a maintenance ration. And the horses, like the rest of the livestock, are making manure. Figure that in, and figure, if you can, the value of the difference between manure and chemical fertiliser. You can probably get an estimate of the value of the nitrogen fixed by your alfalfa, but how will you quantify the value to the soil of its residues and deep roots? Try to compute the value of humus in the soil – in improved drainage, improved drought resistance, improved tilth, improved health. Wages, if you pay your children, will still be among your costs. But compute the difference between paying your children and paying ‘labor.’ Work exchanged with neighbors can be reduced to ‘man-hours’ and assigned a dollar value. But compute the difference between a neighbor and ‘labor,’ compute the value of a family or a community to any one of its members. We may, as we must, grant that among the values of family and community there is economic value—but what is it?

In the Louisville Courier-Journal of April 5, 1981, the Mobil Oil Corporation ran an advertisement which was yet another celebration of ‘scientific agriculture.’ American

farming, the Mobil people are of course happy to say “requires more petroleum products than almost any other industry. A gallon of gasoline to produce a single bushel of corn, for example. . . .” This, they say, enables “each American farmer to feed sixty-seven people.” And they say that this is “a-maizing,”

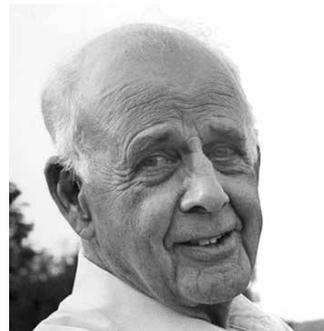
Well, it certainly is! And the chances are good that an agriculture totally dependent on the petroleum industry is not yet as amazing as it is going to be. But one thing that is already sufficiently amazing is that a bushel of corn produced by the burning of one gallon of gasoline has already cost more than six times as much as a bushel of corn grown by [my Amish friend] Bill Yoder. How does Bill Yoder escape what may justly be called the petroleum tax on agriculture? He does so by a series of substitutions: of horses for tractors, of feed for fuel, of manure for fertiliser, of sound agricultural methods and patterns for the exploitive methods and patterns of industry. But he has done more than that—or, rather, he and his people and their tradition have done more. They have substituted themselves, their families, and their communities for petroleum. The Amish use little petroleum—and need little—because they have those other things.

I do not think that we can make sense of Amish farming until we see it, until we become willing to see it, as belonging essentially to the Amish practice of Christianity, which instructs that one’s neighbors are to be loved as oneself. To farmers who give priority to the maintenance of their community, the economy of scale (that is, the economy of large scale, of ‘growth’) can make no sense, for it requires the ruination and displacement of neighbors. A farm cannot be increased except by the decrease of a neighborhood. What the interest of the community proposes is invariably an economy of proper scale. A whole set of agricultural proprieties must be observed: of farm size, of methods, of tools, of energy sources, of plant and animal species. Community

interest also requires charity, neighborliness, the care and instruction of the young, respect for the old; thus it assures its integrity and survival. Above all, it requires good stewardship of the land, for the community, as the Amish have always understood, is no better than its land. “If treated violently or exploited selfishly,” John Hostetler writes, the land “will yield poorly.” There could be no better statement of the meaning of the practice and the practicality of charity. Except to the insane narrow-mindedness of industrial economics, selfishness does not pay.

The Amish have steadfastly subordinated economic value to the values of religion and community. What is too readily overlooked by a secular, exploitive society is that their ways of doing this are not empty gestures and are not ‘backward.’ In the first place, these ways have kept the communities intact through many varieties of hard times. In the second place, they conserve the land. In the third place, they yield economic benefits. The community, the religious fellowship, has many kinds of value, and among them is economic value. It is the result of the practice of neighborliness, and of the practice of stewardship. 

WENDELL BERRY, *THE GIFT OF GOOD LAND*. COUNTERPOINT 1981
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2014
International Year of
Family Farming