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## Review Essay Local Food, Local Economy

By Jennifer Sumner

**The Emergent Agriculture: Farming, Sustainability and the Return of the Local Economy.** By G. Kleppel. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2014, 165 pp. ISBN 9780865717732

**Financing Our Foodshed: Growing Local Food with Slow Money.** By C.P. Hewitt. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2013, 209 pp. ISBN 9780865717237

In the push for globalization over the last few decades, the local has been sidelined—dismissed as irrelevant, parochial or behind the times. In the wake of this push, we are facing the negative consequences of this political-economic phenomenon, including the consolidation of the food system in the hands of a few multinational corporations, long-distance supply chains that are vulnerable to environmental or political contingencies, faceless, placeless food of questionable safety, and the demise of rural communities.

These two books form part of the inevitable reaction to these negative consequences, while highlighting the importance of face-to-face relationships, communities of place, and the power of food. The first book, *The Emergent Agriculture: Farming, Sustainability and the Return of the Local Economy*, focuses on food production by engaging with what author Gary Kleppel (an academic as well as a farmer) describes as “the emergent agriculture.” For Kleppel, the emergent agriculture is “grounded in the philosophies of sustainability, local production, and the values of small-scale, family farming” (p. 4). In essence, it honours what comes from the land and promotes the ability to produce food that is safe and nutritious for large numbers of people while not depleting the soil, bankrupting the farmer, or abusing animals. Kleppel ranges over a number of relevant topics, including sustainability and the local economy, and turns a common concept on its head by reminding readers about real farm subsidies—not the payments by the state that make commodity prices artificially low but the ways in which farms subsidize all of us in so many unrecognized ways.

The second book, *Financing Our Foodshed: Growing Local Food with Slow Money*, joins producers and consumers by explaining how to finance a local economy. The author, Carol Peppe Hewitt, is a co-founder of Slow Money North Carolina (NC), which is modelled on the Slow Food movement. Using stories to humanize her topic, she energetically describes the mission of Slow Money: to catalyze affordable loans to local, sustainable farmers and the food businesses that support them. In effect, Slow Money involves micro-loans at low interest rates that are negotiated directly between the lender and the borrower—Slow Money brings them together but does not handle any money itself. The lenders have some cash to invest, a dedication to local food and an ethical approach to lending that deplores usury. The borrowers are local producers and entrepreneurs with a vision, a business plan, and a shortage of funds to realize their vision. As of the publication of the book, Slow Money NC had enabled over 60 low-interest, personal loans worth \$600,000 and built a strong network of like-minded food activists.

The books share a number of important commonalities. To begin with, they both focus on food—a vital topic because everyone needs to eat. Food is not only a stimulating topic of interest in itself, but also an entrée into larger issues, like globalization, the economy and human rights. The books also emphasize the importance of relationships. Kleppel argues that the emergent agriculture “celebrates ethical relationships between farmers and consumers, farmers and livestock, farmers and the land” (p. 144), while Hewitt points out that communities are not the sum of their roads, schools and malls, but the sum of their relationships. Both books also highlight the concept of community, with the agricultural economist John Ikerd, who wrote the forward to Kleppel’s book, introducing the concept of “communities of choice” – communities of common interests, values, and place that are being created by the sustainable food revolution. The two books also hone in on developing the local economy: Kleppel uses the triple bottom line and devotes a chapter to Slow Money (while unfortunately incorrectly spelling the name of the originator of this movement, Woody Tasch), and Hewitt’s book is all about Slow Money and the local economy. And, finally, both books use narrative to positive effect, giving deeply human dimensions to the ideas they present.

Although generally persuasive, the books exhibit a number of shortcomings. For example, Kleppel justifiably critiques the cruelty and lack of transparency in large slaughter facilities, then fills his book with sweet images of the lambs he raises, but devotes no images to the process of more humane slaughter. Hewitt rightfully brings up the issue of the 99 percent, and describes how, in the last decade, “we’ve seen a huge chunk of the wealth of the 99% shifted to the 1% through a well-rigged system” (p. 113). On the next page, however, she laments how it’s politically incorrect to criticize people based on gender, race, or age, but just fine to take a jab at “the filthy rich” (p. 114).

In spite of the real problems these books address, they both unquestioningly assume a capitalist economy—albeit a form of “small-c” capitalism with a human face. Relatedly, both books skirt the issue of not having the money to participate in this new, local economy. Instead, the books are pitched at those with middle-class incomes who “vote” with their dollars, echoing Michael Pollan’s individualistic approach to food issues that some have critiqued as promoting neoliberal subjecthood (see, for example, Guthman 2007a; 2007b). This, in turn, opens up the question of the role of nonprofits and the social economy in the new local. Both books briefly mention the use of food stamps at farmers’ markets, but otherwise low-income people are ignored. Hewitt does add information about Slow Money NC, which she and her co-founders registered as a nonprofit, and investment clubs—groups of people with cash to lend who come together to make loans to farmers. But all in all there is little place for those with insufficient means in these visions of the future.

The overall strength of these books is that they provide a grounded examination of how change would be operationalized in the new local. Crucially, the two authors do not fall into what Born and Purcell (2006) describe as “the local trap,” that is, assuming that the local is automatically more sustainable than the global. Born and Purcell remind us that there is nothing inherent about any scale. In their view,

scale is not an end goal itself; it is a strategy. Scale is a means that may help achieve any of many different goals. Which goal is achieved will depend not on the scale itself but on the agenda of those who are empowered by the scalar strategy. Localizing food systems, therefore, does not lead inherently to greater sustainability or to any other goal. It leads wherever those it empowers want it to lead. (p. 196)

The vision of the local presented in these books is backed by an agenda that carries the potential to overcome many of the negative consequences of the globalization agenda. Through narratives of actual practice, we can truly see the outlines of an emerging alternative to the juggernaut of globalization, although one that still needs to figure out how to ensure that *everyone* is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet.

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