

Biodynamic Perspectives

STRENGTHENING THE HEART OF THE FOOD MOVEMENT:

Biodynamics and the Deregulation of GMO Alfalfa

ROBERT KARP

THE WIDER FOOD MOVEMENT, of which I consider the biodynamic movement to be an intimate and integral part, suffered two devastating blows the past month—blows which have evoked much pain and which deserve much reflection.

The first and most obvious blow was the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) decision to deregulate genetically modified (GM) alfalfa and several other crops. The second, less obvious but no less important, blow was the widely circulated letter of Ronnie Cummings of the Organic Consumers Association claiming a kind of complicity among large players in the organic industry in these USDA decisions.¹ The first blow was ecological, political, and economic. The second blow cut right to the social heart of the food movement.

Is there a helpful light that can be shed on these events from a biodynamic perspective?

A guiding concept within biodynamics is that of the "farm organism." The idea is to conceive of the farm biologically and "spiritually" as a whole organism rather than mechanistically as a collection of "parts" to be manipulated for purely human ends. The farm organism does have "parts," so to speak (i.e. woods, crop ground, animals, vegetables, wetlands, pastures, etc.), but these are worked with in a far more holistic, integrated, and ethical way than the parts of a machine. And each "part" is also thought of as a whole—that is, as living organisms of integrity unto themselves.

The creative work of the farmer thus involves bringing the diverse elements of the farm into such a dynamic relationship that the whole farm takes on the life of a self-sustaining eco-system. In this way, a profoundly healthy

environment is created in which soils, plants, animals, and human beings can truly thrive. This is the ideal, anyway, to which basically all biodynamic farmers strive, along with many organic farmers and others who have come to this approach out of their own life experience.

The idea of human beings splicing together genes from completely different organisms and species—and even kingdoms of nature—in order to create wholly new organisms is nothing less than a mechanistic, technological perversion of the picture of the true vocation of the farmer presented here, i.e. of the farmer as a social-artistic creator of farm organisms. And thus it is in the proliferation of these kinds of farms and farmers that I would suggest lays the ultimate antidote to genetic engineering.

But we also need to be active politically and economically. While the concept of the farm organism has been gaining more and more recognition outside of biodynamics, it is less well known that this way of looking at the farm can also be applied to political, economic, and social realities. In doing so, radical new ways of approaching social change and the transformation of capitalism can be discerned. Community supported agriculture (CSA), for example, was inspired by Rudolf Steiner's efforts in this direction.²

In my 2007 essay "Toward an Associative Economy in the Sustainable Food and Farming Movement,"³ I pointed to many examples of the promising emergence of an associative or "organismic" economy in our midst and suggested a number of ways to strengthen these efforts. And I proposed that the key challenge facing the wider food movement derives from the fact that we have attempted to embed a holistic approach to agriculture into a conventional, toxic economic and political landscape,

¹ Ronnie Cummings' letter can be found at www.organicconsumers.org/articles/article_22449.cfm. An alternative view can be found at www.stonyfield.com/blog/2011/01/29/the-organic-community-must-come-out-swinging-at-the-right-opponents.

² See, for example, Steven McFadden's article "The History of Community Supported Agriculture Part I Community Farms in the 21st Century: Poised for Another Wave of Growth?" in *The New Farm* at newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml.

³ Available at www.biodynamics.com or by calling (888) 516-7797.

We must find new ways to transform our economy of winners and losers into an economy of producers, distributors, and consumers working together with capital providers to meet the needs of all.

which by its very nature will tend to erode the values at the foundation of the food movement.

In that essay, I also pointed to the tension between the grassroots, activist, non-profit wing of the food movement and the pragmatic, industry, for-profit wing—and highlighted the need for these two groups to come together to find common ground and develop more synergistic economic practices and political strategies.

The events of the past month suggest to me again that we stand in great need within the food movement of realizing that our core values are based on wholly different ways of thinking about nature, social life, and the human being than those informing mainstream institutions. If we think we can easily graft the food movement onto the current social and economic forms, without working to transform the whole system, we are, I believe, profoundly mistaken. At the same time, I do not believe we are called upon to withdraw from society and attempt to set up quaint little agricultural islands for foodies.

In this light, I would suggest that what is most deeply needed right now, in the wake of the recent deregulation of GM alfalfa and other crops, is not to stand back and point fingers, or even simply gear up for bigger and better lawsuits against Monsanto (which is not to say these do not have their place, particularly the lawsuits). Rather, I think these events call us all, idealists and pragmatists, activists and industry leaders, farmers, and consumers alike to come together to develop a more comprehensive, holistic, and “organismic” vision for our work, and a more seamless, dynamic ecosystem of strategies for accomplishing our goals.

The fact is we need each other and the diverse perspectives, skills, and resources we bring to the table. We need to leverage and harmonize the unique capacities and strategies of our for-profits and our non-profits; of our farmer groups, consumer groups and trade groups; our educators, researchers, and activists; our foundations, angel investors, and philanthropists. Only by coming together in this way and thinking outside the box can we hope to navigate and transform the treacherous landscape of our current political and economic life, while strengthening, at the same time, the social heart, the social organism, of our movement.

We must find new ways to transform our economy of winners and losers into an economy of producers, distributors, and consumers working together with capital providers to meet the needs of all. And we must find new ways to conceive the right role of government in our move-

ment, and so transform our politics of insiders and outsiders, into a true democracy that can embody the will and wisdom of the whole community.

Finally, as biodynamic practitioners, I would suggest that we must join unreservedly in this task. For we too have often attempted to naively embed biodynamics into the existing social, economic, and political forms or withdrawn into our agricultural islands. Rather it is time to join forces, in all humility, with our brothers and sisters in the wider food movement and bring our best ideas to the table, so that the pain of the past months can be transformed into new hope, new insights, and a new vision for the future.

In a further contribution, I plan to deepen these perspectives and share more specifics of what I think some concrete next steps along these lines could look like.

Robert Karp is the Executive Director of the Biodynamic Association and has been a leader in the local food and sustainable agriculture movement for over thirteen years.



Robert's essay, “Toward an Associative Economy in the Sustainable Food and Farming Movement,” was published incrementally in *Biodynamics*, starting in the Spring 2008 issue. The complete essay is now available in our web store at www.biodynamics.com.

This piece was originally published on our blog at biodynamicsbda.wordpress.com.



**Associative Economics:
Spiritual Activity for the
Common Good, by Gary Lamb**

A comprehensive guide for substantially rethinking the economic life. It opens doors for new perspectives, describes pitfalls and successes, and gives practical small steps one can take in order to effect change and improve the human condition.

New in Stock — \$12.00

**www.biodynamics.com/new-items
(888) 516-7797**