



## **COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE AND ASSOCIATIVE ECONOMICS**

JEFF POPPEN

People can associate economically in a cooperative manner; excessive competition between buyers and sellers is not necessary. After the economic turmoil following World War I, Rudolf Steiner wondered how to set a price value on goods. Nature plus labor creates goods with a value, such as farming some potatoes. The true price of the crop is when we receive enough to enable us to satisfy all our needs until it is time again to produce the same product, another crop of potatoes.

Ideally, we need to be clear that we don't get paid for our labor or the potatoes, but simply to satisfy our needs until there are more potatoes. When grandpa grows several bushels of potatoes for his family, we have an example of associative economics. The family wouldn't consider paying him, just as they wouldn't consider letting him go without something he needs.

Food, although necessary for human existence, is a transitory wealth. The potatoes will soon be worth nothing. But the farm that grows the potatoes is the means of production, and insures the future. Food and labor need to be taken out of the marketplace; farms and other means of production need community support.

When an objective community spirit is working in associations of people providing for each other, a wise intelligence appears; we feel good when everyone gets treated fairly. If we can choose our destiny, let's evolve towards taking what we need, giving what we can, and doing for each other as we would like reciprocated. At this point you may say, "Sounds like he's been lost in the woods, down on the farm, or out in the sun too long," all of which are true. But Hartmut von Jeeze, Trauger Groh, and others took up Steiner's ideas and formed associative economic models on their farms.

It's now called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and I have jumped on the CSA bandwagon. I believe the value of farms goes way past the produce to include beauty, education, the environment, social aspects, and a host of other considerations as well.

CSA has its roots in the recognition of the fundamental difference between growing something and selling it. By juggling around a farm's organic material and livestock, food pours like manna from heaven on this earthly paradise. Plants, powered by the sun, can't help but create food and feed from the air and rain, and each year the animals reproduce. These resources, the farm's cornucopia, are a result of nature; the growth processes are a production economy. There is more every year.

On the other hand, what happens after harvest is no longer a result of nature or growth. People are involved in transporting, marketing, and consuming the farm's production, making this a human process in a reduction economy. We use it all up.

These two economies are mutually dependent and make a whole, but work best autonomously. Farmers have no business in the market economy, where excess production creates problems. The marketplace has no bearing on the processes occurring on the farm. When farmers can make decisions from the needs of the farm itself, rather than from monetary concerns, farms thrive. Marketing is not the farmer's forté, just as farming is not for most other people. "Farmers' market" is an oxymoron.

The health of a community is based on the health of the soil, which produces its food. Farmers balance the give-and-take relationship with the soil to both provide human sustenance and sustain soil productivity. When a group of people cover the farm's annual budget, as in CSA, the farmer is able to put all his or her attention into developing the farm's unique possibilities. With the proper amount of livestock, a farm organizes itself as a self-contained individuality, able to offer its supporters an abun-

dance and diversity of food while maintaining its own fertility and capacity for future production. This is made possible by the farmer's skill in handling manure, as a full-grown cow can provide enough wastes to fertilize four acres annually, while only requiring two acres of land for her own needs.

I first heard about CSA in 1987, and started one that next year. A group of families took care of a New England farm's financial budget, each giving what they could afford. In exchange, they went to the farm each week and took all the produce they wanted. I love the concept of giving what you can and taking what you need. We pre-sold shares of crops for three years, but kept the traditional marketing going, too. In 2000, the CSA really came together, with the members organizing it much better than I could.

It worked. Within a few years we quit marketing altogether and dropped the organic/biodynamic certification we'd had for fifteen years. Although our practices hadn't changed, certification wasn't necessary anymore. Now in our ninth season, members still pay the same, \$15 to \$25 per week, and can come inspect the farm themselves. No longer are vegetables washed, packed and boxed—they're simply harvested into bushel baskets and sent to Nashville every week, where the members drop by and pick up what they want. CSA allows us to grow the highest quality produce we can, and provides the easiest access of fresh food for the members.

We don't get paid for "just vegetables" anymore; our job is to run a farm and have ground ready for the next crops. This involves cutting and baling hay, building fences, liming meadows, intensively grazing cattle, managing wetlands and forests,

and making the biodynamic preparations to go into the huge compost piles. These activities are integral to growing a garden that will thrive despite erratic weather, but gardening is just one part of the whole farm. I take my cues from the farm's needs and Mother Nature, who are much wiser bosses than the marketplace.

The members also enjoy other farm benefits besides the garden produce. They have an open invitation to hike around their farm or to picnic, swim, or camp out. By supporting the whole farm, they know what their food dollars are doing. It would be a lie to call this a revolutionary new food distribution system based on human trust and care of the soil, not profits. It's not new. It's the ancient tradition of the land's bounty benefiting the community, which supports the farmers, the livestock, and the soil. Becoming part of a farm and rekindling this feeling of caring for the land may be more nourishing than the fresh food the members get each week.

*Additional writings by Jeff Poppen are available on his website, "The Barefoot Farmer," at [www.barefootfarmer.com](http://www.barefootfarmer.com). Jeff runs a CSA at Long Hungry Creek Farm, located in Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee. He is available for consultation to aspiring organic and biodynamic farmers. Jeff is especially interested in getting small farmers and gardeners started in their own healthy food production.*

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Among other things, your generous contributions have helped us redesign the *Biodynamics* journal, update and improve the information available on our website, sponsor the national conference at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, and provide support to the regional groups.

These foundations will help us, now and in the future, to meet the challenges and potentials facing biodynamic agriculture. We greatly appreciate your continued membership and support!