

Ellingson, Stephen. 2024. *Planting with purpose: How farmers create a resilient food landscape*. New York University Press. ISBN 9781479820665. US \$28.00

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In *Planting with purpose: How farmers create a resilient food landscape*, Stephen Ellingson explores how a relatively robust local food system emerged in Central New York state over roughly the past decade. As a sociologist, Ellingson is specifically interested in understanding what motivates people to take on the punishing and precarious work of local food production, and what motivates them to remain committed to the work despite the manifold challenges. The short answer—perhaps intuitive at first blush, though conceptually more complicated—is that local farmers, chefs, and artisanal producers are motivated and sustained by a complex moral order.

Ellingson here makes an interesting—and ultimately generative—conceptual move by training our focus away from the more conventional analytic approach of investigating the intertwining of ethical commitments and consumption, toward questions of morals within the context of production-side dynamics. Accordingly, Ellingson seeks to contribute to a theory of local food production that centers morality as a key driver in compelling actors to engage, and remain, with the challenging work of realizing alternative local food systems.

Drawing on a resurgent body of sociological scholarship that centers values and morality as an explanatory element of action, Ellingson sets up a distinction between conventional agriculture and alternative agriculture. The former incorporates capitalist logics and transposes upon them a moral rationality: the pursuit of efficiency, profit maximization, and market share all become proxy indicators for 'good' farming. Alternative agriculture, on the other hand, prioritizes and assigns moral status to commitments beyond simple capitalist logics, including support for biodiversity and minimizing (or indeed reversing) the ecological impacts of farming. As Ellingson observes, the farmers, chefs, and artisanal producers he engages in the study "organize their work so that these values are placed above profit" (p. 30).

This is a methodologically rich project, started in 2018, and based on extensive engagement in the field. Ellingson conducted 51 interviews, representing 45 organizations working across 8 counties that comprise Central New York state in the USA. Ellingson engaged with people and organizations from across the local, alternative food production and distribution sector, including seven farmers running community supported agriculture (CSA) businesses, seven meat producers, four cheese makers, seven small farmers, four local food retailers, six self-identified locavore restaurateurs, seven actors who work on local food issues for local governments or farming non-profits, two farm-based breweries, and one owner of a small local food distribution co-op. In total Ellingson notes that his interviewees represent nearly 40% of all those included in the local food system in Central New York (p. 37).

In Chapter 2, Ellingson elaborates on his findings by describing the moral commitments of farmers and chefs who support the alternative local food system within Central New York. This chapter will be of particular interest to readers of this journal as Ellingson demonstrates the complex entanglements between 'nature', 'humans' and the development of moral commitments. Ellingson develops a three-part typology to categorize farmers in the study area: new farmers, returning farmers, and legacy farmers. He notes that there is no unifying moral order among these groups, though he also states that "all farmers identified a broad set of environmental and communal values that motivated them to adopt an ethic of care" (p. 49). To the extent there is a difference in motivation between these three groups, it is a matter of emphasis. New farmers were more likely to articulate commitments to sustainability and the reformation of food systems, while returning and legacy farmers were more often compelled by ethical animal husbandry, land stewardship, and commitment to family. Local farm-to-table restaurateurs share some of these values and articulate them through food aesthetics, land stewardship and sustainability, and relationships with other local food system actors. In Chapter 3, Ellingson describes how his interviewees prioritize 'non-economic' values and relationships to navigate the challenges of local alternative production. He builds on this in Chapter 4 to make the more general argument that we need to take emotion and values seriously in our analysis of what motivates people. As it relates to local alternative food system actors, Ellingson writes, "focusing on the interplay of emotions, production, and morality helps us understand the kinds of behaviors that may not seem rational or financially rewarding" (p. 40).

There is much for political ecologists to pick up on in this monograph. At times Ellingson's analysis might be read as a reification of the so-called natural and social worlds as discrete entities, a logic that political

ecologists have been renouncing for decades now. Yet he demonstrates a complex process of co-production wherein emotion and care motivate, and result from, multidimensional, interspecies interactions. While Ellingson—a sociologist—does not use the analytic tools or language of the political ecologist, he points us in a productive direction and implicitly challenges us to scaffold emotion and morals onto our approaches. This opens many horizons for future work, particularly within the context of food systems.

Planting with purpose will be of interest to advocates, graduate students, and scholars of alternative food systems and food systems relocalization. Ellingson convincingly demonstrates how emotions and morals, born from a connection to land, plants, animals, and people, are a decisive force in efforts to imagine and enact food systems beyond those enabled through capitalism. Ellingson notes persistent problems with local alternative food—that such interventions remain stubbornly raced and classed. As Ellingson concedes, "building community is challenging work" (p. 55), but it remains crucial, perhaps particularly essential within the context of the global polycrisis. We might well ask ourselves how affective elements facilitate braiding solidarities across movements—for racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and inter-species justice—with movements for food justice to inform strategies of building enduring, mutually supportive communities. And we can look to many Black, Indigenous, and feminist scholars and activists who have been demonstrating the case for care, community, and relationality as essential elements of transformation for productive ways forward.

Reference

Ellingson, S. (2024). *Planting with purpose: How farmers create a resilient food landscape*. New York University Press.

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