

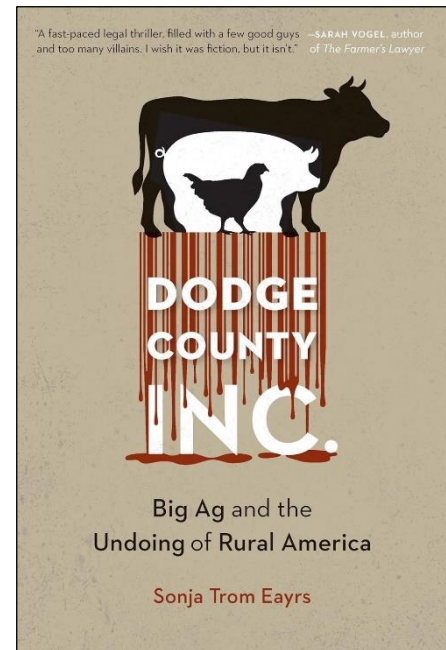
From community to commodity: The costs of big ag in *Dodge County, Incorporated*

Book review by

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Review of *Dodge County, Incorporated: Big Ag and the Undoing of Rural America*, by Sonja Trom Eayrs. (2024). Published by Bison Books. Available as paperback and ebook (PDF or EPUB); 344 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison-books/9781496234995/dodge-county-incorporated/>



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In *Dodge County, Incorporated*, Sonja Trom Eayrs offers a compelling and deeply personal account

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of her rural Minnesota community's transformation under the weight of industrial agriculture. Her narrative arrives at a critical moment in national discourse, as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and the corporatization of agriculture increasingly draw scrutiny. As both an attorney and environmental advocate, Eayrs documents the environmental degradation, public health crises, and erosion of democratic processes that have accompanied the rise of corporate agriculture in Dodge County. Her work is especially relevant to readers of this journal, as it weaves together themes of agricultural practice, food systems, and community development.

Eayrs's personal connection to the land and her community lends authenticity and urgency to her critique. She recounts her family's and neigh-

bors' experiences as they confront the encroachment of large-scale hog operations, highlighting the environmental hazards, such as pollution and inadequate waste management, that stem from housing thousands of animals on limited acreage. These environmental issues are linked to serious health concerns, including cancer clusters. As she notes, the problems are complex and it defies simple solutions to "explore the complex, challenging realities of modern agriculture's impact on the environment" (p. 202).

The book also explores the socio-economic consequences of corporate agriculture, showing how local economies and community cohesion are undermined by vertically integrated systems that leave little room for independent producers. As Dukeshire (2013) observed, corporations increasingly dominate the food chain from processing to retail, while Lloyd, Treakle, and Hendrickson (2024) argue that this concentration of power threatens progress toward both sustainability and justice. Eayrs illustrates how corporate influence extends into local and national politics, weakening regulatory oversight and antitrust enforcement. Even those who attempt to engage in the democratic process often find themselves outmatched by corporate interests with deep financial resources.

Through vivid storytelling and rigorous analysis, Eayrs humanizes the broader structural issues facing rural America. She skillfully integrates environmental, health, economic, and political perspectives to present a holistic view of the challenges confronting rural communities. Her call for civic engagement and policy reform is both urgent and inspiring, urging readers to take action to protect and revitalize rural life.

While the book's focus on Dodge County provides depth and specificity, a broader comparative analysis could have further illuminated the national scope of these issues. Ikerd (2024), for instance, identifies similar patterns of industry concentration and systemic risk across the U.S., attributing these trends to technological change and policy shifts, particularly those made through the farm bill.

Eayrs's account aligns with broader critiques of industrial agriculture, which, while driven by economies of scale, often result in monopolistic or oligopolistic control. CAFOs, in particular, commod-

ify production, marginalize small farms, and impose significant environmental and social costs. This transformation may increase efficiency, but it also heightens vulnerability, reduces farmer autonomy, and erodes community diversity. As Lloyd et al. (2024) note, rural communities disproportionately bear the burdens of pollution, health risks, and land use changes.

Both Eayrs and Ikerd (2024) envision a path forward through transformational policy. Ikerd argues that while we may not need to return to having five million farmers in the U.S., we do need more family-scale, management-intensive farms to ensure a sustainable future. Strengthening antitrust enforcement, enacting community-oriented farm policies, and building public support for sustainable agriculture are essential steps. These changes would benefit not only producers but also consumers, by expanding choices and promoting fairer pricing (Dukeshire, 2013). Collective action, political education, and the integration of climate and antitrust policies are key to building a resilient food system (Lloyd et al., 2024).

Ultimately, *Dodge County, Incorporated*, is a vital contribution to the literature on industrial agriculture's impact on rural communities. It underscores the need for sustainable farming practices, robust local governance, and community resilience. For scholars and practitioners in agriculture, food systems, and community development, Eayrs's work offers valuable insights into the consequences of corporate farming and the urgent need for systemic change.

This is a poignant and timely narrative that illuminates the often-overlooked repercussions of industrial agriculture. Eayrs's work is a must-read for those engaged in agricultural policy, rural development, and environmental advocacy. As one interviewee in the book states, "We need a paradigm shift. ... Food systems need to be more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient" (p. 234). A deliberate, policy-driven approach, one that prioritizes ecological stewardship, community well-being, and economic fairness over corporate efficiency, is not only necessary but long overdue. Dodge County stands as a powerful example of why such change is imperative.


(continued)

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