

The Call of the Land: An Agrarian Primer for the 21st Century

Steven McFadden (2009). Nashville, IN: Norlights Press. ISBN 978-1-935254-11-9.
128 pp. \$12.95, paperback.

Review by Kim L. Niewolny and Nancy K. Franz

Published online August 2010
Copyright © 2010 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

According to Hinrichs and Lyson (2007), lessons learned from the university and the field are increasingly helping us to participate in a flourishing movement to transform the North American food system. Readers new to this movement sometimes struggle to identify a primer that is accessible and grounded in real-world examples. *The Call of the Land: An Agrarian Primer for the 21st Century* lends itself as a tool for such readers, as it not only illustrates a foundational agrarian ethos historically argued by Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, but it also outlines a variety of practical models and approaches to inform the practice of local food system development. For most of the book, McFadden draws upon the lived experiences of various practitioners, farmers, and educators to reveal his agrarian philosophy and subsequent suggestions to better “live with the land” (p. 32). The result is a broad overview of issues affecting the trajectory of food and farming development, and an introduction to several approaches we might take to alter this unsustainable path. McFadden’s ethical stance for agrarian transformation strongly influences these issues and strategies for change.

See the book’s website at www.thecalloftheland.info and the author’s blog at <http://thecalloftheland.wordpress.com>.

The author’s agrarian ethos can be traced to his long-time practice as a journalist, group facilitator, and speaker on issues pertaining to earth sustainability and community engagement. It is not surprising, therefore, that this book feels more like a journalistic report than an academic synthesis or practitioner discussion of best practices. The

Kim L. Niewolny is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Her work explores the ways in which community-based education enhances agriculture and food system sustainability through such lenses as critical adult education, social movement learning, and civic agriculture.

Nancy K. Franz was recently named the associate dean for Extension and Outreach to Families and 4-H Youth Development at Iowa State University College of Human Sciences. Franz also serves as director of ISU Extension to Families, holding a faculty appointment in educational leadership and policy studies. She was previously a professor and extension specialist in program development for agricultural and extension education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Her work focuses on conditions for transformative learning in nonformal education contexts, determining and measuring educational program impacts, and best practices in Extension education.

introductory chapter briefly outlines a number of key issues affecting our modern agricultural system, including climate change, global economic instability, and chemical inputs. This chapter also provides the author's main argument for agricultural reform through more social movement action: "Individuals, families, and communities have an opportunity and a responsibility to step forward and be directly involved in producing an ample supply of clean food, while also helping to heal our distressed environment" (p 2). The first chapter presents insight learned from seventeen food and farming "pioneers" as they attempt to "listen to the land" (p. 9). The author shares their views on the state of farming, health, and agrarian culture in the United States. The second chapter lays out the values, wisdom, and ethic needed for this new agricultural movement to succeed. Chapters three through six illustrate a variety of food system models, strategies, and organizations that function to provide more ecological responsibility, social equity, and community viability. It is in these chapters that McFadden demonstrates the ways in which these initiatives operate at the individual, household, and community level. In the final chapter, McFadden revisits his call for an agrarian response to ensure that our food and farming future is wholesome and sustainable.

A key strength of *The Call of the Land* is that it provides a practical introduction to a variety of philosophical ideas and strategies that should be of interest to a broad spectrum of agriculture and food system development practitioners. For example, the first few chapters might be a supportive resource to use in a group discussion about conservation and farmland protection in a community setting, farming group, or Extension workshop. Chapters three through six might also provide a suitable starting point for practitioners and educators looking for new or forgotten initiatives, development models, and advocacy organizations ranging from such topics as community supported agriculture (CSA) and land trusts, to holistic land management, among others. The agrarian resource appendix will be particularly helpful for anyone seeking names and contact information of organizations across the United

States that directly support the development of agricultural and food system sustainability.

We also have several criticisms of the book. Although McFadden is a careful and artistic writer, the journalist style he chooses to use does not easily allow the reader to substantively engage in the material, as it lacks depth, scope, and integration of ideas across chapters. Our primary concern, however, is the book's absence of evidenced-based arguments, which should be a concern for applied researchers, development practitioners, and farmers alike. For example, the author makes several claims about the global impact of industrial agriculture that have numerous implications beyond those covered in the book. While McFadden is to be praised for bringing up the complex issues of climate change and genetic engineering in such a way that aligns with our sensibilities, it is very troubling that the number of facts and quality of arguments framing such immense issues are mediocre at best. The book overall would further benefit from more balanced coverage of the economic and social benefits of food and farming sustainability in the United States, rather than having such a heavily weighted emphasis on environmental consequences and calls for change, especially since the author hints at fostering social justice and cultural reform.

This book is most appropriate for the reader who desires a brief and spirited introduction to the far-reaching social, political, environmental, and economic issues that inform agricultural and food system research and practice. It will be particularly helpful as a secondary resource for a practitioner or university student audience interested in learning the names and locations of the many organizations and community-based initiatives that work to create and strengthen linkages for sustainable food and farming outcomes. 

Reference

Hinrichs, C.C. & Lyson, T. A. (Eds.). (2007). *Remaking the North American food system: Strategies for sustainability*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.