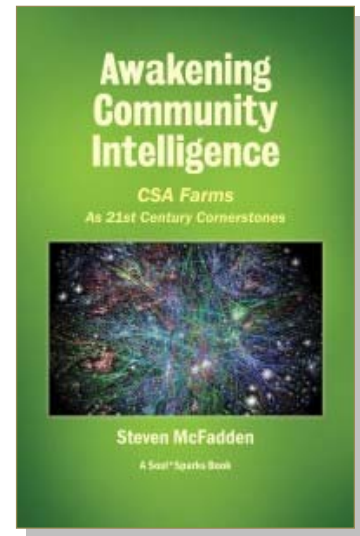


Anchors in a globalizing world

Book review by Kimberley Curtis *
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Review of *Awakening Community Intelligence: CSA Farms as Community Cornerstones*, by Steven McFadden. (2015). Published by Chiron Communications; 77 pages; available as ebook and paperback. Publisher’s website: <http://chiron-communications.com/?p=2115>



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In the slender volume *Awakening Community Intelligence*, journalist and long-time community supported agriculture (CSA) advocate Steven McFadden argues for the exponential expansion of CSAs. In the face of profound, disruptive challenges in the 21st century—climate change, resource depletion, geopolitical instability—McFadden believes CSAs have the potential to become “community cornerstones” that provide

“key points of stability and orientation” (p. 20). In ten very short chapters, McFadden unfolds his vision of this potential and issues a call to action.

A “cornerstone” is the central metaphor around which McFadden organizes his vision. Drawn from the craft of stone masonry, the cornerstone is “the base upon which other stones are set and the building takes its form” (p. 9). That base, as we look at CSA, is a specific plot of farmland with tangible connections to the natural cycles of life and to which shareholders and farmers freely tie their fates together in forms of reciprocity: the community of shareholders taking care of farmers while farmers take care of the land and nourish the community. These are the sturdy cornerstones. But McFadden’s notion of community cornerstones is bigger and more dynamic than the world the stone mason metaphor conjures. It is the cosmic, scintillating image on the cover, he tells us,

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that captures his vision. With the help of digital networking, CSAs could become a “network of light-giving impulses”; they could serve as “a model for a dynamic, far-flung, and intelligent network of nodes” in which “community intelligence” and “land-based intelligence” is awakened (p. 10). Anchored and networked and intelligently sparking, CSAs, he thinks, can bridge the gap between the personal and the global, becoming worldwide nodes of “environmental and human health consciously woven into a network of associations” (p. 68).


This is McFadden’s vision. But there is a sizeable gap between the ideal and the real, and the call to action he develops is designed to close that gap. Both his experience and his research show that community is weak in CSA. Thus he returns to the original concept of CSA—the historical cornerstone, as it were—identifying three “seeds” that have gone dormant but are still viable (p. 25). These are “shared ownership and risk, free will participation as members of the community, and intelligent partnership with nature” (p. 32). Mutual commitment and, most importantly, active participation and shared labor on the part of community shareholders are the core issues here, and McFadden believes that these are increasingly missing, with some scholarly studies to support his claim. On the one hand, increasing numbers of CSAs are more about marketing strategy and profit than about building webs of community relationships and community intelligence. (McFadden calls these new forms “genetically modified CSAs” (p. 32).) On the other hand, shareholders, and indeed all people who want to care for the land and have access to healthy, fresh food, must understand that “farming is everyone’s responsibility” (p. 40). McFadden’s call is for renewed appreciation of this insight, and for a reinvigorated “free will association” in support of farmers and an awakened community intelligence.

This call is critical in the face of the ravages industrial capitalism enacts on human and ecological communities. McFadden’s vision of CSA’s contribution to an alternative social economy based on webs of association and meaning is indebted to a robust tradition of social theorizing and community experimentation to build associational

democracy and social economies by reembedding social and ecological values into the creation of living economies (Alperovitz, 2011; Berry, 2002; Polanyi, 1968). And he rightly identifies community (which he calls “free will association”) as the weak link in CSA. Yet when he attempts to address it, reflecting on the need for a core group to sustain the CSA model and observing that it is mostly full- and part-time homemakers who form the backbone of these core groups, he celebrates women rather than critically interrogating the implications of this fact for his vision. Are CSAs sustained by women of relative privilege? Do they flourish and are they anchored in only parts of our communities?

Books designed to be visionary calls to action are different from treatises of social critique or hands-on, practical guidebooks. As such, they run two risks. One, they risk glossing over critical problems. And when they do, they may weaken the visionary power they otherwise might have. An undifferentiated and unmarked notion of human community is one such weakness in McFadden’s work. Two, they risk not giving readers enough texture and context to support the vision. For example, readers would have been inspired to learn some basics about the growth of global CSA networks like URGENCI (URGENCI, n.d.) as well as some of the past and current stories of real connections between CSA nodes spreading around the globe. Likewise, some of the bolder actions CSAs have undertaken, such as removing land from the market and forming associational, value-based relationships with local banks to stabilize and enact their CSA, would have excited readers’ practical imaginations.

McFadden is not a scholar, and readers will not find in his work deep exploration of ideas or concepts. Nor will they find fully developed reflections on the challenges to CSAs that might be useful to practitioners. But what they will find is a hopeful and visionary sketch of what CSAs could become that is grounded in the experiences of communities over the last 30 years, including his own. His vision of CSAs as community cornerstones that anchor us to the land in concrete associations that engender orienting “community intelligence” about the entwining of human and

ecological communities, *and* which foresees using that intelligence to enact global networks—all of this is powerful and welcome. It is a vision that can and should be built upon. 

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