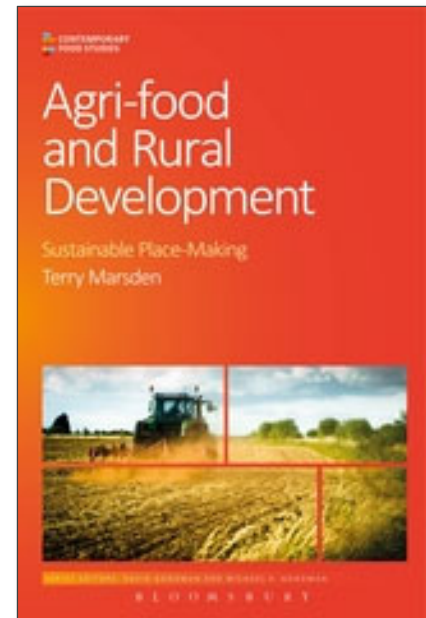


## Contested sustainabilities: The post-carbon future of agri-food, rural development and sustainable place-making

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Review of *Agri-food and Rural Development: Sustainable Place-making*, by Terry Marsden. (2017). Published by Bloomsbury. Available as hardcover and paperback; 208 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/agri-food-and-rural-development-9780857857408/>



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Terry Marsden has enormous experience working in the fields of agri-food, rural development, and sustainable place-making. He digs deeply into his experience in this book, looking back over the recent history of food and rural development,

analyzing current trends in these areas, and looking forward in an age of great uncertainty, both environmental and political, to better understand and promote sustainable food systems.

He begins by positing a significant transition from neoliberalism and production agriculture to a looming choice between what he refers to as the bio-economy and the eco-economy. He describes the former as being “characterized by exogenous development through corporate controlled production of biological products (fuels, mass, technology, enzymes, genomics) for global markets” (p. 92). Backed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and endorsed by the European Union, the bio-economy is the post-carbon offspring of neoliberalism: a little more aware of its shortcomings, but still enmeshed

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in a business-as-usual paradigm. In essence, it “incorporates the multiple ways in which rural and urban people and their institutions manage and manipulate the biosphere which sustains their existence and creates economic value out of its non-renewable and renewable resources” (p. 22).

In contrast, he describes the eco-economy as “an alternative and diverse spatial arena for the development of new endogenous production chains and networks” (p. 92). Rather than disrupting and destroying the local and regional ecosystem, the eco-economy is designed to mesh with and enhance it. It consists of “cumulative and nested ‘webs’ of viable businesses and economic activities that utilize the varied and differentiated forms of environmental resources of rural areas in sustainable ways” (p. 66). It follows that the eco-economy does not deplete resources but instead provides net benefits and adds value to both the environment and the community.

Marsden argues that these two paradigms will engender ‘contested sustainabilities’ and have profound effects on agri-food, rural development, and thus on sustainable place-making. One of the vectors for the change he envisions is governance, with a shift away from the debilitating, neoliberal form of governance that is dependent on increasingly unstable and financialized systems to novel, more proactive, reflexive governance networks, including the “decisive and fundamental role of the state and the public realm in resolving contradictions between food security and food sustainability” (pp. 153–154).


This book is focused on agri-food and rural development in the UK, so one might ask how it applies to North America, with its complex mix of farming communities, lumber communities, mining communities, fishing communities, indigenous communities, and northern and remote communities. First, the negative effects of neoliberal globalization are felt around the world, albeit unevenly, and rural communities of all kinds have

been victims of its extreme exploitation (Sumner, 2007). What Marsden sees in the UK translates well to Canada and the United States.

Second, the paradigmatic choice we face is also international, and we are widely familiar with the struggle between the bio-economy that promotes so-called ‘sustainable intensification’ and genetically altered organisms to increase consumerism, and the eco-economy that is championed by alternative food movements and their potential (as yet unrealized) to transform the role of food, support rural communities, and promote sustainable place-making.

And third, instead of dismissing rural communities as marginal to global competitiveness and anachronisms in an urban-focused world, we can clearly recognize Marsden’s argument that rurality is “central to the post-carbon economy and needs refreshed governance frameworks which both recognize and promote this” (p. xii).

This book is aimed at an educated audience and demands attention to nuance and detail. As such, it can act as a springboard for academics to teach, advise and research differently, and relate more comprehensively with rural communities, and for policy-makers to actively engage with the unfolding possibilities of the eco-economic paradigm.

In the end, food matters, rural communities matter, and sustainable place-making matters. Only someone with Marsden’s erudition and conceptual reach can pull these vital spheres of life together into a vibrant and coherent whole. In an era of uncertainty and contested sustainabilities, he is laying out the parameters for “creating new spaces and places of possibility and agency for new forms of empowered and more sustainable forms of resource governance to take hold” (p. 19). We can learn from his ideas and examples and use them to create sustainable food systems for all communities based on “translocal rather than globalized relations and knowledge flow” (p. 155). 

## Reference

Sumner, J. (2007). *Sustainability and the civil commons: Rural communities in the age of globalization*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.