

Colin A. M. Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture: Between Humankind and the Rest of Nature* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 1996).

In this ambitious book, Duncan touches on an impressive array of subjects and disciplines to argue, "that the central place in every culture should be occupied by agriculture." (xv) By this he means a locally based, ecologically sound agriculture in which the distance between production and consumption is minimized both socially and spatially. In Duncan's view, this type of agricultural system can be both the embodiment of and path toward a socialist society. It is not enough that socialism embody more humane social relations — without a focus on the ecological sustainability of agriculture, even a socially just society cannot endure for long.

The book is divided into four chapters. In the first, Duncan establishes why he believes agriculture is central to a sustainable future. The second chapter presents pre-capitalist England as an instance in which modernity and agriculture coexisted in an environmentally benign manner. The third chapter (and the one I found the most fascinating) describes how agriculture came to its environmentally destructive present condition. The final chapter offers ideas on the path we might take toward a better society, grounded in the centrality of agriculture.

Duncan begins by pointing out that in their efforts to theorize and improve society, social critics on both the left and the right have ignored or minimized the importance of nature. In particular, he is concerned that little attention has been paid to the limits of nature's ability to tolerate human intervention. This seems an unremarkable observation at the time of the book's publication (1996), but Duncan began the text in the 1980s when such ideas were much less developed. The considerable amount of theoretical and empirical work done in this area since reinforces his earlier formulations.

One of the most useful contributions of the book is to put "modern" agricultural problems into larger historical perspective. While we all know that agriculture became increasingly industrialized and chemicalized in the first half of this century, Duncan is not content with just stating this fact, but pinpoints the key moments of and reasons for this trend. He provides a detailed analysis of the effects of international political economic conditions and government policies in this century on agricultural structures and practices. For example, commodity price support systems intended to help farmers economically also encouraged the excessive use of industrial inputs. In another example, the development of agricultural insecticides was an unintended byproduct of chemical warfare research during World War II. (Insects were used in these studies because of their rapid rates of reproduction which increased the number of experiments that could be completed in a given period of time.) The result of these types of changes in this century has been a lack of

integration of agricultural activities with other economic activities and with the environment in both capitalist and socialist countries.

As a historical illustration of a time and place where it was not so, Duncan highlights England as an example of a modern society in which agriculture was both productive and environmentally sound. He explains that this was supported by pre-capitalist land-ownership arrangements which were based on a tripartite class system of landowners, tenant farmers, and landless labourers. Due to the particular nature of English legal inheritance, there was an incentive for landowners and tenant farmers to protect the long-term productivity of the land. Land had to be passed to heirs in at least as good condition as when it had been received. Duncan reports, for example, that as late as the 1860s, tenant farmers could be sued by their landlords for growing two successive crops of wheat on the same land. The productivity of agricultural land and ecological balance were maintained through a complex rotation system ("high farming") of livestock and crops, along with integrated biological pest control. Once free trade became the law of the land, the balance between production and consumption, agriculture and industry, was undermined. Ecological stability in agriculture was threatened once there were no longer any social institutions to prevent ecological destruction in agriculture.

Duncan goes beyond his close history and analysis of modern agriculture to offer ideas on how agriculture might be re-embedded in society and nature. Duncan observes that agriculture is both necessary and by its nature necessarily ecologically disruptive, especially as compared to hunter-gatherer activities. Since agriculture is a process in which deleterious ecological effects appear readily, Duncan suggests that localized, ecologically sensitive agriculture be a sort of canary-in-the-mine for environmental problems in modern society. In this way, the recognition of ecological problems that might emerge in agriculture can forestall the occurrence of these problems in other productive activities. This process would be made especially effective, Duncan believes, if producers consumed their own products.

Duncan's argument for localist agriculture is founded on two basic premises. First, that the world is composed of distinct, identifiable bioregions based on geophysical and biological characteristics. These bioregions, he believes, should both shape and constrain human activities within them which would therefore help to ensure ecological sustainability. A second premise is that before people can unite on a large scale, they must first operate in smaller communities in which meaningful human relationships are possible. For him, this means that centrally planned agriculture is unlikely to be sensitive to locally adapted methods. Duncan is not an anarchist, though. He advocates a global, interacting federation composed of these smaller communities oriented to local ecological cycles.

A starting point for developing an ecological socialist society is the reconnection of production and consumption. This in turn is predicated on

rejecting the notion of the commensurability of use-values, and changing land-ownership and trade institutions. As an example of alternative land-ownership arrangements, he offers the idea of community land trusts wherein a community buys land and then rents it to farmers. This would allow a connection between present and future users of the land. As an example of alternative marketing arrangements he offers the idea of what has come to be known in the U.S. as community supported agriculture. In this arrangement a farmer contracts with consumers to provide a fixed annual sum of money in return for weekly shares of produce. Recognizing the distinctions in use values while facilitating trade could be accomplished through a multicurrency system such as a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS). Duncan points out that this also has the benefit of potentially rectifying the value of services and goods that have been undervalued in the general economy, such as gendered pay scales.

In the end, Duncan advocates “flexible disengagement” from modern economies as a strategy for social transformation. The basis of this transformation would be a community of people, secure in their agricultural bioregion, using their own protective currency. Such a life, he argues would meet people’s material needs while maintaining the environment and at the same time be pleasant and liberating — a wonderful vision, indeed.

Yet any book of this scope is likely to have its less satisfying aspects. Duncan is a historian and I am not, but I found that detailed histories in some places distracted from the overall argument. Starting the book with photographs of five men Duncan considers important to his thesis is emblematic of the emphasis on historical figures in the text. A consequence is that at times minor points are belaboured while points more central to his argument are simply asserted as fact. For example, he states that, “given that people tend to identify with place ... this affords a harmless, indeed positive useful outlet for the pervasive but not always beneficial so-called ‘urge to belong.’” (43) A statement such that people tend to identify with place requires explanation and substantiation. And the notion that this proclivity would be harmless seems demonstrably false, particularly in light of recent events in Yugoslavia.

Duncan criticizes social reformers throughout history for not paying sufficient attention to ecological factors and consequences of their actions. Perhaps in overcompensation, Duncan seems to go the other direction. For example, while extolling the ecological record of English agriculture, he notes, almost parenthetically, that “the social record of English agriculture as distinct from its ecological record is less impressive, to put it mildly.” (54) Things like the Irish famine or the effects of British colonisation go unmentioned. In addition, for a book that is “intended as an explanation of a possible meaning for the word ‘socialism,’” (12) Duncan has curiously little to say about what *he* means by socialism. He offers that in a socialist society people should have the

opportunity for more personal relations with others in economic activities and that people should have an adequate material base. Yet there is no discussion of basic questions of the ownership of productive resources, labour exploitation, or the overall distribution of the social product. This absence makes the notion that a bioregional agriculture can yield both ecological sustainability and social justice less convincing.

The strengths of this highly original book are far greater than its weaknesses, however. It blends agricultural and environmental history, agroecological principles, philosophy, and political economy to critique the contemporary agricultural system. The book ranges from the philosophies of Locke and Marx on nature to the necessity of bioregional agriculture and an alternative system of money. With the scope and complexity of subjects and provocative ideas presented, it could serve as an important text in undergraduate and graduate courses in agricultural history, agricultural economics, the sociology of agriculture, environmental studies, and those focused on the long-term sustainability of the food and agriculture system. No one who reads this book will ever again think quite the same way about the importance of and future possibilities for agriculture and its place in society.

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