

CSA and Associative Economics

by Jeff Poppen

People can associate economically in a cooperative manner; excessive competition between buyers and sellers is not necessary. After the economic turmoil following World War I, Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher and founder of the Waldorf education movement, wondered how to set a price value on goods. Nature plus labor creates goods with a value, such as farming some potatoes. The true price of the crop is when we receive enough to enable us to satisfy all our needs until it is time again to produce the same product, another crop of potatoes.

Ideally, we are not getting paid for our labor or the potatoes, but simply to satisfy our needs until there are more potatoes. When grandpa grows several bushels of potatoes for his family, the family wouldn't consider paying him, just as they wouldn't consider letting him go without something he needs. This is an example of associated economics.

Food, although necessary, is a transitory wealth. The potatoes will soon be worth nothing. But the farm which grows the potatoes is the means of production, and insures the future. Food and labor need to be taken out of the market place; farms and other means of production need community support.

When an objective community spirit is working in associations of people providing for each other, a wise intelligence appears; we feel good when everyone gets treated fairly. If we can choose our destiny, let's evolve towards taking what we need, giving what we can, and doing for each other as we would like reciprocated. At this point you may say, "Sounds like he's been lost in the woods, down on the farm, or out in the sun too long," all of which are true. But Hartmut von Jeetze, Traugher Groh, and others took up Steiner's ideas and formed associative economic models on their farms.

It's now called Community Supported Agriculture, and I have jumped on the CSA bandwagon. I believe the value of small, organic farms goes way past the produce to include beauty, education, the environment, and social aspects. Many people want to support all of these other benefits of good farming.

Community supported agriculture has its roots in the recognition of the difference between growing something and selling it. By juggling around a farm's organic material and livestock, food pours like manna from heaven on this earthly paradise. Plants, powered by the sun, can't help but create food and feed from the air and rain, and each year the animals reproduce. These resources, the farm's cornucopia, are a result of nature; the growth processes are a production economy. There is more every year.

On the other hand, what happens after harvest is no longer a result of nature or growth. People are involved in transporting, marketing and consuming the farm's production, making this a human process in a reduction economy. These two economies are mutually dependent and make a whole, but work best autonomously. Farmers have no business in the market economy, where excess production creates problems. The market place has no bearing on the processes occurring on the farm. When farmers can make decisions from the needs of the farm itself, rather than from monetary concerns, farms thrive. Marketing is not the farmer's forte, just as farming is not for most other people. "Farmer's Market" is an oxymoron.

The health of a community is based on the health of the soil, which produces its food. Farmers balance the give and take relationship with the soil to both provide human sustenance and sustain soil productivity. When a group of people cover the farm's annual budget, as in CSA, the farmer is able to put full attention into developing the farm's unique possibilities. With the proper amount of livestock, a farm organizes itself as a self-contained individuality, able to offer its supporters an abundance and diversity of food while maintaining its own fertility and capacity for future production. This is made possible by the farmer's skill in handling manure, as a full grown cow can provide enough manure to fertilize four acres annually, while only requiring two acres of land for her own needs.

The CSA movement as we see it now started in the mid-1980s. I first heard about it in 1987, and started one the next year. A group of families took care of a New England farm's financial budget, each giving what they could afford. In exchange, they went to the farm each week and took all the produce they wanted. I love the concept of giving what you can and taking what you need. We pre-sold shares of crops for three years, but kept the traditional marketing going, too. In 2000, the CSA really came together, with the members organizing it much better than I could.

It worked. Now in our ninth season, members still pay the same, \$15 to \$25 per week, and can come inspect the farm themselves. No longer are vegetables washed, packed, and boxed – they're simply harvested into bushel baskets and sent to Nashville every week, where the members drop by and pick up what they want. CSA allows us to grow the highest quality produce we can, and provides the easiest access of fresh food for the members.

We don't get paid for just vegetables anymore; our job is to run a farm and have ground ready for the next crops. This involves cutting and bailing hay, building fences, liming meadows, intensively grazing cattle, managing wetlands and forests, and making the biodynamic preparations to go into the huge compost piles. These activities are integral to growing a garden that will thrive despite erratic weather, but gardening is just one part of the whole farm. I take my cues from the farm's needs and Mother Nature, who are much wiser bosses than the marketplace.

The members also enjoy other farm benefits besides the garden produce. They have an open invitation to hike around their farm, or to picnic, swim or camp out. By supporting the whole farm, they know what their food dollars are doing. I would like to call this a revolutionary new food distribution system based on human trust and care of the soil, not profits, but it's not new. It's the ancient tradition of the land's bounty benefiting the community, which supports the farmers, the livestock, and the soil. Becoming part of a farm and rekindling this feeling of caring for the land may be more nourishing than the fresh food the members get each week.

Jeff Poppen, the Bare Foot Farmer, owns and operates the Long Hungry Creek Farm and CSA. This article has been provided courtesy of the Green Living Journal, a project of the Center for Holistic Ecology and the Cumberland Green Bioregional Council.