Book Review. Loconto, A and Constance D (eds.) 2024. Agrifood Transitions in the Anthropocene: Challenges, Contested Knowledge, and the Need for Change London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Paper first received: 31 July 2024; Accepted: 09 August 2024; Published in final form: 24 February 2025
https://doi.org/10.48416/ijsaf.v30i2.632

Michael BELL[1] and William LACY[2]

Abstract

In July 2024, an author meets critics session was organized at the Rural Sociological Society's Annual meeting that was held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In this session, the co-editors (Allison Loconto and Doug Constance) of the book *Agrifood Transitions in the Anthropocene: Challenges, Contested Knowledge, and the Need for Change* met co-authors Elizabeth Ransom and Claire Lamine to discuss the contents of the book. They also met two critics - one in person and one at a distance - in order to debate the pertinance, the interest and the contribution of the book to the epistemic community gathered in Madison. This article publishes these two critiques back-to-back as a means to stimulate further debate and discussion in the sociology of agriculture and food community.

[1] University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA
[2] University of California, Davis, USA

Corresponding authors: Michael Bell, michaelbell@wisc.edu and William Lacy, wblacy@ucdavis.edu

Bibliographical notes

Michael Bell is Chair and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Community and Environmental Sociology. He is also a faculty associate in Environmental Studies, Religious Studies, and Agroecology. He is author or editor of eleven books, three of which have won national awards. His most recent books are City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What Is Right (Princeton, 2018), the Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology (Cambridge, 2020), and the 6th edition of Invitation to Environmental Sociology (Sage, 2021).

William Lacy, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Sociology in the Dept. of Human Ecology, University of California, Davis and affiliated faculty at the Center for the Studies of Higher Education, UC Berkeley. He has authored/co-authored/co-edited over eighty journal articles and book chapters and six books on higher education and science policy. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and recipient of two Fulbright awards for international education.

ISSN: 0798-1759 | This Journal is double blind refereed.

Welcoming Agrofood Nanarchy: Transitioning Away from the Monstrous Problem

Michael M. Bell

To be honest, I didn't enjoy reading *Agrifood Transitions in the Anthropocene* as much as I expected to. I was delighted – in these challenging times of contested knowledge in much need of change – to be invited to have a look. We face a difficult and fiercely complicated situation as a planet. One often hears the phrase a "wicked problem" to describe the condition of food and agriculture, but that's not exactly apt. What is wrong with being alive and animate, the original meaning of "wick"? I'm OK with spirit. I think we need more, in fact. Maintaining the alive and animate is, after all, the whole point of food and agriculture – or, rather, should be. Really, what we face is a *monstrous problem*, monstrous in size and moral aspect. Indeed, it's a Frankenstein problem, being both human and non-human, birthed by us, and rampantly out of our control. But reading this book, I did not get a sense of how we might regain that control, despite what I took from the title was its intent.

Don't get me wrong! It's a very good book by some very good folks on a very important topic: the concern we should all have over the terrible state of what the authors often call – although I wish they wouldn't – our "food system." It's not a system, and we don't want it to be. I have often complained about the creeping crude of this term in our field, although people generally look at me blankly when I do, or whistle a tune, the same old tune, until the moment passes. The meaning of system, says the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, is an "organised whole" with sys- coming from *syn-*, meaning together, and -tem coming from *histanai*, meaning to "stand up" or "set up." Tell the starving it's an organized whole. Tell the impoverished farmer it's an organized whole. The problems stem from its disconnections and disorganization. Indeed, to the extent it is organized, it is even more a monstrous problem. Which is more in keeping with the etymology given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which reports that "sys-" comes from the Greek to "set up" or "stand up" something, but "-tem" comes from "-oma," as in carninoma. A system, by this derivation, is an organized cancer.

So why do we love this term so much? So why, when we intone it, do we raise our arms in supplication to this higher power?

Besides, the "agrifood system" is not much about food, nor agrifood – although, again, it should be. It is mainly about power, oppression, and accumulation. The co-authors of the book agree that this is the sad case. And they are right that, by whatever name, this organized whole has gone cancerous, and is in crisis. The co-authors are clearly quite depressed about this. So that did not make for enjoyable reading.

I also have some more minor irritations about this and that, concerning the book's framing and content. For one thing, I'm not sure the book is really about the troubles of the anthropocene, dating from whenever the geologists can first detect a layer of radioactive fallout from atom bombs, or whenever. The troubles of agriculture and food are not new, and we need to be cautious about implying that there was a golden age of agroecological harmony before the atom bomb. The same goes for related terms that some of the authors in the book favor, or toy with, such as capitalocene or the plantationocene. Capitalism and dominating relationships have long been a part of agriculture, from Mesopotamian times to now, if not from before that, if we take seriously what late lamented Jim Scott (2017) said in *Against the Grain*.

And if by anthropocene we mean the staggering impact of the human on the Earth, even at a geologic scale, such ecological power is not necessarily bad. Perhaps that power could be used to promote transition and transformation. Perhaps we now have the power to do food and agriculture right, in ways that are just and sustainable. The moral issues of power are its common inequality and how it is commonly used for unequal ends. But agroecological power could be used differently, and sometimes is. It could be a form of love, built from below, promoting regeneration, as I think Harriet Friedman in the book wants us to consider.

I also hoped to read more about concrete issues of labor in food and agriculture. The book seems framed more around the question of relationship of humans to the rest of the planet and the Latourian question of how different are we anyway then it is about human exploitation of humans in food and agriculture. Yay for relational ontologies! Still, framing of the book around the anthropocene made the focus more on overcoming binaries than on overcoming exploitation.

But these are not the main issues that made the book less enjoyable than I hoped. It is that, aside from Friedman's contribution and a few others, the book is about troubles, not solutions. Even the many case studies of transition and transformation that constitute the bulk of the book generally have the flavor of, well, somebody tried doing something but it wound up just being just the latest manifestation of the world system, albeit perhaps with a bit of a smiley face – which almost made matters worse by disguising and papering over what is really going on. The book feels reactive more than active. It does valuable work of critique and complaint. But the book analyses more than it proposes. The overall tone is one of despair. I didn't see a chapter here to inspire the undergraduates in the introduction to agroecology course I co-teach.

Solutions are hard! If they weren't they probably would have already been enacted! I get that. But I guess I read too much into the "need for change" ending of the book's subtitle. We got plenty on the need, but very little on the how.

The editors and many of the book's authors do address the how in some of their other work. There is Allison Loconto's wonderfully helpful "innovator's handbook" on *Enabling Sustainable Food Systems*, a beautifully produced 231-page book published by FAO and INRAE in 2020. There is the half million dollar 2016 USDA-AFRI grant that Doug Constance was part of on "Pathway to Organic: A Research, Extension, and Education Project in the Southcentral Texas on Transitioning Cropping Systems." But that was evidently not the mood that the contributors to this volume were in.

OK, so if I am going to complain about too much complaining, what have I got to say about solutions? What would I have contributed, if I had been one of the co-authors? Would I have had anything even modestly hopeful to suggest about solutions?

Maybe something. I want to conclude by sketching out a new thought that I think is also an old thought, a thought that I hear in the background of many of these papers and chapters. And I'll give this new old thought a new name: what I will term *nanarchy* – not anarchy, but nanarchy. I mean it in the sense of nano, the small. I'll offer this initial definition or description of nanarchy: sovereignty of the small, for the small, in the small – and in the large.

Like anarchy, and like many of the chapters of this book, nanarchy is suspicious of scale. It's not necessarily against scale but wary of it, as nanarchy is protective of autonomy and sovereignty. Nanarchy encourages what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1969 [1958]) called "freedom-to" – freedom to do, to act, to be as individuals and collectives. Clearly, we have little freedom-to in agrifood – in what I would prefer to call the *agrifood complex* rather than system. I gave a talk at the 2023 ESRS meeting in Rennes, and someone in the crowd suggested that term (a Dutch man, by look and accent) in the question period afterwards. I never got his name, but I think he was on to something. It gets at the complexity of the agrifood context, but without a sense that it is actually an organised whole – or that we would even want it to be, given the way organisation so commonly squelches freedom-to.

But not inherently. Indeed, freedom-to is only possible with what Berlin called freedom-from. Space needs to be created and held open for freedom-to, and to ensure that one freedom-to does not compromise another freedom-to – what John Rawls (1971) called the first principle of justice. As my colleague Michaela Hoffelmeyer (2023) points out in her work on meat packing, small is not necessarily beautiful. It can be the

site of much exploitation. We need to protect the small from the small, not only from the large. So nanarchism differs from anarchism – or at least differs from much anarchism – by recognizing the need for the protective role of the state or state-like entities.

This is what my colleague Loka Ashwood (Ashwood and Bell, forthcoming) calls the horizontal power of the state, creating space for the sovereignty of the small, while also ensuring that there is no infringement in the small of basic human rights and more-than-human rights. The trouble, says Loka, is that the state has become too vertical.

What does food and farming nanarchy look like in practice? It looks like an egg from my backyard chickens, which I am now allowed to have 8 of in my city, without troubling my neighbors very much. It looks like the bottle of wild-harvested blackberry jam that my wife and I made last summer. It looks like the incubator farm at Wisconsin's Farley Center, just outside my city of Madison, Wisconsin. It looks like hot sauce from my city's farmer's market, made by my friend Sandra Morris, based on a recipe from her native Togo. She makes it in my city's FEED (Food Enterprise and Economic Development) kitchen – a kind of incubator for food businesses in Madison. It looks like the IPM blueberries from a Latino growers coop in Michigan that my friend Margaret Krome brings to Madison as part of a buying club she organizes. It looks like the Wily St Food Coop in Madison. It looks like farmers organizations like Grassworks, the Practical Farmers of Iowa, Family Farm Defenders, and the Wisconsin Farmers Union, which have grown up in my region to create more space for freedom-to. It looks like OSHA rules that are enforced in the small meat packing plants that Michaela Hoffelmeyer studies, and that we may soon lament, as the Trump administration continues its efforts to make an organised whole that puts the billionaires even more firmly on top. It looks like the overturning of so-called right-to-farm laws, which are really right-to-exploit laws.

But I can't hope to solve the monstrous problem of agrifood in a few pages of fine words, and nor can these authors in 388 pages of fine words. Still, as I sat on a bench on my city's Capital Square this past summer, during the Rural Sociological Society's Annual Meeting, I was inspired by a Madison tradition: the solidarity sing-along, every Friday, noon to 1pm. Here's what they were singing as I sat there between sessions of the meeting:

> *We shall overcome*
>
> *We are not afraid*
>
> *We shall live in peace*

References

Ashwood, Loka and Michael M. Bell. Forthcoming. *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, 7th edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Berlin, Isaiah. [1958] 1969. "Two Concepts of Liberty." Pp. 166–218 in *Four Essays on Liberty,* edited by Henry Hardy. London and New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoffelmeyer, Michaela. 2023. *Scalar Irresponsibility: Workplace Safety, Managerial Control, And Worker Coping in Small and Medium-Scale Meat Processing*. PhD Dissertation, Penn State University.

Loconto, Allison et al. 2020. *Enabling Sustainable Food Systems: Innovators' Handbook*. Rome: FAO and INRAE.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Scott, James C. 2017. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Urgent, immediate and ambitious action is needed to address the challenges of the Anthropocene and the transformation of our agrifood system for a sustainable future

William Lacy

Senior researchers and policy analysts Allison Loconto and Douglas Constance have produced a very timely and critically important edited volume which addresses perhaps the greatest challenges of the 21st century, the new Anthropocene epoch. This new geological age is viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. Loconto and Constance bring a much needed sociological insightful and compelling analysis of this new epoch and strategies for moving forward.

They summarise the increasing evidence of this evolution and the major role played by agriculture (recent estimates identify food systems as being responsible for a third of the global Anthropocene greenhouse emissions). They point out that the debates about the consequences of this transition can be characterized as (1) those who view these changes as global ecological, social and economic disaster and (2) those who believe this will enable humans to achieve total control over the planet. The debate is further complicated by the climate change deniers. These conflicting world views often at the intersection of knowledge, environment, and governance contribute to an inability to reach consensus of the problem itself. They argue that the challenges of the Anthropocene and human/nature relationships require a new way of thinking in both the natural and social sciences and a drastic rethinking of modernity's assumptions, neoliberal consumer capitalism, and the politics of unsustainability.

The Loconto and Douglas overview and sophisticated analysis is enhanced by the subsequent chapters by philosopher Paul Thompson, sociologist Harriett Friedmann, technical advisor and teacher Nora Mckeon, and independent scholar and researcher Wardah Alkatiri. These scholars provide much needed sociological, philosophical and historical insights, as well as compelling analysis of this new epoch and strategies for moving forward. Both Friedmann and McKeon critique the governance models that have contributed to the unequal development, exploitation and inequalities of the current agrifood system.

Friedmann further questions whether the Nation-State is an appropriate governing model for the needed transition and future societal sustainability. She persuasively argues that a liveable, sustainable future lies in decolonizing the Anthropocene and reaffirms a commitment to a communal relations with the earth. Alkatiri concludes that governance of societal and agrifood transitions require holistic, integrated, and coordinated actions among a wide range of stakeholders.

These theoretical and historical analyses are also complemented by several excellent chapters that explore the current societal struggles to transition towards a more sustainable agrifood system in several countries worldwide. These empirical stories of the challenges of transition in the Anthropocene include the analysis of the French efforts to reduce antibiotic use in intensive and industrial livestock farming, pasture restoration in Brazilian animal agriculture, ethical issues in the role of Indonesian fisheries, the corporate agribusiness diet in Argentina, Brazil's experiment with biodiesel for rural development policy, and food systems in Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Each of these stories illustrate that while some modest positive change may have resulted from these initiatives, little fundamental change has occurred and that these technological strategies enable the current system to remain unchanged. Moreover, the provisioning of an adequate diet has fallen far short with the number of people who did not have access to adequate food in 2020 rising to 2.4 billion, nearly a third of the world's population.

Loconto and Douglas conclude with a call for a relational, interactionist approach for agrifood transitions in the Anthropocene that incorporates responsibility for sustainability of the natural and human environments and rights-based food sovereignty. In contrast, in Loconto's chapter on corporate research at Nestles and

Unilever she observed that their main purpose for doing research and innovation is to create marketable products and not a concerted response to societal sustainability. Similarly, Loconto and Douglas' final chapter provides a strong critique of institutional scientific knowledge of the United States Department of Agriculture public research system and the international agricultural research system, which reinforce the dominance of the industrialized agrifood system. Several other chapter authors also emphasize the need for reflexive approaches to research that value qualitative, indigenous, and farmers knowledge and citizen science.

In the Ransom and Raymond chapter they further expand the notion of knowledge to include knowledge from the margins and peripheries and that way of knowing is tied to the emotions and produced through social relations. They conclude that concern for the future of the earth can be a source of new or more appropriate knowledge. Finally, Loconto and Douglass encourage sociologists of agriculture and food to engage more strongly in these critical debates and political agenda and embrace a more activist public sociology.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the appropriateness of dedicating this book to the memory of Professor Lawrence Busch. He was my colleague and friend for several decades and provided significant theoretical grounding for this scholarship while championing many of the themes in this book. Equally importantly, he was the first President of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on the Sociology of Agriculture and Food which began in the 1980s to analyse issues of inequality, knowledge, power, and institutional change in a global agrifood system.

In conclusion, although I have engaged in several decades of knowledge generation, dissemination and application on agrifood systems, science, higher education, and democracy, this volume provides a myriad of timely, important, new insights, perceptions and analysis in both a local and broad global context.

I can only hope it is read widely and acted upon! Urgent, immediate and ambitious action is needed to address the challenges of the Anthropocene and the transformation of our agrifood system for a sustainable future.