



Book Review

Growing and eating sustainably: Agroecology in action

By Dana James and Evan Bowness

2021 Fernwood Publishing. 128 pages

Reviewed by Richard Bloomfield*

Western University; ORCID: [0009-0003-8397-8513](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8397-8513)

Dana James and Evan Bowness' book, *Growing and Eating Sustainably: Agroecology in Action*, provides a portrayal of existing sites of a radically different food system in southern Brazil. A uniquely designed book including glossy pages and dozens of striking photographs of farmers and activists is a novel way to demonstrate how transitions to agroecology¹ are happening. For me, it is a captivating approach to presenting these transitions because it draws individual stories out from abstract notions of ideal futures and brings them to life with their particularities.

As the title indicates, the authors focus their attention on action, and therefore this is not a book that explores

larger theoretical debates such as the *Agrarian Question*² in-depth. However, they do provide a theoretical starting point for their work, primarily leaning on Erik Olin Wright's conception of "real utopias"—envisioning and creating alternative social structures and systems that aim for a more just and equitable society—and Stephen Gliessman's five-step framework on transitioning global food systems to agroecology (Gliessman, 2015; Wright, 2010). In short, Gliessman's framework starts by requiring a movement away from conventional inputs, then substituting inputs with new practices, followed by redesigning the agroecosystem based on ecological processes, and then reestablishing direct connections

¹ Agroecology is a social movement which seeks to transform agricultural systems toward biodiversity, adaptability, and justice (James and Bowness, 2021).

² Scholarship which has sought to understand the role of agriculture in society, in relation to economic development, social structure, and political power. This includes but is not limited to land ownership and distribution dynamics, the relationship between agriculture productivity and technology, rural development schemes, and the impacts of globalization on trade and market integration (Akram-Lodhi, 2021).

*Corresponding author: rbloomfi@uwo.ca

Copyright © 2024 by the Author. Open access under CC-BY-SA license.

DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v11i2.692](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v11i2.692)

ISSN: 2292-3071

between growers and producers, and, after the previous four steps, building new global food systems based on equity, participation and justice that help restore earth's life support systems. James and Bowness rightly point out that this framework can seem linear, but on the ground this is rarely the case and therefore note the importance of experimentation and place-based understanding.

The first two foundational chapters introduce the reader to agroecology and the concept of food-systems transitions and provide an overview of the current industrial food system (IFS). The authors document a brief history of the substantial changes to, and present challenges of, our IFS, and make their theoretical orientation clear as a part of critical agrarian studies. They briefly, but effectively, outline the contradictions and crises of the IFS highlighting the corporate power, rising chemical toxicity, and overproduction since the Green Revolution. They conclude that given the imbalance of power, and the unaccounted for negative externalities in the market-driven IFS, a transition to an agroecological future is imperative. The authors chose southern Brazil because of its biological and sociocultural diversity as well as its recent deeply entrenched agricultural industrialization while also hosting some of the most influential agrarian social movements contesting this entrenchment.

Chapter three is modeled on Gliessman's level one and two in transitioning food systems. The authors describe a participatory guarantee system, "Rede Ecovida," which is an alternative to third-party certification such as Organic or Fair Trade. Rede Ecovida uses peer-to-peer grassroots learning, is more socially oriented than the third-party equivalent, and includes co-developing standards and self-certifying. Ultimately, this certification is more time consuming but less costly for the participants. The reader meets formidable people on the front lines of this work through both text and

photography, like Heliton, who has transitioned a conventional tobacco farm into a diversified agroecological crop and pasture farm certified through Rede Ecovida, allowing him to sell through local, rather than export markets, obtaining higher profit margins. Heliton's personal satisfaction in this transition work is well captured by the supplementary photography.

However, the authors did not take up seriously the barriers to scaling this participatory model in other regions given that many farmers attempting more labour-intensive agroecological methods are often struggling to have enough labour to enact such a structure. Although they employ Wright's conception of "real utopias" as justification for building on this kind of gradual transformation within existing conditions, it falls short of acknowledging the need for much larger structural changes that would be required to liberate most small-scale farmers from the dominate inequality generating capitalist system.

In chapter four James and Bowness move to Gliessman's level three, presenting several examples of agroecosystem redesign based on a new set of ecological processes. Noting earlier in the book how difficult an economic livelihood can be to sustain for many small-scale farmers, it was encouraging to see the benefits of diversification of income through agritourism. However, these diversifications are likewise firmly embedded within a market-based system and face similar scalability barriers in the form of time and capital. The authors also engage with the dynamics and challenges of urban folks seeking a rural life and gaining access to land while also drawing the urban rural connection through a revolutionary community-led urban composting program and responsible consumer cells (CCR) in Florianopolis. Each example, though place specific, will be a relatable challenge to practitioners, familiar to food studies scholars and the solutions compelling to both.

Finally, in chapter five, the authors elevate the outcomes of pursuing an agroecological future, moving to level four of Gliessman's framework; to reestablish rural and urban connections between eaters and growers. The authors provide examples such as the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC), a rural women's movement playing an active role in women's liberation and empowerment within agroecology and demonstrate that feminist, anti-racist, and democratic practices are necessary to avoid reproducing social power imbalances through more environmentally friendly farming. They also show Tekoa V'ya, which has grown from fifteen to forty-four families since obtaining their land in 2009, as a powerful example of Indigenous food sovereignty.

The authors conclude that individuals seeking radical change can achieve this from within existing structures and conditions while remaining ambitious enough to see a different future. For some, this may feel too hopeful given the tenuous success alternative movements have had compared to the predominate corporately controlled IFS. For others interested and familiar with critical food

studies, this hope is often missing from academic texts. This book would be an excellent complement text to any undergraduate course exploring food studies. Specifically, the illustrations of transition could help students grasp the practical implications of complex critical agrarian theories which ultimately provide the foundation for agroecology. James and Bowness' presentation of equal parts photography and text is a welcome change, capturing the emotion and humanity of those pursuing the transformation of our food system and could inspire other similar works. The book is accessible while still embedding important theories from the beginning, although not without shortcomings, as a backdrop for the real-world stories provided throughout. In *Growing and eating sustainably*, James and Bowness aim to inspire us to protect earth's life support systems on which we all depend and illustrate both visually and textually that, through the lens of agroecology, there is no independence; rather there is only responsible or irresponsible dependence.

Richard Bloomfield is passionate about the social and environmental sustainability of food production. He is a PhD candidate in Geography and Environment at Western University and is researching the political economy of agro-food systems by examining current farmland policy, ownership dynamics, and alternative land-use models that support next or first-generation farmers in Ontario. He co-founded Urban Roots London in 2017, a non-profit urban farm that is addressing issues around food access.

References

Akram-Lodhi, A. H. (2021). The ties that bind? Agroecology and the agrarian question in the twenty-first century. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48(4), 687–714.

Gliessman, S. (2015). *Agroecology: The ecology of sustainable food systems*. CRC Press.

James, D., & Bowness, E. (2021). *Growing and eating sustainably: Agroecology in action*. Fernwood Publishing.

Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning real utopias*. Verso. (1), 1-10.