

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KREGG HETHERINGTON. *Cultivating Utopia: Organic Farmers in a Conventional Landscape*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2005, 117 pp + references.

Cultivating Utopia is based on Kregg Hetherington's MA research, during which he lived as a volunteer worker on an organic farm. Hetherington uses an ethnographic approach to explore the relationship between organic farming and "conventional" farming in rural Nova Scotia. He does not engage with the question of the relative "sustainability" of the two approaches to agriculture. Instead, the author focuses on micro-social processes of identity-formation and the creation of culture. He is interested in how members of the two communities, which co-habit the same geographical space, construct symbolic and cultural barriers between the "organic" and the "conventional."

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Hetherington engages in a rich exploration of the boundary-work that goes on between organic and conventional farmers. Organic farmers valorize the local. They perceive themselves as more liberal and educated than their "conventional" neighbours. They are engaged in a project of environmental sustainability; they do not "poison" the land. By contrast, conventional farmers tend to perceive organic farmers as over-educated "hippies" or "pot growers" who lack the "common sense" required to succeed as farmers. This discursive boundary-work inhibits the creation of a local community *among* organic and conventional farmers. It also inhibits the construction of a political identity *as farmers* who are located within the political economy of agriculture.

A key insight in *Cultivating Utopia* is the notion of the "wake-up call." Through his interview data, Hetherington shows us how organic farmers attempt to negotiate the tensions between their own political values, the formal structures of the organics movement (i.e., the associations that certify "organic" products) and the practical necessities of making a living from farming. The majority of organic farmers reach the point where they must address the disjuncture between their political values and the pragmatic necessities of farming. At this point of personal crisis, the wake-up call, many farmers leave their rural communities. However, those who keep farming after "waking up" often develop a more complex understanding of farming, community and politics. For Hetherington, the experience of "waking up" can provide the foundation for a more nuanced politics of food, wherein organic and conventional farmers might find common ground.

While *Cultivating Utopia* is generally very good, a few critical comments can be made. First, while there is substantial methodological self-reflexivity, wherein Hetherington locates himself as a researcher, there is only a short appendix on method. The book would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of methodology, addressing issues like the criteria used to select interview respondents, the interview schedule, or the analysis of the interview transcripts. Second, Hetherington's micro-social, cultural focus is very good for exploring the work that goes on inside the political economy of farming. However, I felt that Hetherington might have made better use of the Marxian and Gramscian theoretical material, which is introduced in Chapter 2 and quickly replaced by a Bourdieu-influenced approach. In particular, I would have enjoyed a final chapter which attempted to bring the micro-social analysis back into dialogue with the macro-social theoretical material.

Finally, the analysis is weakened by an inconsistent focus on gender (which is acknowledged by the author). For example, Hetherington notes that there are important differences in attitudes relating to gender between the two communities. That is, organic farmers are more likely to invoke discourses of gender egalitarianism, while the notion of the "male farmer" is central to conventional farming. However, the treatment of gender is sporadic, and often tangential. A more sustained focus on gender would have added to the analysis.

In *Cultivating Utopia*, Hetherington shows us the complexity of lived experience that goes on inside organic farming as a hybrid of lifestyle and social movement. The book is clearly written and engaging. Students interested in rural studies, social movements, and nature and society will find the book valuable. *Cultivating Utopia* also contains a strong sense of self-reflexivity. Hetherington repeatedly makes the reader aware of his presence as a participant-researcher, who came into the project with his own set of beliefs about organics. We get a sense of how the author's own relationship with the discourses of organic farming shifted through the research process. This dimension of the book also makes it valuable for graduate students who are interested in this type of self-reflexive qualitative research.

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