

Battling Magic: Maintenance and Enchantment in a Biodynamic CSA

Organizations across all industries are coming face to face with a complex landscape of grand challenges that affect the social and natural environments they are embedded in. Amongst these industries, the agricultural sphere is particularly vulnerable to stark changes in climatic factors and is also one of the most important for humanity given our necessity for nutrient-dense food. In response to these concerns, scientists have called for improving equity and biodiversity in food system while reducing agriculture's effects on the environment (Jordan et al., 2021).

Conventional (or industrial/intensive) agriculture, as it is known, is in fact a recent phenomenon. This pioneering technical innovation (amongst others like GMOs) has helped feed billions, though it has also contributed to environmental harm. Specifically, concerns around biodiversity loss, soil erosion, chemical pollution, and intensive water usage have been most pressing. In response, alternatives to conventional or industrial agriculture have been posed and practiced experimentally across the world in the face of various social and environmental norms and systems that tend to resist change. Here, we focus on how regenerative agriculture as an alternative to industrial agriculture centered around soil health is locally enacted and produced.

Drawing on an in-depth ethnographic investigation of "Biodynamic CSA", one of the oldest CSAs in the United States, I contribute to the literatures on institutional maintenance, enchantment, and sustainability. This CSA in southeast Michigan was one of the first dozen CSAs to emerge in the United States, and in fact, helped constitute the CSA movement in the state over the course of its history. They exhibited significant leadership in creating a local institution of regenerative agriculture that helped support other farms to participate similarly and grow the institution's capacity. In addition to creating the institution locally, they engaged in maintaining regenerative agriculture for over thirty years. We focus on its maintenance in the

face of organizational change (via a new farmer) and ask the following question: how can an organizational form be a vehicle for institutional maintenance? As the fieldwork continued, I asked a secondary question based on emergent themes, namely: how does enchantment amongst members play a role in this maintenance? In this investigation, I collected data over four months during the peak of the 2022 growing season from July through October. I draw on formal and informal ethnographic interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and a variety of archival data covering the history of the CSA since its inception in 1987. I participated as a volunteer, but also attended numerous member, board, and committee meetings, as well as external events alongside members as they represented the farm.

The findings from this ethnographic study make a threefold contribution. First, I demonstrate the novel use of an organizational form (CSA) as an “enchanted organization” that attempted to maintain a more traditional and seemingly inefficient institution (regenerative agriculture) against the pressures to conform to more efficient and dominant forms (industrial agriculture). While much of the literature on institutional maintenance and custodianship focuses on an explicit macro or micro-foundation, we explain how organizational forms themselves can be vehicles for developing renewal. Second, at a lower-level of analysis, we integrate a perspective on enchantment in our inductive analysis of the four groups that emerged. I focus on ideological tensions such as pastoralism and the agrarian myth to build on emerging work on the contradictions inherent in ethical consumerism. Lastly, we show how heterogeneous groups of actors with divergent interests within the same organization interact in this battle. As we investigate this organization over four months, we describe what elements were negotiated more readily than others between groups with convergent interests. Our data on interactions specifically speaks to a unit of analysis typically overlooked in the sustainability literature.