

Agroecology: A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-Oriented Approach, by V. Ernesto Méndez, Christopher M. Bacon, Roseann Cohen, and Stephen R. Gliessman

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BOOK REVIEW

Agroecology: A Transdisciplinary, Participatory and Action-Oriented Approach, V. Ernesto Méndez, Christopher M. Bacon, Roseann Cohen, and Stephen R. Gliessman (2016). CRC Press, Boca Raton, London & New York. ISBN 978-1-4822-4176-1. Hardback, \$48.97.

Through decades while US researchers were working with farmers and community-based researchers on agroecology, publications and academic references were scarce in the United States. But suddenly there is a wealth of books, peer-reviewed articles, and reports available, with many more in the pipeline soon to be published. The time for explaining the negative consequences of industrialized food systems and what agroecology is, to a skeptical audience, may be passing. The disastrous experiment with industrialized agriculture in which many countries in the world have been engaged for three-fourths of a century is increasingly bankrupt, and its dire consequences for ecological integrity, decent livelihoods, independent small-scale businesses, and human rights are clear to anyone paying attention. People practicing agroecology demonstrate that other food systems are possible, and people can feed themselves with these systems without having to engage with globalized agribusiness on unfair terms beyond their control.

Precisely because agroecology has emerged as a strong alternative, political forces suppress knowledge about its practices; arguments about its scope remain active; and the association between agroecology and food sovereignty raises red flags for many governments. For example, at a recent Expert Group Meeting at the United Nations regarding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture) and in discussion of progress toward that goal in the High-Level Political Forum this year, recognition and favorable mention of “agroecology” as a means of implementation for this goal was a major achievement of civil society organizations. Likewise, a long-standing struggle by civil society to have the Committee on World Food Security commission a report on agroecology from its High Level Panel of Experts has been thwarted again and again. It is safe to assume that most of the government representatives who are discussing SDG2 and food security in official United Nations forums are not reading books on agroecology or talking with people who practice it, unfortunately.

But those who have been paying attention to the agroecological literature are reveling in current riches. The question for this group is what new books can add to this rapidly expanding field. The book edited by Méndez et al. adds to current literature through the emphasis on how agroecological research is conducted, at its best, with multiple examples from different countries. The participatory and action-oriented approach is central to the work of all of the editors, and their choice of chapters shows how this can be carried out in the United States and Spain as well as in Latin America, the fertile formative ground for many of the agroecologists who are based in the United States. The chapters offer conceptual and empirical evidence of agroecological research in different settings, filtered through the

understanding that comes from disciplinary backgrounds including sociology, anthropology, agronomy, and political ecology. Authors are in agreement that agroecology is not only agronomic practice but also a philosophical stance of a more harmonious relationship with nature, and the underpinnings of a social movement for food sovereignty. Several chapters argue against narrower definitions.

The book begins with a chapter by Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen that lays out the arguments for the transformative practices that authors favor. The editors situate themselves clearly in the debate about the scope of agroecology when they claim that the


“agroecology as natural science” perspective tends to privilege positivist science and Cartesian reductionism over other ways of knowing (e.g., holistic, indigenous, or local knowledge), and thus risks producing research that is not appropriate to local contexts and which ignores the larger power structures that impact farmer livelihood strategies. (p 8)

They are interested in incorporating political ecological critiques of rural development with agroecology, showing in their research how sociopolitical forces impinge on the choices farmers are able to make, and how a “politically engaged agroecology” is necessary to overcome these forces to create more sustainable and culturally embedded ways of life. The editors use two case studies, one in Vermont (which is revisited in greater detail in Chapter 11) and one in Nicaragua (with more detail provided in Chapter 12) to pull out opportunities, challenges, and lessons that came from the main results. The next three chapters emphasize agroecology as resistance to the industrialized food system (Gliessman), as a basis for transformation (Woodgate and Sevilla Guzmán), and as political ecology (González de Medina). These are followed by a chapter from the team that has been developing methods of teaching agroecology with Chuck Francis in Norway, a chapter by John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto on complexity in tradition and science (to be expanded in their forthcoming book *Ecological Complexity and Agroecology*), and a chapter by Eric Holt-Giménez and Miguel Altieri about the threat of co-optation of agroecology and food sovereignty by the new Green Revolution. The next six chapters are more place-specific, examining how agroecology is being used in Spain, the United States, and Mesoamerica, and how lessons from different places contribute to its development.

This book assembles contributions from some of the most outspoken and articulate academic advocates, practitioners, and analysts of agroecology (and most authors work across these realms). Many of them have worked together and mentored or influenced each other, so they share a common perspective on agroecology despite different disciplinary lenses. Individual chapters are consistently accessible and well-documented, and refer the reader to previous writing by these authors. Having chapters from this stellar group guarantees a strong and authoritative book on current thinking about agroecology and the development of the field. As a whole, this book might be seen as a field guide to agroecology 2016, i.e., a place where readers can discover the themes and topics that academics who identify with agroecology are/were thinking about at this point in time and how they construe its history. The chapters also stand alone, for example to describe the connections among ecology, complexity, traditional knowledge, and agroecology or to describe the advantages of agroecology to Nicaraguan coffee-growing communities.

That said, it is a little difficult to say what holds the chapters together into a coherent whole. All of them support participatory action research and the transdisciplinary nature of agroecology as science, practice, and movement. Yet these are standards of most contemporary agroecological work in the vein that these authors mine, not novel perspectives or new theoretical frameworks. The appearance of two chapters about

agroecology in the United States (one on links with urban agriculture and one on the Vermont climate change research that Méndez coordinates) is very welcome. More applications of agroecology in the heart of industrialized agriculture are needed, explaining the challenges and value of doing this work in the midst of a culture dominated by industrialized food systems. This may be one of the veins that future agroecologists will explore further.

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