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Book Review (Submitted by Cornelia Butler Flora) - Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing Agriculture in the Middle

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*Book Review: Food and the Mid Level Farm:
Renewing Agriculture in the Middle*

edited by [THOMAS A. LYSON](#), [G.W. STEVENSON](#), and [RICK WELSH](#)

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Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing Agriculture in the Middle, Edited by Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson, and Rick Welsh. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2008. ISBN # 978-0-262-12299-3. \$25 paper.

This book is a product of the Agriculture in the Middle Project (<http://www.agofthemiddle.org>). The first chapter, heartfelt and passionate, reads like a speech to the already convinced. Pointing to the decline of farms in the middle (between really small and over \$1 million in gross sales), they link that decline to the decline of food choice, easily accessible open space, wild life habitat, clean air, soils that hold rainwater for aquifers, decline in carbon sequestration, and tax increases. There is no data cited that link the mid-size farm to any of these public goods, although they do cite many philosophical arguments of why that should be so.

Given the premise that mid-level farms must be saved for the greater good, the authors set out some a series of strategies to reverse the decline. These strategies are of three types: organizational structures, mid-level supply chains to link to consumers who want high quality food with a face, and policies at a variety of levels. The case studies are well done – and in a number of cases demonstrate the faulty reasoning of associating All that is Good and True with agriculture in the middle.

The second chapter of the book acknowledges that mid-size farms are following the agribusiness model, but argues that it **could be** more democratic, culturally diverse and decentralized. Dahlberg then lays out the rather monumental changes that would need to take place for agriculture of the middle to meet its utopian potential.

The next section of the book presents organizational structure the **could** support an agriculture in the middle (cooperatives – yet to achieve that goal; relationship marketing, which has struggled to achieve higher and more stable prices for organic grain growers, contractual integration – clearly exploitative currently, but which could be a possibility if power relationship change and end up arguing for cooperatives.)

The third section, whose two chapters are based more on positive experiences of systemic change than the previous chapters, look at mechanisms for linking consumers and producers. Brady and O’Brady mention a few successes that have worked when enterprises are small and trust level high. Stevenson and Pirog layout a model in process: values-based supply chains.

The final section deals with policies that could support agriculture in the middle: laws that foster agricultural bargaining, antitrust and competitive market strategies, and agri-environmental payments, and international supply management. The first three strategies are shown to be inadequate to insure the survival of mid-sized farms, and the last strategy nearly impossible to implement.

In that section, Lyson's chapter on lessons learned from civic agriculture suggests the importance of local policy and the engagement of civil society, although it is not clear that agriculture in the middle will benefit as much as smaller farms producing for local markets.

In their concluding chapter, the editors argue that high quality unique food, separate from undifferentiated commodities, contains the seeds of hope for agriculture in the middle. Yet, as the appendix by Duffy makes clear, most of those mid-size farms raise undifferentiated commodities. It is doubtful that this volume, while inspiration to those who are part of the sustainable movement, will do much to convince them to shift from the security of the undifferentiated commodity market, particularly when the subsidies for corn ethanol are constantly increasing.

About the Editors:

Thomas A. Lyson was Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor of Development Sociology at Cornell University until his death in 2007. He was the author of *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community* (2004). [[back to top](#)]

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(Editor biographies taken from *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing Agriculture in the Middle*)