

## Civic Agriculture Through the Lens of Mary Parker Follett's Writings: Pulling at the Civic Roots of Civic Agriculture

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## **Abstract**

The deep connections between agriculture and democracy are rooted in American political thought since the time of the nation's founding, particularly in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. More recent efforts to connect agriculture and democracy are expressed in the ideas of civic agriculture and food democracy.

These 21<sup>st</sup> Century concepts renew interest in agriculture's contributions to the classic dilemmas of the individual's relationship to the community and the role of power in the American political system. This paper examines key elements of Thomas Lyson's model of civic agriculture and how the work of the late 19th and early 20th century social and political theorist, Mary Parker Follett, provides a foundation for Lyson's work. The objective is to build upon civic agriculture theory by exploring the model's connections to Follett's theories on the group process, community, power, and expertise, and how her concepts apply to food system examples. Follett's theories provide support for civic agriculture's potential to build community, develop civic capacity, and recast power. The paper also examines links among Lyson, Follett, and Neva Hassanein's 2008 description of food democracy. An underlying theme is that civic agriculture neighborhoods may coalesce within larger communities, and these neighborhoods may help participants acquire the skills of civic association and collective problem-solving. The skills learned by participants in civic agriculture neighborhood groups may yield benefits for food democracy at regional, national, and global levels, as well as democracy more generally. This paper is intended to enhance current efforts in food system policy and advocacy.

## **Keywords**

Civic agriculture, food democracy

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## Abstract

The deep connections between agriculture and democracy are rooted in American political thought since the time of the nation's founding, particularly in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. More recent efforts to connect agriculture and democracy are expressed in the ideas of civic agriculture and food democracy. These 21<sup>st</sup> Century concepts renew interest in agriculture's contributions to the classic dilemmas of the individual's relationship to the community and the role of power in the American political system. This paper examines key elements of Thomas Lyson's model of civic agriculture and how the work of the late 19th and early 20th century social and political theorist, Mary Parker Follett, provides a foundation for Lyson's work. The objective is to build upon civic agriculture theory by exploring the model's connections to Follett's theories on the group process, community, power, and expertise, and how her concepts apply to food system examples. Follett's theories provide support for civic agriculture's potential to build community, develop civic capacity, and recast power. The paper also examines links among Lyson, Follett, and Neva Hassanein's 2008 description of food democracy. An underlying theme is that civic agriculture neighborhoods may coalesce within larger communities, and these neighborhoods may help participants acquire the skills of civic association and collective problem-solving. The skills learned by participants in civic agriculture neighborhood groups may yield benefits for food democracy at regional, national, and global levels, as well as democracy more generally. This paper is intended to enhance current efforts in food system policy and advocacy.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2000 Thomas Lyson proposed the notion of civic agriculture. Civic agriculture is considered a local system of agriculture and food production, which binds producers and consumers together by place and contributes to a community's social, economic, and political health (Lyson, 2004). The instruments of civic agriculture are varied and include farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and community gardens (Lyson, 2000). These forms of farming are connected by their shared purpose of agricultural problem-solving through local food systems (Lyson, 2004). They are food production activities that are embedded in the community (Lyson, 2004). The focus of civic agriculture has been on revitalizing rural areas, but agriculture rooted in the community may take place in rural or urban communities. The common thread is a sense of connectedness among people, and between people and the earth. This sense of connectedness can be achieved in urban areas through home gardens, community gardens, farmers markets, and through ongoing relationships with farmers on the urban fringes. Thus, the core concepts of civic agriculture are relevant for urban food systems as well as rural communities.

The civic agriculture model was developed largely in reaction to industrialized agriculture, which blossomed after World War II and continues today. Key characteristics of conventional or commodity agriculture include an emphasis on efficiency, productivity, profit, globalized markets, scientific expertise, free-market forces, and individualism (Lyson, 2004). In contrast, civic agriculture emphasizes social and economic equity, community welfare, and local and regional markets (Lyson, 2004). Lyson's model of civic agriculture is intended to fill the economic gaps left

by large-scale industrial producers while also contributing to the well-being of communities (Lyson, 2008).

Since the concept of civic agriculture was first introduced, scholars have attempted to determine if small-scale agriculture can in fact strengthen social ties and community (Obach and Tobin, 2014). A recent 2021 literature review on civic agriculture by Allison Kaika and Alexis Racelis (2021), however, concludes that there are “considerable gaps” (p. 551) in understanding the relationship between civic agriculture and key indicators of civic community theory such as concentration of power, community cohesion, and civic engagement.

This paper intends to narrow the theoretical gaps between civic agriculture and civic theory by examining the writings of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholar Mary Parker Follett whose work connects agriculture to community building and civic capacity. Mary Parker Follett’s writings are a natural starting point for theory-building related to civic agriculture. Follett (1868 – 1933) was a progressive era social philosopher known for her work in management theory (Morse, 2006). She also made significant contributions to political theory and public administration that are less well known (Morse, 2006), but her ideas have had a lasting impact. There are echoes of Follett’s work in contemporary theories of conflict management, social capital, and communitarian thought. Follett’s writings provide the intellectual heritage for many of the theories used to explain the civic component of civic agriculture, thus a closer look at her writings may help inform future theory building.

Lyson’s model of civic agriculture overlaps with Follett’s work at several points, but three major intersections will be examined: 1) Building community through direct relationships in a group process to promote community-based problem solving, 2) Building civic capacity at the local level while considering food production and consumption as civic activities, and 3) Moderating power inherent in conventional models of agriculture. Finally, the paper will look at how civic agriculture and Follett’s writings relate to the more encompassing concept of food democracy.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Foundations of building community: direct relationships for community-based problem solving**

A foundational principle of civic agriculture is that we need to reorient attention from the individual to the community in agriculture (Lyson, 2004). The conventional model of agriculture is driven by individuals who are free to pursue their self-interest and free-market forces serving national or international markets (Lyson, 2000, 2004). The focus is on individual self-interest (Lyson, 2004). Civic agriculture, on the other hand, emphasizes developing community by forging direct links between the producer and consumer through local market outlets (Lyson, 2000).

Although there are important differences, civic agriculture and conventional agriculture share a fundamental feature in common—they are both based on economic relationships between producers and consumers. The civic aspect of civic agriculture, however, is realized through the direct relationships between community members as opposed to indirect relationships among strangers. In civic agriculture, the farmers’ private interests are arguably harmonized with common interests as the result of the direct relationships between producer and consumer in local agricultural markets.

The claim that civic agriculture truly shifts attention from the individual to the community, however, is controversial and has been challenged. For example, Laura B. DeLind (2002) suggests that the civic part of civic agriculture needs to be more fully developed if it wishes to distinguish itself from the conventional model of agriculture. She argues that “because the ‘we’ rarely replaces the ‘I’ (except in an instrumental economic sense), civic agriculture manifests many of the same contradictions that characterize conventional agriculture” (DeLind, 2002, p. 219). She explains that civic agriculture is built upon the traditional market relationships of producer and consumer; it embraces the ideas of private enterprise, ownership, and accumulation (DeLind, 2002).

The economic nature of the relationship between the producer and consumer and the fact that each may have different interests, however, does not preclude these relationships from building civic capacity either. In civic agriculture it is not the type of activity (economic), but the direct interrelating among individuals on routine matters, that has the potential to build community. As explained by Brian K. Obach and Kathleen Tobin (2014), civic agriculture is primarily about an exchange of goods, but the way that the exchange is organized can influence how we act as citizens. Follett's concepts of circular response and integration help explain why the organization of civic agriculture can potentially build community in a way that is not possible through conventional agriculture. The ability of interests to confront one another, integrate, and relate at the local level in civic agriculture is more important than the fact that the transactions are economic.

Two foundational concepts in Follett's writing--circular response and integration--are essential for understanding how the individual (I) and the group (We) are related in group processes. Circular response is the idea that individuals have a reciprocal relationship with their social environment (Fry and Raadschelders, 2008). We affect our social environment while also being affected by it (Fry and Raadschelders, 2008). Follett contends that:

We cannot put the individual on one side and society on the other, we must understand the complete interrelation of the two. Each has no value, no existence without the other. The individual is created by the social process and is daily nourished by that process. (1918, pp. 61-62)

For Follett, the individual and the group are deeply connected.

Follett also recognizes that interrelating among people can lead to conflict. People have different interests and conflict is unavoidable (Follett, 1925/1982a). Follett (1925/1982a) suggests three ways that conflict can be managed—through domination, compromise, or integration. Follett considers domination and compromise to be suboptimal solutions. Domination is not a successful long-term strategy, and compromise requires each party to sacrifice something (Follett, 1925/1982a). Follett argues throughout her writings in favor of integration. Integration occurs when interests confront each other, neither party sacrifices anything, and something new is created from the differences (Follett, 1924; Fox and Urwick, 1982). Follett views conflict as inevitable, but conflict can be used to develop creative solutions.

Follett's concepts of circular response and integration align with Lyson's description of civic agriculture as "networks of producers who are bound together by place" that are part of the "community's *problem-solving capacity*" (Lyson, 2004, p. 63). Lyson's (2004) depiction of civic agriculture as a network of individuals tied together evokes the idea of a social process where individuals are affected by as well as affecting the group in a circular process. In both small scale and large-scale food systems, the producer, consumer, and other community members may all have different interests that may not initially be in harmony. However, one can imagine food problems being solved through a process that enables different interests to confront and integrate, when one party, such as a large industrial producer or local government, is not dominating. Food producers, who are used to competing, may be better able to resolve conflicts through integration and cooperation. Producers and consumers who are used to bargaining may be able to develop solutions that are more holistic. Producers, consumers, and citizens can confront, integrate, solve community problems, and potentially build community. For example, food policy councils are forums where individuals with different interests, including different economic interests, can come together to solve a variety of issues related to food. Food policy councils are one mechanism for assessing, initiating, and integrating food policy issues (Raja et al., 2008). Food council members may confront, integrate, and cooperate to develop solutions that contribute to the community.

## **Building civic capacity: local units and agricultural production and consumption as civic activities**

One of the central principles of civic agriculture is that it is smaller in scale and is part of the community (Lyson, 2000). Follett, like Lyson, believes that small groups are critical. They hold the key to democracy (Follett, 1924). Follett claims that “the small group [then] is where we shall find the inner meaning of democracy, its very heart and core” (Follett, 1924, pp. 225-226). The neighborhood group, for example, is where the individual learns to relate to society through experiences and it is where we learn “the rules of the game” of association, which Follett argues is the “game of life” (Follett, 1918, p. 193). Follett emphasizes the neighborhood group as the foundation for the broader system of representation (Fry and Raadschelders, 2008). In civic agriculture, local farmers and other community members who choose to participate in local food systems may be considered members of a civic agricultural neighborhood, even within a larger community, town, or city that relies on industrial agriculture and the global food economy. These civic agriculture neighborhoods may enable community members to learn the conventions and practices of association, which may eventually benefit the broader community.

Follett’s ideas regarding collective action and governance have been expressed in the work of Elinor Ostrom (Roll and Thomas, 2014). Ostrom, like Follett, examines how people come together to find solutions, but Ostrom also looks at how people solve problems related to common resources (Jenkins et al., 2021). Ostrom’s link between human problem solving and common resources is important, when considering civic agriculture as one element of a broader sustainable ecological system. Ostrom shares several beliefs in common with Follett: 1) Communication and coordination lead to shared norms, ideals, and institutions, 2) Efficient solutions may arise when individuals collaborate, and 3) Institutions tend to be more successful when the community participates in designing them (Roll and Thomas, 2014). Importantly, Follett and Ostrom share that:

From acts of self-governance, different parties can successfully integrate with each other by creating institutions to formalize their collective solutions. This integration benefits not only the community but also the broader and more formalized levels of government. (Roll and Thomas, 2014, p. 175)

In other words, it is feasible for civic agriculture neighborhoods to integrate and develop collective solutions that eventually provide benefits to the community and beyond.

Additionally, and perhaps controversially, agriculture and food production may be within the scope of civic activity. DeLind (2002) is particularly concerned with the tendency to consider production and consumption to be civic activities. Follett, however, is generous in her interpretation of what constitutes politics and the practice of citizenship: “the work we do, the conditions of that work, the houses in which we live, the water we drink, the food we eat. . .that in fact the whole area of our daily life should constitute politics” (1918, p. 189). She further argues that we should exercise citizenship in our daily activities (Follett, 1918). Citizenship is not a right, duty, or privilege, but an activity that we should be engaged in all the time (Follett, 1918). For Follett (1918), there is not a separation between public and private life since politics shapes our lives.

Decades after Follett, Robert Putnam (2000) expanded upon the links between routine associations and civic capacity through social capital theory. Social capital theory demystifies the connections between routine forms of association at the local level, such as agricultural exchanges, and the development of civic capacity. Putnam’s (2000) thesis on social capital, as explained in his well-known work *Bowling Alone*, is that social networks, and the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise from them, have value for individuals and groups. Even informal social connections are associated with our willingness to work toward the common good (Putnam, 2000). Follett’s writings support the underlying principles of social capital and civic infrastructure (Morse 2006). Ricardo S. Morse explains that Follett’s argument that we cannot separate thought and action supports the idea that we build community by “stimulat[ing] community-oriented activity wherever and however possible. Over time, the cumulative effect of ever-increasing engagement

will result in more civic-minded citizens” (2006, p. 11). Follett and Putnam see value in deep networks of social exchange at the community level where people build trust and the norms of reciprocity, and this trust can potentially extend beyond personal relationships to the broader community.

Following Follett’s and Putnam’s line of reasoning, community-oriented activities that take place routinely, even community-oriented economic activities such as community supported agriculture and farmers markets, have the potential to build citizenship and civic capacity. The key is building trust and norms of reciprocity. Kenneth Arrow explained 50 years ago that “Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time” (1972, p. 357; Putnam, 2000, p. 288). Routine economic activities have the potential to build trust and reciprocity, which contribute to social capital. This is more likely to take place in more closely knit environments where relationships and reputations are at stake (Putnam 2000), such as local communities.

### **The heart of the matter: power**

Power is at the heart of the distinction between conventional agriculture and civic agriculture. Economic and political power are concentrated in conventional agriculture, but they are dispersed in civic agriculture (Lyson, 2004). According to Basil Bornemann and Sabine Weiland (2019), a critical issue in the contemporary food system is the concentration of economic and political power. They examine how challenges to the concentrated system of power in the food system may be met through empowerment (Bornemann and Weiland, 2019). They argue that empowerment occurs along a continuum of empowerment to, empowerment with, and empowerment over (Bornemann and Weiland, 2019). Bornemann and Weiland (2019) conclude that a blend of all three forms of empowerment is needed for a more democratized food system.

Power is also at the center of Follett’s work. It is closely connected to the concepts of circular response and integration. Whether in business or politics, Follett (1925/1982b) argues that it is possible, preferable, and more legitimate to develop power with others rather than power over others. She explains that legitimate power is power with that is built up through the process of circular response and integration (Follett, 1925/1982b). For Follett, legitimate power is “almost the heart of the whole matter” (1925/1982b, p. 76).

Power over others can be prevented through the process of interests confronting and integrating their desires (Follett, 1925/1982b). Follett (1925/1982b) concedes that we may not be able to eliminate power over, but it can be reduced through the process of integration. Similarly, in civic agriculture, power with others is possible through a local system of food production and consumption which focuses on community problem solving. Food policy councils, farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and community gardens may not fully replace conventional agriculture, but if they are organized in a way that encourages power with others, their presence may help reduce the power over inherent in the current food production system. For example, if local governments embrace the idea of power with the local food system instead of power over it, then they may be able to grow local economies by integrating rather than compromising or dominating. Bornemann and Weiland (2019) supply a more positive, or at least pragmatic, perspective on power over by explaining that it can be necessary for new political authority to be recognized.

A final area of intersection between civic agriculture and Follett’s writings is expertise, which is also related to power. One of Lyson’s (2000) characteristics of civic agriculture is that producers rely less on best management practices and more on indigenous knowledge. Follett is equally concerned with the role of experts and even dedicates the first chapter of her book, *Creative Experience* (1924), to the topic. Follett specifically addresses the role of expertise in agriculture:

The present aim of many agricultural experts—to get the farmer to follow their formulae blindly—is in line with all the over-emphasis today on the expert. But the better way is to

find out how to combine the experience of the agricultural colleges and that of the farmers.  
(1924, p. 19)

Follett (1924) believes that expertise is required, but we also need to understand how we relate to the expert. Society needs everyone's experience and democracy requires it (Follett, 1924).

### **Food democracy**

Food democracy is a concept that is broader in scope and scale than civic agriculture. It involves citizens shaping agro-food policies at multiple levels from the local to the global (Hassanein, 2008). Although more encompassing, food democracy intersects with Follett's and Lyson's ideas at several points and thus deserves attention.

As Neva Hassanein (2008) explains, meaningful participation by individuals to influence the food system involves four dimensions: gaining knowledge, sharing ideas, developing efficacy, and caring about the common good. Each dimension is related to Follett's and Lyson's writings.

1. Knowledge – Knowledge of the food system has been limited by powerful interests, but citizens require knowledge as part of food democracy (Hassanein, 2008). Follett's (1925/1982b) notion of power with versus power over is related to democratizing food knowledge at the local level to support civic agriculture and the national and global levels to support food democracy.
2. Sharing ideas – Citizens need to be able to discuss and deliberate to make better decisions in food democracy (Hassanein, 2008). The acts of discussion and deliberation align with Follett's concepts of circular response and integration. Follett's and Lyson's forums for decision-making and problem-solving are more localized than the national and global forums envisioned by food democracy. However, the type of local problem-solving and community building envisioned by Follett and Lyson can arguably enhance local democracy, which may serve as a building block for food democracy at regional, national, and global levels.
3. Developing efficacy & 4. Common good – Food democracy requires citizen engagement in shaping their relationship with food and there must be public work to solve food problems (Hassanein, 2008). Public work involves people producing in support of the common good and gaining confidence (Hassanein, 2008). Citizens also need to recognize their interdependence and think beyond their self-interest to promote the common good (Hassanein, 2008). Dimensions 3 and 4 suggest that community relationships are as important as, or perhaps even more important than, individual economic self-interests, which is an underlying theme of both Follett's and Lyson's writings.

Food democracy is a broad call to action for citizens to participate in shaping food systems at all levels. Civic agriculture, on the other hand, emphasizes the local food systems and the relationships among local producers and consumers that have the potential to enhance community. The scope and focus of the concepts are different, but both are concerned with power imbalances, the use of deliberation for problem solving, promoting the common good, and identifying various forms of food problem-solving as public work. When viewed through the lens of Follett's work, the concepts have many common themes. Finally, the concepts support one another. The development of civic agriculture neighborhoods, where people learn the rules of association, may arguably serve as an important step toward broader food democracy.

### **CONCLUSION**

There are multiple parallels between Follett's writings and Lyson's concept of civic agriculture, and this paper only begins the discussion of the connections.



**Table 1. Parallels between Mary Parker Follett’s writings and civic agriculture**

| Follett’s Writings (1918, 1924, 1925/1982a &b) | Civic Agriculture (Lyson, 2000, 2004, 2008)                      |
|--|--|
| Circular response and integration              | Networks of local producers engaged in community problem solving |
| The small group as the core of democracy       | Community and place-based focus                                  |
| Normal activities are part of politics         | Agricultural activities as civic activities                      |
| Power with instead of power over               | Dispersed versus concentrated power                              |
| Everyone’s experience is needed                | Indigenous knowledge over expertise                              |

Continued examination of the links between Follett’s work and the underlying principles of civic agriculture may help to strengthen the civic elements of civic agricultural theory. Follett’s theories demonstrate how communities and civic capacity are created through citizens engaging in routine activities, working directly with one another, confronting their differences, and integrating those differences to produce something new. Follett shows how power with others is authentic power and the experience of both laypeople and experts is needed. Her writings provide support for why civic agriculture has the potential to build communities and civic capacity in ways not possible through the conventional agricultural model. Finally, the broad concept of food democracy supports the principles of civic agriculture, especially when connected through Follett’s ideas.

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