

A small farm future

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About the author

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You don't need to be too obsessed with current affairs to appreciate that modern global civilization is running into various crises: the sources of its material culture are dwindling, so are the sinks for its wastes and pollution, while growing inequalities and dwindling faith in existing politics are prompting profound social crises worldwide.

One response to this modern crisis is to double down on the ideologies that have prompted it. The keywords here are ones like progress, science, growth, money, trade, prosperity, control. If only we can augment the good aspects of these things while curtailing the bad through greater technical control, the argument runs, then we can barrel through the present crisis towards a better tomorrow.

Like many, I find that argument increasingly unpersuasive. Humans are inventive at creating symbolic systems (such as money or social status) that create intense linkages between ourselves and that bring forth intense activity, but neither the ecological base nor our own social systems can sustain them long-term. This tendency has been turbocharged in recent centuries by the development of global grain farming and trading, the exploitation of fossil fuels, and the development of fluid global investment capital. Together, these have largely broken the possibilities for people to emplace themselves locally in renewable ways that enrich both human and non-human life.

We can create alternative linkages that rebuild those possibilities – but there is no simple path for doing so and no singular point of arrival at an ecocentric society. Some people dismiss the idea that there are trade-offs between different desired ends as an ideological fiction of right-wing

economics, but unfortunately this isn't so. Trade-offs abound in the natural world. They are why penguins can dive deeper than puffins, but are unable to fly. More pertinently for present human dilemmas, they are why farmers can produce a torrent of cheap nutritional energy from grain fields, but at the cost of much ploughing, weeding, greenhouse gas emissions, soil and wildlife destruction – and at the cost of human health.

It's worth looking at how preindustrial and other low-energy societies have confronted these trade-offs historically. Typically, they did so in most parts of the world through mixed farming strategies that carefully optimized the relationships between woodlands, fields, pastures, gardens and livestock (raised primarily for the ecological work they did on the farm, not for their meat), with the farm household as the hub of these ecological flows. We could do worse than learning from these examples of small farm societies – as inspirations rather than as blueprints. They point to primarily horticultural strategies of household and locality self-provisioning, with strictly limited flows of non-local capital.

These strategies in turn raise some trade-offs of human society. How to balance the farm household as an ecological unit with the autonomy of its members, particularly women? And how to balance the autonomy of the farm household with its need to work collectively for wider social purposes? We surely need to be debating such questions more urgently than we presently are.

We're not debating them presently because the political landscape is dominated by unprecedentedly centralized states presiding over vast mass societies and orchestrating the flow of resources

across them in ways that are obstructive of creating local ecological livelihoods and inimical to more ecocentric views of our agency. Practically, politically, ideologically, the prospects for a small farm society often seem impossible or absurd in the face of this present reality. Yet many of these states are already mired in potentially terminal crises of political legitimacy and economic turbulence, with waning power to organize political space across their nominal territories. The need to create institutions to secure livelihood renewably from the local ecological base

and to forge associated political cultures within the vacuum of the modernist state may be upon many of us sooner than we think.

This is the context in which – if we play a skilful hand – we may just be able to wrest a more civic ecological order out of the present crisis. What this looks like on the ground is a small farm future, as I examine in more detail in my book *A Small Farm Future: Making the case for a society built around local economies, self-provisioning, agricultural diversity and a shared Earth* (Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT, USA, 2020). ■

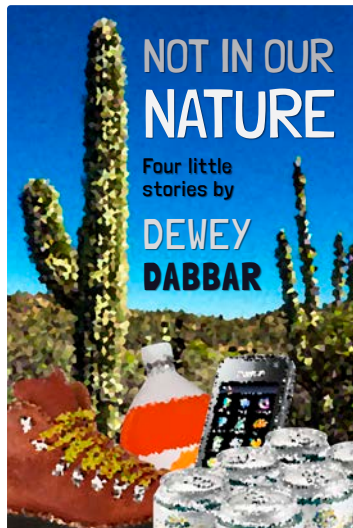
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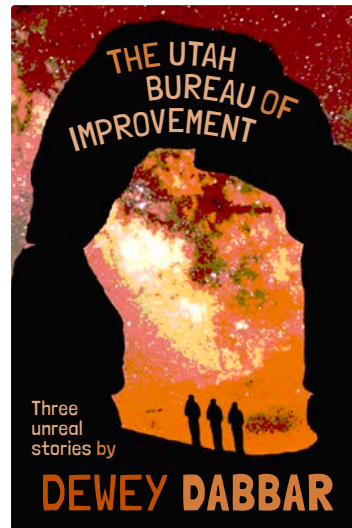
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