



Economies of Trust

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One way that economies can transform us is when opportunities are created for producers and consumers to go beyond their usual roles.

The actual point of exchange can in some cases be the place where this transformation happens-- where we can experience a new awareness and feel within ourselves a different economic identity start to emerge. With this idea of transformation in mind, I have begun to investigate what I call Economies of Trust.

Much has been said and written of the culture of fear that has dominated American politics since 9/11. It's not just potential terrorists that we are to be wary of though--we're also encouraged to fear a host of others, from identity

thieves to child-predators. In the commercial sector, the industries of mistrust (locks, alarms, paper shredders, surveillance cameras, etc.) are flourishing. Many people make their living by selling products or services that rely on widespread mistrust.

But despite what seems to be a growing culture of fear in the U.S., I've decided instead to explore a culture of trust and see if, in its own quiet way, it is also growing. My research focuses on a vibrant trust-based economy that exists where I live in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts: Farm Stands.

The tradition of farm stands enables farmers to sell their produce "direct"-- at the same location as it was grown--with no middleman, thus making a higher profit. Since many of these farmers are either too busy to staff their farm stands or are away from the farm itself--working other more lucrative jobs--many farm stands must operate on an honor-system. Therefore farm stands represent an economy which is based on trust.

In Western Massachusetts farm stands of varying sizes are both abundant and prolific. Why are they so popular? Why do people start farm stands? Mark Lattanzi, a staff member of the regional advocacy group Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), explains, "they have the legal permission to do so and they have the economic incentive to do so...and there's a growing culture and interest in buying produce directly from farmers." *And CISA has itself played a big part in promoting this culture of buying local.*

It is true that some farm stands are staffed (often by teens), but in pursuit of investigating more genuine economies of trust, the farm stands I've studied rely entirely on the honor system for transactions. This means no one is watching the stand. So in place of a cashier and a cash register, there might be an old tackle box, a jar, coffee can or bucket -- and it's up to the customer to put in the correct amount.

The abundance of farm stands in Western Massachusetts form a type of community economy which has several noteworthy characteristics, which I will describe in detail. Most important perhaps is that this trust-based exchange system is fundamentally different from our usual methods of purchasing. The honor-system exchange provides both the producer and consumer a different way of experiencing and considering each other's character, each other's needs, each other's vulnerabilities.

In Massachusetts, state laws permit farmers to sell direct from land that is zoned agricultural—but many other folks also operate farm stands who don't have "ag-zoned" land. So farm stands represent informal temporary (seasonal) economic realms set up by individuals. Like tag sales or lemonade stands, farm stands are often so informal that they are largely un-regulated.

Their physical infrastructure is informal too--a few planks are nailed together to form a table. Covering the table might be an old patio umbrella or other

makeshift roof which shades the various vegetables, eggs, berries, goat cheese, maple syrup, flowers, holiday wreaths, etc. These are usually grown or produced on the premises—but sometimes bought or traded locally (laws stipulate that the majority of items sold at a farm stand must have been produced on-site—this is to discourage farm stand operators from becoming simply retailers rather than producers). The following noteworthy characteristics attempt to describe and explain the ability of these farm stands to operate and usually thrive on trust.

Uninhabited

Many farm stands have an unusual quality of being uninhabited: no owners, no employees, no anyone. They are sites where goods are sold but where only the customer is present. “Sounds like a vending machine” one might think. But farm stands reflect specific farming cultural characteristics of the regions they are located in. Unlike a “Coke machine” which offers items marketed and sold in a globalized economy, farm stands are tied to geography, tied to seasons, to climate, and to cultural traditions (i.e. pumpkins for Halloween, etc.)

Conspicuous

Most farm stands are located on high-visibility arterial roads. Their presence encourages proliferation. If someone is running a farm stand down the road from you—why not you too? And for customers—the abundance of farm stands acts as a strong validation for this particular sector of the agricultural economy.

Personal/Educational

From the earliest stages of my research I discovered that in several cases farm stands have been set up by parents for their children to run or participate in. Parents want to provide their children with an income generating opportunity based on producing goods rather than the more typical providing of services--like mowing lawns or babysitting. Parents who start farm stands for their kids also appear to value the educational experience of having their children grow and sell products within their own geographic or cultural communities. Participating in honor-system transactions introduces children to the concept that an economy could be based not on fear, growth and competition but on fairness, sufficiency and trust. Says one farm stand operator:

“I think it’s a really important lesson for kids—a lesson that most kids in this country miss. My husband being from somewhere else and having immigrated—from a place where people are really poor--really feels its important that the kids know that nothing comes for free--and it’s work. And I think that they have learned that.” And in many cases the child might become a more visible contributor to his neighborhood. One teen I spoke with said he didn’t realize that his farm stand “would get so famous”.

Vulnerable

Farm stands are vulnerable. But as the pioneering urban theorist William H. Whyte observed, it is often this vulnerability and openness that breeds positive behavior. Whyte advocated that managers of public space should trust the public more readily and was famous for convincing managers of Bryant Park in New York City to put out moveable chairs—rather than bolt them down. Years later, it's still a successful approach. Whyte also noted that parks and playgrounds which are fenced and gated create a dynamic of suspicion amongst users. In stark contrast, farm stands present themselves as defenseless sites.

“Put money here”, “Please pay for what you take”--these are the gentle reminders posted at farm stands that help the honor-system to work. At one farm stand a metal sign hangs on a rusted wire and offers the following message: “Security -- God on watch --all the time.” Another farm stand operator I interviewed had actually set up a mock surveillance camera as an experiment to deter theft—but ironically continued to receive payments in an old coffee can. Though he was experimenting with fortifying his own security system, he also worried that this camera might be seen as an insult by the vast majority of his customers who were honest and loyal.



Defenseless sites in an overly defensive society

Most farm stand operators found that security was enhanced if the stand was located close to their house. Therefore if a roadside farm stand experienced too

much theft—then a common response was for the farmer to move the stand closer to their residence. Most of us see the roadside as a public space or perhaps even some sort of “no-man’s land”. But we see the home as a private space. So, it is interesting to notice that with farm stands, the economy of trust is more successful in private space than in public space. The roadside after all is a place where we might be tempted to throw trash, but its unlikely that we’d throw trash on our neighbor’s lawn. So even with farm stands, we see a bit of tragedy of the commons.

Fortifying the physical vulnerability of farm stands is the awareness by many customers that hard physical work is synonymous with growing and harvesting food. This notion implores customers to honor the farmers effort with respect, conscientiousness—and fair payment. Said one farm stand operator: “I think people have in the back of their mind, that farming is kind of a long and hard road...and they’re more than happy to put the money in.”

Intimate

In addition to being vulnerable, farm stands often provide a glimpse of the farmers personal space. Most farm stands are located on the premises of the farmers own property, many are located on a front yard, and some are even located at the farmers house—for example, on the front porch. So a visit to a farm stand can also be a fairly intimate look at someone else’s living space, and this intimacy breeds trust.

Accessible and Transformative

Though farm stands are typically placed on private property, they are purposely very accessible. There is an interesting and transformative role reversal that takes place at farm stands where the customer must also become the clerk, cashier, and bagger. In some cases, the customer must even become the field worker too—(since some farm stands offer “Pick-your-Own” fruits or vegetables.) This role reversal can stimulate for the consumer a heightened class consciousness, and a chance to momentarily step into the shoes of the farm worker.

Many farm stands function like rural convenience stores where selections and transactions can be made quickly and quietly. Farm stands help save resources by selling at the site of production rather than transporting first to a wholesale distributor and then on to a retailer. Thus, the comparison of “food miles” between products at a farm stand and a typical convenience store demonstrate how vastly more sustainable farm stands are.

Solitary

Except for the occasional running into a fellow customer or perhaps the farmer himself, shopping at a farm stand is a solitary activity. Financial constraints, and in some cases personal preference, have driven farmers to value labor in the field (producing goods) more highly than labor spent sitting at the farm stand (service sector). This marks an historical shift in approaches to farm sales. In the past, farmers were not invisible and participated in more of a “meet and greet” form of exchange with their customers.

Small-Scale (Occasionally Miniscule)

Some farm stands operate on a scale so small they barely seem to qualify as a business at all. This might mean that the stand is offering only a tiny inventory of one product and nothing else-- a few small flower bouquets, a couple dozen eggs, three baskets of blueberries for example. So in these cases the term “farmer” seems like quite an exaggeration; probably “gardener” would be more accurate.

These micro-scale farm stands beg the important question: why? If monetary gain is marginal, then what are some of the other motivations for farm stand operators? A need to contribute to their community, a reluctance to let surplus go to waste, a desire to “feel” like a farmer –these are some of the reasons I documented.

Farm stand income is often used for a specially designated purpose: i.e. kid’s college fund, a trip to Australia, a nest-egg for future land purchase (for a couple who lives in a rented mobile home) this all leads to a fragile situation where little bits of money are supporting big dreams. Perhaps money earned this way is infused with a greater sense of possibility?

Communicative

Though minimal, signage is important to the success of most farm stands. Advertising is not absent from farm stands, but its rustic presentation pointedly rejects, whether intentionally or not, the legacy of corporate slickness. Instead it is done “in-house” and may only consist of a large hand-painted sign reading “Fresh Eggs” or felt-pen scrawled on a piece of cardboard stating “Sweet Corn, Our Favorite.” The overt lack of advertising and of promotional pretense underscores the element of trust. Farm stands operate based on an *unspoken notion* which might be something like “you know this is good fresh food, grown right here, at a very fair price” and indeed this appears to be all that customers need to know.

Radically Informal

Farm stands as an economic sector defy easy classification or comparison to other sectors because they are often un-regulated, idiosyncratic, non-growth oriented, non-networked, temporary (seasonal), and non-capitalist. In short, the farm stand economy doesn't seem to behave or aspire to behave like other market economies. And despite its radical informality as an economic sector, it does provide a significant means for production and consumption of agricultural products.

Promoting Exchanges Based on Trust

It's interesting to note that when I interviewed various farm stand operators they generally referred to their stands as "self-service" rather than "honor-system". None of those I interviewed outright rejected the term "honor-system", but it is worth noting that the term "self-service" emphasizes a more neutral functionality. "Honor-system" on the other hand, denotes a method of exchange that is clearly based on personal responsibility and ethics. There appeared at times a reluctance for farmers to discuss the uncomfortable issue of mistrust or exploitation (theft). Rather the most appealing topic for interviewees to discuss was what they grew and how much the customers appreciated their products.

At various times during this research, I worried that my inquiries might make my subjects too self-conscious about trust. I felt that the notion of trust might be best left undisturbed and that calling attention to it might be like mentioning to a tightrope walker that there was no net below—perhaps a self-destructive fear would set in, and those using unlocked cash boxes would convert to heavy locked boxes, etc. Fortunately, by the conclusion of my first study I felt that I had provoked more thought about trust amongst my subjects but hadn't actually damaged the fragile foundation of trust itself. Ultimately, some interviewees admitted to being very trusting with their farm stands *and* with society in general, while others simply said that most customers paid their money and that was good enough for them.

Neuroeconomist Paul Zak, who studies trust in economics, has pointed out that exchanges based on trust are apparent (though not necessarily commonplace) even within the business dealings of huge corporations. However, the level of trust inherent in farm stand economy is fundamental, and explicit, and has a potential to strengthen a larger sense of trust within local communities. Perhaps it can even have a ripple effect into other communities.

My ongoing research on farm stands has broadened my awareness of the possibilities for proliferation, not just of farm stands, but of other trust-based economies. One interesting example is a café called Terra Bite which recently opened in Seattle, Washington. Like rural farm stands this urban café also uses the honor system for transactions. The café features a food and drink menu, staff who take and prepare orders, and a place to eat. What they've chosen *not* to

include is a price list. *It is up to the customer to decide* how much they want to pay—if at all. Terra Bite says patrons “are encouraged to pay what they would elsewhere” however, they add “we also cheerfully serve those who cannot pay, in a non-stigmatizing customer setting...” Early reports suggest that consumers appreciate this transformation of roles and the ethical reciprocity of exchange it presents. The café is a place where they can trust and feel trusted. So far, the café’s income seems to be comparable to traditional cafes where trust is not a featured item on the menu. The café has generated lots of fans who are deeply moved by the trust concept and many of them express interest in this as an inspiring business model which should be replicated.

One customer’s comment listed on the café’s website succinctly expressed the power of trust: “When I see good, I like to do good. ...” . Though Terra Bite has received a lot of visibility from the press, there are also other examples of honor-system restaurants in Berkeley, California, London, England, Ahmedabad, India. The goals of justice, equality, solidarity and sustainability may seem lofty as cornerstones to our economy. But honor-system based exchanges provide us with a practice space for the act of trusting, and certainly trust is a prerequisite to realizing those goals.

All photos: Ted White