

REVIEW

A review of “*Farming Inside Invisible Worlds: Modernist Agriculture and Its Consequences*”

Campbell, H. (2021). *Farming inside invisible worlds: Modernist agriculture and its consequences*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Review Authors

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We review Hugh Campbell’s (2021) book about modern agriculture with four motivations. Firstly, its narrative and environmental message concerns our home country Aotearoa New Zealand and how we live, feed ourselves, and participate in society and the economy. Nearly three-quarters of our national income and over half the country’s greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture. Second, co-writing from our positions as Māori (Indigenous first author) and non-Māori (settler second author) academics we are deeply inscribed in the contested and intersecting rural, colonial-imperial and environmental narratives around us. Thinking about how we transform and adapt, this feels like a positive exchange even while anticipating a dire climatic and environmental future in our country, not just globally. Third, changes in farming and rural society as a result of the history that Campbell describes so well and so particularly, are currently afoot willingly and unwillingly. Fourth, both authors and Campbell himself grew up on farms in different parts of the country; we all speak as both insiders and with experiences outside conventional ‘farm talk’, with great affection for our rural compatriots even as we advocate for better ways of farming.

The aim of the book is relatively simple. As a social scientist, Campbell writes to academics and those already familiar and willing to listen to new ways of understanding agriculture as part of thinking through all the major aspects of society, politics and economy. These are certain to change as climate and environmental impacts worsen. Campbell’s farm-boy upbringing means he speaks with front-line knowledge and understanding. His observations apply to much of today’s social science conversations that bring together the big picture angles on climate and environmental degradation. What Campbell has to say is very important, not just to Aotearoa New Zealand, but to the global reframing of all the everyday and commonplace activities that modern societies have come to accept and naturalise, including activities which are not sustainable, specifically modern farming.

In five chapters Campbell unpacks his three-stage model of agriculture using Aotearoa New Zealand to illustrate the story of agriculture world-wide. Chapter one deploys the abstract idea of ontology (i.e., what is real?) — what is the reality of modern farming; moving past naturalising either the nostalgia or the ideology of farms as a heroic struggle or as the good life. Chapter two explores the uncomfortable interface between a Māori Aotearoa and a colonial New Zealand. The historic destruction of Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and the imposition of new

ecological, social and economic worlds. Farms were at the heart of a colonial conquest to remove *tangata* (people) from *whenua* (land), causing significant cultural disruption for Māori, whose valuable pre-modern ways of relating to land have environmental lessons we could re-learn today. Chapter three documents the transition from pre-modern Indigenous ways of belonging to and using the landscape. Initially about making a living, gradually settler farming gave way to intensification and clearing vast areas of land often unsuitable for farming. In Chapter four, what Campbell calls “modernist farming” is explored — high input production systems, draining carbon storing wetlands, replacing native biodiversity with monoculture. The consequences of endless growth have been changes leading to agriculture’s crisis of contradiction — from being productive food and fibre providers, to being one of the largest contributors to climate change and environmental degradation on the planet. In Chapter 5 Campbell alerts us to the invisibility of this story of farming, coupled with his account of a general denial that anything is wrong. Making the invisible visible is often a goal of marginalised minorities. Here the same power of suppression is seen in the normalising or naturalising of modern farming practices that pollute waterways, disrupt natural fertility and reduce biodiversity. Aotearoa New Zealand’s story is at once local and particular, but simultaneously it is the wider story of agriculture’s modern disconnection with what is quite literally (to use the philosopher’s phrase) the ground of our human being.

Campbell headlines the idea of farming within invisible worlds. All of us, non-farmers included, can understand sheds, tractors, fences, cows. We even ‘get’ more abstract ideas like return on investment or interest rate rise. But who controls these things? Who calls the shots? What do you have to do to get access to such things? Who says “yes” and “no”? There are backstories to each of these socio-economic drivers, but if you keep pushing the questions, eventually people shrug, “That’s just the way things are.” But Campbell says, “Not so.” Over time in different places and eras, and with different technologies under different forms of land control, things were, and still can be, very different. The Aotearoa New Zealand example raises many of these issues. Furthermore, says Campbell, the scale of farming has consequences for over-fertilising, degrading soils and water, stripping natural vegetation and forests off regions. Collectively these intertwined practices have multiple consequences leading to environmental degradation and climate change.

Focusing on the invisible aspects of farming as Campbell does, helps make them visible and reveals who — what firms, governments, funders and merchants call the shots, pull the strings and promote individual interests rather than benefiting the common good. Campbell makes this explicit:

But what if power is also manifest in making things invisible? In enacting a particular kind of farming world, what has been unmade by a farm or rendered invisible by its actions? What hasn’t happened, what choices weren’t taken, what worlds that might have been are now no longer able to exist? In this book I argue that the power of farms can only be understood if we examine both their visible and invisible powers. Farms are anything but mundane, their histories are both triumphant and catastrophic, and the consequences of their invisible powers shape the crises of our contemporary worlds. These histories also point us towards alternative futures. (p. 1)

Such questions challenge the ideology of growth, a productivist discourse focusing on maximising production and profits, despite the evidence that such growth is unsustainable. Campbell’s contribution is to bring a social science lens to help a new cohort of writers and thinkers understand this journey from agriculture past to agriculture future. It is not a matter of the commonly understood shift from pre-modern (negative, bad, in the past) to modern (now, better,

more wealth and prosperity), but a journey of *three* phases. What is usually seen as modern agriculture Campbell splits in two, each a distinct phase. The second of the three phases, the settler era associated with colonial expansion of world agriculture, was never sustainable: we now know this but the implications are only slowly sinking in. Campbell's use of the word "crisis" names the resistance to the ending of phase two. We are entering a third phase from learning phase two's land use is a path to environmental and climate ruin. Not accepting the binary story of pre-modern to modern of culturally and imperialistically self-centred modern thinking, frees us up to more honestly and realistically look ahead to see what we need to change. The pre-modern Māori world here in Aotearoa New Zealand, like elsewhere, was an Indigenous world with a lighter touch on the land both technologically and culturally.

In identifying a three-phase transition to climate warming and ecological disaster, Campbell provides a much more dynamic history of farming, centred on Aotearoa New Zealand, but one that echoes the global story of modern agriculture. His analysis uses this longer timeframe that encompasses the history of (1) Māori use of the land before Europeans arrived, (2) non-Māori settler use of the land and (3) the modern contemporary crisis of our current land-use practices impacting water, soil and plants. Campbell has a history of major funded research in the agri-food field. This book is online and free and presents a wide range of insights from his position as a senior academic who has seen the ongoing hegemony of more growth, more land clearing, more animal-based agriculture, more fertiliser capitalism. He knows the sector is conservative politically. His analysis is an invitation to be conservative environmentally instead. Getting past beliefs like hill-side slips and erosion are "just part of farming" will be a paradigm shift towards sustainable land use. Landowners shifting from thinking damp areas are swamps, to seeing wetlands as carbon sinks and sources of biodiversity, will lead to new kinds of farming with the environment rather than just making use of it and degrading it. Campbell does not take cheap shots; rather he tries to bring together an overall understanding of western, colonised, modern forms of land use and the time and places of these land-use changes over the long-term.

Several audiences will find value in Campbell's book beyond New Zealanders learning about their own history and an insider critique of the moral position of being "good farmers." Among them are (1) Scholars of settler societies thinking through the environmental logics of modernist farming that always emphasises "more"; (2) theory buffs who see Campbell's challenge to the simple pre-modern/modern binary as a useful opening-up question in teaching about where environmentally farming can or should go from here — why should degrading soil management be so invisible in Campbell's phrase?; (3) Indigenous scholars articulating the environmental prescience of their forebears' knowledge systems — high on sustainability and the relation of humans to the land — persisting and teaching these world views is of benefit to us all; (4) Regenerative agricultural farmers wanting ways to express to their conventional colleagues that we can educate ourselves how we should farm environmentally; (5) any agronomist or farm management consultant teaching in any form needs to have the framing of environmental sustainable farming practices deep inside their heads so they speak in ways consistent with where all parts of agriculture need to shift; (6) any educator whose discipline touches on land, farming, soil, growing things, can better orient what they communicate to their learners by Campbell's bigger argument that the whole supply chain from farm gate to plate must adjust towards rapid climate change, and we better understand the environmental dynamics of this in preparing ourselves.

We highly recommend this book for its combination of a narrative account of Aotearoa New Zealand agriculture, with the strongly presented point that modernist agriculture is in crisis. Environmental educators' interest in the details of this country's farming success backs into the horrifying reality that globally agriculture is today the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Author Biographies

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