

# AGRICULTURE AND THE CAMPHILL MOVEMENT

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Hartmut von Jeetze was a lifelong farmer and coworker in the international Camphill movement, which is comprised of intentional communities where he lived and worked with adults with developmental challenges. He currently lives with his daughter in upstate New York. More information regarding Camphill can be found at [www.camphill.org](http://www.camphill.org).

Reprinted from *Biodynamics* No. 114 (Spring 1975).

**T**O UNDERSTAND THE APPROPRIATE place of the land within a community of people has been a challenge to Camphill ever since its beginning in 1939. Although not always appearing in the foreground of our activities, the land has at all times been of great concern to all Camphill communities. Often misunderstood in its social, therapeutic, and economic function, it had to take the place of a stepchild. That this is so is due to a peculiar relation most people still have to the land today.

In the light of indications given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner concerning principles governing the social organism, it was possible for us in Camphill to gain a new understanding of our relation to the land. Out of this, new approaches to work with the land have been developed. To describe some of these principles shall be the attempt of this article. To what degree they apply elsewhere must of course be left to the reader.

In order to understand man's relation to the land, it is necessary to see that there are three distinctly different functional areas of involvement with it.

I

The first area is the cultivation and care of the land. This is often mistaken as the area of economics, since its outcome is the harvest, food substances. The act of cultivation of land has, however, nothing to do with the economy to which the harvested goods are subject. The words "cultivation" and "agri-culture" signify a human activity, a discipline. Everyone knows the carefully disciplined steps that are required to guide a particular type of plant from seed to fruit. The gardener's role can be compared to that of a teacher guiding a class through the elementary grades of a school. Equally irreversible, the moment when a farmer carries out his decision to turn over an old ley, by setting the plough to the first furrow, shows that the nature of decisions underlying all acts of cultivation is one of individual spiritual activity on the part of those cultivating the land. That these acts have desirable economic results is only to be hoped. Cultivation itself, as the word shows, belongs in the field of spiritual activity.

That the method to be employed in the cultivation of



the land in our trust should follow the biodynamic principles of agriculture was never questioned. The biodynamic method is employed in all Camphill centers where land is cultivated.

This method was developed on the basis of indications and directions given by Dr. Rudolf Steiner to farmers and gardeners who in 1924 had approached him for advice on ways of revitalizing the soil. The effectiveness of this method can, today—fifty years later—no longer be questioned. It is well documented as a fully workable method of agriculture, exemplified by the results achieved by hundreds of farmers and gardeners in many countries. Both in quantity and in quality of products, the biodynamic principles of agriculture are able to hold their own in comparison with conventional methods. This is well documented by supplementary research, as published in various periodicals and papers, available from biodynamic farming and gardening associations around the world.

That the biodynamic method of agriculture cannot and does not employ chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, or other chemical toxic agents acting detrimentally to organic processes, should be self-evident from the above. Neither, however, is it to be understood as a “de luxe” type of organic gardening or farming. To work on biodynamic principles presupposes an entirely new method of cooperation, on the part of those working the land, with the formative forces which underlie the processes of growth and decay active in nature. These are the forces that are, in the last resort, responsible for the harmonious growth of plants. A technical description of this method, however, is not the purpose of this article.

One may ask: if the above method of working the land provides such a successful avenue of farming and gardening, why is it not practiced more widely, particularly today when it might be the answer to ever-increasing needs? The question is no longer one of finding a viable method; the problem can no longer be sought for in nature. It must be looked for elsewhere. It is one of our relations to the land. It becomes a social question. This is not easily admitted.

In order to understand this we have to consider the second important functional area of agriculture.

## II

The second area is the field of economics. Two distinctively different economic principles apply to our relation to the world. They cannot be mixed up without causing harm to each other. One embraces our relation to goods and commodities, if you like: the world of inanimate things. The other concerns our relation to living organisms. In the first, we are the recipients of things; in the second, the administrators of processes.

A close look at food substances will show that these belong to the first area, while agriculture itself belongs to the second. Food substances come into existence at a certain, definite moment, at the end of the process of cultivation, the moment of harvest. Before harvest they are living organisms, parts of which may become food. The act of harvesting therefore signifies the dividing line of two processes. At the moment they are severed from the living organism, one could say, food substances are born. They immediately, like all goods, become subject to different principles and laws than before (weight, measure, etc.), economic laws that apply to all material things.

The first principle, therefore, can be formulated like this: all goods, once removed from their original natural context by man, become part of an economic process governed by man. These goods generate, serve, and sustain our socio-economic life. In doing so, however, they are subject to a process of diminution and destruction. (In order to yield lumber, a tree must be felled; to make bread, the grain has to be ground.) Life in the sphere of economics depends on a process of the dying of living things.

In order to satisfy a given situation to a maximum of their inherent potential, goods serving the social organism must be used according to two principles:

1. Optimum quantity required
2. Maximum development of inherent quality, physical or otherwise

This law of the inherent economic value of a commodity, strictly observed, avoids, among other things, waste and pollution. Unfortunately, this law is not usually adhered to, fully, except in situations where lives are obviously at stake, as in the construction of bridges or airplanes, or where actual starvation is a factor.

Adam Smith's idea of free enterprise and competition introduced a highly constructive element into the field of social economy. Through it, a discipline inducing individual thought and ingenuity in the development of the maximum potential inherent in goods, in the sense of the above law, came about. Today's technology is based on this method of handling goods.

While constructive as a discipline, its real value was defeated by the introduction of another principle, that of selfish gain for the competing individual. Today one would say: what can I get out of it? Through this attitude, the goods of the earth have been degraded to mere objects, to be regarded solely from the point of view of maximum usefulness for the individual. Smith's constructive ideas of free enterprise and competition, by being coupled with the idea of maximum gain for the individual, introduced



detrimental consequences. Not only did the resulting ideology subject the goods of the earth to human egoism, but it precipitated an avalanche of utilization—nay, ruthless overexploitation—of resources, now reaching global proportions, fired by self-interest under the whip of the principle of the survival of the fittest.

The second principle applicable to living organisms is quite different. All living organisms—plant, animals, men—are dependent on laws that, contrary to the above laws of economics, lie outside man's jurisdiction and control, such as day and night, seasons, weather, etc. All life roots in these rhythmic processes. The earth with its most sensitive part, the soil, is part of this living organization and subject to the same processes. The reader will not find it difficult to understand, therefore, that a garden, and particularly a farm, is a living organism.

Our individual life as man depends on this living organism. In the same way that we fully expect that there will be sufficient air for our next breath, we depend on the earth to yield our food. Thereby the land becomes our host. Our life is inextricably linked to these living elements, and through them also to every other person. Almost universally we have overlooked this dependency by leaving it to farmers and gardeners to see to it that we have enough to eat. It has made us overlook the following:

1. Inasmuch as the land sustains our life, it is our host.
2. Apart from the human being, a farm or garden is the only living organism in nature created by, and

dependent on, man. Like a child, it is an organism in which man's activity and that of nature can meet without mutual detriment, but to mutual advantage.

3. The fact that the land is our host and at the same time dependent on us puts the farmer and gardener into a new position quite different from the one realized until now. This puts the third functional area—the place of the farmer—into perspective.

### III

To understand this third functional area, we have to see that, because of increasing demands, the land has been invaded by a principle valid only for goods. This has had detrimental effects. It has put the farmer into a defensive position. Since agriculture has become an industry, the farmer, having at the same time to defend his stewardship on behalf of the land, has been forced to look for compromises. The use of spare land (as long as available), cheap labor, artificial fertilizers, forced breeding of plants and animals, mechanization—all these have, because of their seeming success, prevented our recognition of the fact that they are largely compromises, obscuring the effect of inappropriate economic principles on the land. The reason for the flight of people from the land may well have to be sought for in this fact.

The now apparent global limits of capital resources, including soil fertility, may make us ask, how can we reverse this trend? A community of people would have to recognize that the land is our host, and that we are

indebted to it. This recognition would allow the farmer, gardener, or forester to be placed in a different position than is customary today. He would become a mediator between the land and a community of people. On the other hand, he would have to be provided, by his community, with the means necessary for the cultivation of the land on their behalf. From composting to sowing to harvesting, he should be given full freedom to administer the land according to its needs, according to methods and principles which are in harmony with the living organism of the farm. At the same time, he is no longer forced to make compromises. He no longer needs to be on the defensive in the face of wrong economic demands, but can use methods which allow the land its optimum ability to grow crops, without defensive artificial means.

Through the above approach, practiced in some of the Camphill centers, the farmer has been freed of the fight for survival, of having to compete with economic principles that have no place on the land. His position is no longer that of a social outcast forced to try to justify two economic principles. Once again the farmer is assured of his true position, that of a mediator between a community of men on the one hand and divine forces working in the organism of the land on the other.

The above approach to agriculture is in no way impractical or merely idealistic and Utopian. In our experience, in the communities of the Camphill movement, it has solved deadlocked situations on the economic, social, and cultural levels, helping to close the gap between man and the land.

Another important aspect of the land is its therapeutic value. Our approach has made it possible for many persons people who elsewhere would be social outcasts in a world of competitive “profitability”—to find true fulfillment in the social organism of Camphill. In the centers of the Camphill movement, which integrates handicapped people into creative community life, many mentally retarded persons have been able to find a place meaningful for them, as well as for the social organism of which they are a part, only through being allowed to

take their place in the work on the land.

Quite apart from economic considerations, their day-by-day involvement in nature’s seasonal processes of growth, dying, and rebirth has a therapeutic value that could not be replaced by other means. Not to avail oneself of this opportunity would be unthinkable in the Camphill approach to man and nature. The social and therapeutic value of work and life with the land is unquestionably re-established in the striving of the Camphill centers throughout the world.

Photos from Camphill Village Minnesota, which was founded by Harmut von Jeetze and his family, are courtesy of the Camphill Association of North America and ©Rebecca Wilson Photography.

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