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Book Review: *Crisis & Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture* By John E. Ikerd

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Crisis & Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture. By John E. Ikerd. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xi + 325 pp. Notes. $18.95 paper.

Since the early 1990s John Ikerd has been one of the preferred speakers at convocations oriented to small farm survival and sustainable agriculture. This book collects twenty of his speeches delivered between 1995 and 2006, mostly in the Great Plains region. Although there is in fact a continuing development and expansion of themes from one speech to the next, there is also a great deal of overlap and repetition. Many themes recur in every chapter, sometimes with virtually identical wording. A more felicitous experience would be obtained

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by allowing a period of weeks to elapse between reading each chapter.

Ikerd argues that the problem of sustainability can be understood in terms of reconciling ecological soundness, economic viability, and social responsibility. Although ecology and society are discussed, it is, in fact, economic viability that is Ikerd's long suit. Ikerd advises farmers to limit debt by reducing purchased inputs and living simply, and he counsels for careful and strategically planned diversification. He encourages production of products that can be marketed to the emerging creative class and describes how linkages with consumers and relatively small-scale food distribution networks can help farmers capture a larger share of the consumer dollar. A comparison of Ikerd's book with Julie Guthman's *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (2004) would reveal Ikerd's implicit focus on the Great Plains region, where farmers neither cope with a regulatory environment hostile to small-scale agriculture nor with overheated real estate markets and tax policies.

Ikerd also repeatedly stresses a contrast between the philosophy of industrial agriculture and that of the sustainable alternative. Industrial farming is an outgrowth of ethical principles that presume the ubiquity of self-interested behavior and that see unfettered growth and competition as the only way to channel self-seeking motives into patterns that are relatively beneficial to society as a whole. Ikerd opposes this view with one that endorses a rather bland (though not strictly religious) notion of caring for others and community solidarity. He also adds a strong dose of anticorporate libertarianism, a theme that is difficult to reconcile with his altruism in suggesting that the main problem with the industrial philosophy lies not in its egoism, but in its faith that unfettered economic power serves the greatest good for the greatest number.

Although Ikerd's philosophy is quite perceptive in its instincts, one could enumerate many internal contradictions in execution. In fact, the primary value of *Crisis & Opportunity* may be that it *is* a collection of speeches that encouraged and emboldened small farmers and advocates of alternative agriculture throughout the Midwest. As such, it documents the perceptions, values, and myths, inconsistent as they might be, that animated and motivated a group of rural Midwesterners not unjustly laboring under the self-image of an oppressed and victimized minority during a critical period in the formation of the sustainable agriculture movement. **Paul B. Thompson**, *Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, Michigan State University.*

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