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## The agroecological imagination: Introduction

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### ABSTRACT

In June of 2015, 49 academics, students, government and NGO representatives, and farmers gathered together for a four-day conference on *The Agroecological Imagination: A Franco-American Exchange*. This paper introduces the special commentary section of four position papers based on discussion at the conference. This paper also argues that the central feature of the “agroecological imagination” is thinking *contextually* about food and agriculture.

### Keywords

Agroecology; theory; international; contextuality; justice

## Introduction

Agroecology is fast becoming a global project. This collective endeavor knows no national borders. Nor should it, for we have much to learn from and with each other about creating agriculture that is just for both people and the Earth.

With these thoughts in mind, in June of 2015, some 49 people — including about a dozen from France and one from Belgium — gathered in Madison, Wisconsin for a four-day conference on *The Agroecological Imagination: A Franco-American Exchange*. The attendees included academics, graduate students, government employees, NGO representatives, and five farmers, three from the USA and two from France.<sup>1</sup> There was science. There was practice. There was movement. Our focus was on assessing the state of our agroecological knowledge, as well as building ties for further collaborations across the boundaries of language and place.

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To that end, we conducted a series of participatory workshops. In four of the workshops, two participants — one French and one American — stepped forward to write up a short position paper, based on the group’s deliberations but also going a bit beyond. We present those statements here, one each on agrifood systems, agroecological education, agroecological theory, and long-term systems research.

## The agroecological imagination

In addition to their specific topics, much of the conversation of the workshops (and in between the workshops) focused on grappling with the meaning of the conference title: the phrase “the agroecological imagination.” Many notable and worthy recent works have sought to help us understand what agroecology is, often presenting the field in triads, in part to move us past the dualism so characteristic of thinking about food and agriculture in the past, and still into the present. The Wezel et al. (2009) agroecological triad of science, practice, and movement has become perhaps the most widespread (and we have already made reference to it above). Guzmán and Woodgate (2013) suggest that agroecology is best understood through a different, but related triad: as having “three core dimensions: productive/ecological, socio-economic, and sociocultural/political.” Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen (2013) and Méndez et al. (2016) have proposed yet a third triad: that agroecology is a transdisciplinary, participatory, and action-oriented approach.

Most of the workshop participants found value in all these conceptualizations, despite their varied theoretical language. But there was a word that kept popping up in our conversations across the workshops, whether we were discussing more theoretical or more practical points: the vital importance in agroecology of paying attention to *context*. The French context is different from the American context. The urban context is different from the rural context. The context of the lab and field station is different from the context of the farm. The context of the classroom is different from the context of daily life. The varying contexts of climate, season, soil, water, slope, pests, cultural values, local knowledge, social ties, wealth, politics, and so much more means that a production method that works in one context very well might not work out in another context. This word wasn’t offered in a necessarily lofty way — in the grand pronouncements of conference presentations (although it showed up in those too). It was just a word that everyone found themselves using.

It is a word that the above-mentioned formulations of agroecology also find themselves frequently using. Wezel et al. (2009) use the word context four times, as do Guzmán and Woodgate (2013). Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen (2013) use it 10 times. They don’t use it in a lofty way either. It is just a word that they find themselves often using.

As well they might, for their conceptualizations of agroecology are easily framed as inviting us to understand food and agriculture contextually. Wezel et al. (2009) ask us to remember that agroecology is not just a science, a practice, or a movement, but rather all three, for each is a different context of the agroecological endeavor. What the scientist experiences is not necessarily what the practitioner experiences, and neither is it necessarily what it takes to move a movement, for these are different contexts, and we must think differently about agroecology with regard to them. Guzmán and Woodgate (2013) want us to remember that agroecology is not only a matter of successful production in harmony with ecology but also will not succeed if we do not pay equal attention to society, economy, culture, and the politics of all of this — to social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen (2013) offer us the means for ensuring that we pay attention to the varied contexts of agroecological endeavor. Transdisciplinary thinking entails reaching not only across the disciplines but out of them too, engaging with knowledge from outside the academy, for, as noted above, the context of the field station is indeed not the same as the context of farm field, and the context of the lab is indeed not the same as the context of the barn, the packing shed, the restaurant, the home kitchen, and the basement room where activists meet. To connect with this full breadth of agriculture and food's contexts, agroecology must embrace participatory approaches. And when it does, agroecology will also embrace the action needs of not only the university but the full universe of agroecology's social and ecological situations.

So perhaps the underlying message here is that the common, the grounded, the quotidian *is* the lofty — that if we were to get it all down to a simple word, the agroecological imagination is thinking *contextually* about food and agriculture. For to think contextually is to think about the realism of consequences in all their important specificities, and not the blind idealism of universalistic generalization. Yes, one place can learn from another. What goes on elsewhere and at other times has much to inform the here and the now of any locality. But that learning is deepest, and most useful, when it engages differences rather than trying to plow them under and assert a monoculture. This is exactly what we attempted to do at this conference — to learn from one another, in all the fullness of our experiences, not to become one another.

As well, to think about context and consequence is to think about justice. For it is the existence of difference that raises the question of justice. If all life were the same, and the distribution of its rewards were the same, the question of justice would not arise. But it is not all the same. The challenge for a just agroecology is to welcome difference in life while being wary of differences in the rewards of life. Welcoming difference should not mean walking away from the plights of others. A just agroecology needs always to take into account the sovereignty of situation while not lapsing into a totalitarianism of the local as we reject a totalitarianism of the global. We

are mutually involved and thus mutually obligated. One context has consequence for another. One consequence is context for another. That is why, the agroecological imagination is so very, very important — socially, ecologically, economically, and ethically.

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