

How to critique an Australian Community Managed Food Distribution System, *Food Connect*

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Food Connect (FC) is a food distribution company operating in Brisbane, Australia. Within the contemporary business paradigm it might be described as a company that is growing, to make a profit, receiving, packaging and distributing organic and eco-efficient food products to Brisbane's suburban homes. However, FC has brought together, through deliberate relationship, two significant and large systems; primary producer networks, and consumer networks. FC generates social and economic benefits into each system. The involved communities have identified a range of values, principles and concepts that inform the structures and decision making across many scales of practice. These enable a community owned and managed business structure to meet social, environmental, economic, education, health and wellbeing goals for individuals, households, farming systems, the environment and our localised economies. Quality of food, reliability of supply, value of supplied food and opportunity for enhanced social and community relationships are all benefits derived by consumer groups, while producer groups gain reliability and predictability of income, enjoy enhanced and direct feedback from discerning consumers and participate in local and extended communities. It is spiritual, practical, ethical and profitable. FC's existence can be understood as a set of political aims about the relationships between urban communities and primary producers; the treatment of animals and the environment; workplace relations; and the spiritual and ideological importance of clean, nutritious, quality food produce at accessible and equitable prices. However a threat to the achievement of these aims is patriarchy and associated positivist behavioural and social science ideologies, despite FC's development based on systems thinking. Defined gender role stereotyping, sexist assumptions and oppression of women in the workplace, prevail in all sectors of Australian culture and society. If reflective and purposeful processes to value and encourage the effective and safe participation of women is not fostered throughout FC's systems, FC is not likely to achieve its potential.

Eco-feminist goals suggest that it is imperative for local communities to harness and engage the responsiveness and energy of women to ensure social and ecological diversities survive. A merging of systems theory and non-assumptive, eco-feminist critique of the patterns and contexts, will reveal the prevalence of patriarchy which may be undermining FC's systems, and make suggestions as to how FC can use the knowledge generated from the evaluation. Feminist engagement in FC's continued evolution ought create future actions aligned with democratic, participatory and communitarian principles. This is a practical, real world example of systems and feminist theories grounding action in and for community wellbeing. Our experience has shown that a deliberate (eco)systems based process do not negate gendered structures and practices.

Keywords: local food distribution; organic; eco-efficient; eco-feminism; community; business systems.

In Brisbane, Australia, a culturally and environmentally embedded business entity has grown, burst from a seedpod, making deep connections, shooting upward and spreading out, with determination to purposefully stand out as a new hybrid; an ethical social, and environmental business. The entity is *Food Connect Pty Ltd* (FC). As an example of integrated systems and sub-systems at work to provide multiple social, health, environment and economic and business outcomes, FC provides a fascinating case study of a Community Supported Agriculture project. Metaphorically, FC can be likened to a garden. The rich diversity of people, cultures, and communities interconnected to the FC system, resembles the biologically active ecologies in which our food is sourced. A poly culture of ecosystems, embedded and nurtured by systemic processes, represent the interactions of people and environment of FC to deliver fresh, quality, locally produced fruit, vegetables, groceries and meat products every week to Brisbane consumers. Like the organic food it seeks to deliver, its own systems and sub-systems have organic origins. However, the language and processes in systems science, which can be used to describe FC so well, can be exclusionary and damaging when it neglects the needs and contribution of marginalised, yet crucial people. On occasions, an explicit effort to override innate prejudices is required. This paper is an effort to make explicit some of the ways systems theory ignores gender as an expression of my personal aspiration to ‘comprehensive understanding’ of a system (Midgley, 2000; Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2004) to determine the depth of meaning FC has to offer society in terms of models of future sustainable business, social and environmental practice.

Whilst there are limited example of research efforts to find linkages between feminism and systems science, Barbara Hanson’s *Systems Theory and the Spirit of Feminism: Grounds for Connection* (Hanson, 2001) validates the importance of my project. Her broad goal seeks to integrate general systems theory with a non-assumptive feminist analysis, because systems and feminism are ‘compatible, even inseparable’ (Hanson 2001, 546). She is concerned that feminists ignore general systems theory. I am concerned more with applied system’s theorists ignoring feminisms. Anne Forrest’s (1993) study of Canadian Industrial Relations reveals, for example, that whilst ‘systems theory is the predominant analytical paradigm, it fails to explain gender specific trends, evaluate their implications, consider women’s particular working needs nor examine the importance or prevalence to women of workplace sex segregation and the underpinnings of sexual harassment. In essence, women are invisible and marginalised in the literature (pp 2 – 4).

Anyone can adopt a feminist perspective and feminist perspective has transdisciplinary application. If seen as a tool, feminist analysis can be part of systems theorists’ and operational research practitioner kit, especially when concerned with a boundary and margins and what is to be included or excluded from analyses. In fact, their studies are just not complete without them. A point raised with Gerald Midgley when discussing his work *Systemic Intervention: Philosophy, Methodology and Practice* (Midgley, 2000). In his discussion of ‘social exclusion’ he refers to a wide variety of examples of excluded groups, or classes of people from the ‘mainstream’, (p 15) but makes no reference to the exclusion of women from the mainstream, arguably one of the largest and most common forms of marginalization affecting half the world’s population of people with contextually relevant degrees of life threatening outcomes. The act of failing to recognise female specific forms of marginalization, i.e. prejudice and de-valuation, discriminatory practices, sexual mistreatment and inequality across a vast number of social contexts, is exclusionary practice itself. “By overlooking what is distinctive about women’s experience in studies... scholars implicitly assume that the experiences of the minority (women) are unimportant and or parallel those of the majority (men)” (Forrest, 1993, p 4). Systems theory risks being viewed as limited by its reliance upon sexist or conservative ideologies, a point Hanson (2001) also notes (p 548).

Hanson (2001) also recognises that a singular definition of feminism is not possible and I wish to take up this issue. Her ‘spirit of feminism’ accounts for two basic ideas of feminist epistemology: sexuality and equality. However, the meaning of the ‘spirit of feminism’ can easily be expanded to include themes of human interaction in the physical environment. Eco-feminist scholarship, for example, has applications in fields of study concerned with social and business development, health, environment and social sustainability, and food security issues, at all scales.

FC provides a practical response to these concerns at a local scale. However, how do we pick up the tools on offer to undertake a critique of FC? This paper proposes that a process orientated, active research methodology that embraces diverse feminist perspectives is essential to unlock the depth of understanding about the experience and contribution women make to the systems of FC.

So, come with me out into the garden. FC, as a poly-cultural ecological garden, rich in micro and biological organisms, is a useful metaphor in which we can explore FC. Together we will select some of the tools from the garden shed, and discuss how to tend to the multiplicity of systems where we can locate women's experience and engagement with FCs social, business, agricultural, economic, IT and communications systems.

The Permaculture Gardens of FC

“Australia provides some of the sweetest-tempered places for plantsmen (sic) and women to indulge their interests. Ingenious gardeners can perform alchemy in less than ideal conditions”
(Earwaker & Robertson, *A Garden of My Own*, 2000)

“Permaculture is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems. Its is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way. Without permanent agriculture there is no possibility of a stable social order”
Bill Mollison

“Strategies for the necessary changes in social investment policy, politics itself, and towards regional or village self-reliance are now desperately needed”
Bill Mollison

FC is a rapidly growing company, managed by people in communities based in Brisbane, Australia. FC sprang to life as a consequence of a bank's foreclosure on a property which had attracted up to 600 subscribers through the activity of FC's current founder and Managing Director, Robert Pekin. Rob and a team of social and environmental activists salvaged this 'incarnation of the CSA concept' by establishing agreements with a host of farmers in South East Queensland to regularly supply FC directly with genuine quality, fresh, clean and in principle, organic (including plenty of certified or pre-cert) fruit and vegetables. Thus FC, moved from the garage of Rob's rented home, leased a warehouse 'the Homestead' and began packing and distributing boxes of vegetables to regions (or 'paddocks') of family subscribers across Brisbane. It grew from an operating budget of \$4,000 per month to over \$50,000 AUD per month in under 12 months and is growing. FC's growth has been entirely through word of mouth, with deliberate embargos placed on the media to prevent unsustainable surges in consumer demand.

FC is growing on a bed of concepts and principles. The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) concept is fundamental to the garden's foundation.

CSA is an agricultural movement that originated in the 1960s in Switzerland and Japan. There are now many hybrids of CSAs, but their rapid growth is indicative of communities' concerns about increasingly globalised food systems, and the corresponding, social, environmental and health problems. Communities around the world have been developing a different vision for food production and distribution. CSA is a concept which encourages local, environmentally sustainable food production that supports both farmers and consumers alike.

A CSA is a “...partnership of mutual commitment between a farm (producer) and a community of supporters (consumers) which provides a direct economic and social link between the production and consumption of food.” In essence subscribers cover all, or part of a farm's yearly operating budget by committing to purchasing a share of the season's harvest - up front. There is no agent or distributor between the customer and the farmer. All subscriber funds are directed to the farm. The arrangement has a range of benefits for the producers. Farmers can determine with certainty what to plant based on the growing plan arranged with the community. For consumers receiving a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basket of fresh produce, being a member generates a “...responsible relationship between people and the food they eat, the land on which it is grown and the people who grow it” (Food Connect website, 2006; Lea, Phillips, Ward & Worsley, 2006). See appendix 1 of FC's Statement of Purpose, Objectives and website text.

FC's system is like a garden because it can be described as an open, living set of systems and sub-systems, which are subject to growth, change and development, continually interacting with the outside environment. A complex and dynamic ecology has evolved. It became necessary to formalize strategic planning of the systems to guide FC's growth, which is not unlike a permaculture garden, a non-reductionist conscious design of an integrated social and ecological system. FC's evolving business structure, clarified in a FC Business Plan, recognises the system's complexities, non-linearity and interdependencies. This systemic intervention, a purposeful action by human agents to create change (Midgley, 2000, p 113), or in our case, harness forces of social change, show that it is “... possible for complex, abstract and revolutionary ideas to exercise influence through positive grassroots processes” (Holmgren, 2002 p xxi). These processes evolved, and were then defined. Now we are working with them, or cultivating the systems, to help FC grow.

Diagram 1 is the first illustration of FC's integrated systems. The diagram depicts two large networks of systems with sub-systems. The City Cousin network in the blue circle and the Producer/Country Cousin network in the green circle. See diagrams 2 and 3 below for illustrations of the subsystems operating within these wholes. The FCO (Brisbane), in grey, operates as a conduit between these two networks, with FC Pty Ltd, an executive management, training and support and strategic planning entity, in the red circle.

Like the symbiosis prevalent in poly-culture, where plants provide mutually supportive relationships for each other, each system is interconnected with nurturance. The FCO (Brisbane), is a support system that employs key personnel to manage the logistics of receiving/dispatch of produce. These positions include the Operations Manager, packers, drivers and Customer Service staff. A CC Coordinator liaises between new customers (termed families) and the CC network, coordinates communication channels and strengthens the relationships between the producer networks and the CC network, in organising and scheduling events, farm tours, education seminars encouraging and stimulating the CSA principle of communities of people supporting agricultural producers.

The FC Pty Ltd system contains the Board of Management and the produce manager, who is behind the establishment of the producer and country cousin networks. The Board seeks representation from across the networks, CCs, families, farmers, Country Cousins, FCO staff, CC Coordinator, and meets monthly bringing to bear member's embedded experience and understanding of the FC's business, social and economic systems. In much the same way as a healthy and active compost harvests beneficial micro-organisms and it is distributed to the beds and plants where it is needed, FC's role is to establish new FCOs with support and training, and expand the CC and Producer/Country Cousin networks.

The Producer/Country Cousin network plans to be bound by the FC Food Accreditation System (FCFA). This is an example of a participatory guarantee system whereby farmers comply to food production standards established by and for the FC community (as an alternative to the 3rd party certification systems). The role of the Country Cousin, committed individuals volunteering to be the spokesperson for their region (see Diagram 2) work with the Produce Manager to take advantage of cost-effective freightage to transport produce to the FC's warehouse, and provide support and guidance to primary

producers shifting from conventional systems to ecologically sustainable or ‘world’s best practice’ systems to comply and remain compliant with the FCFA. The producer and country cousin network perform an important social inclusion role and help break down the isolation of many Australian primary producers. Compliant or not with our FCFA, all producers are invited to join the network and have opportunities to meet FC families and CCs, other producers and participate in the social movement.

The network of CCs and families is a diverse network of sub-communities of people collecting boxes of produce and value-added products from a local CC collection point (see Diagram 3), at an allocated time each week. The importance of CCs to the system cannot be understated. These people open their schools, community centres and homes, warmly inviting people in, sharing information, trouble shooting, sharing products, introducing neighbours and chatting about ‘this week’s news’. They build relationships with individuals in places of disparate community providing much more than food. I like to think of our CCs as the birds and the bees attracted to the flowers of the garden, cross fertilizing and helping the garden grow.

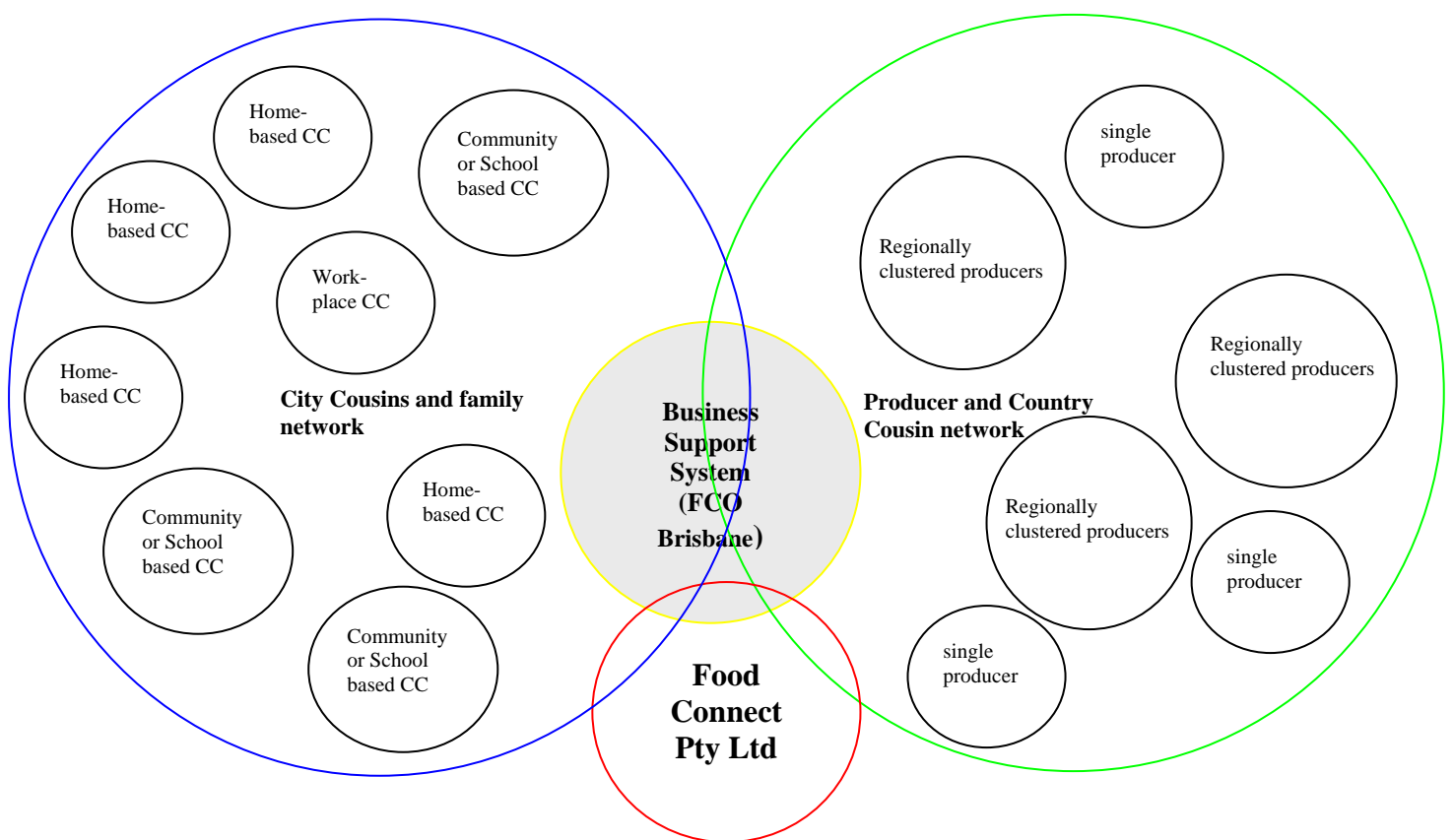


Diagram 1: FCs integrated systems (author)

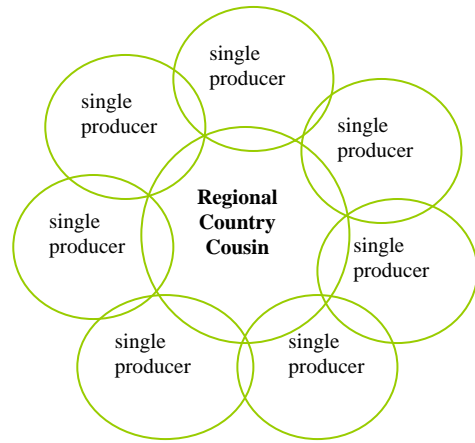


Diagram 2: Regionally clustered producer network, a subsystem of the Producer and Country Cousin Network (author).

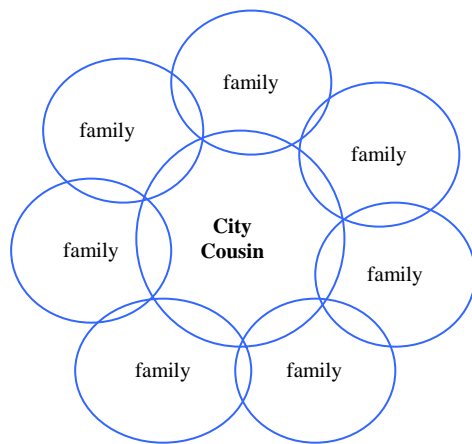


Diagram 3: A Country Cousin network a subsystem of the City Cousin network (author).

Diagram 4 provides another perspective on the integrated systems. This illustration recognises the stakeholders of the Brisbane FCO. The FC systems and subsystems are bounded in the blue oval, their connection based on a legal or contractual relationship to the FCO. External stakeholders can influence, or can be influenced by the activities of the FC system/s. This list of stakeholders is not exhaustive, but symbolizes the depth and extent to which FC is nested in larger social, political, economic systems in the state of Queensland, Australia.

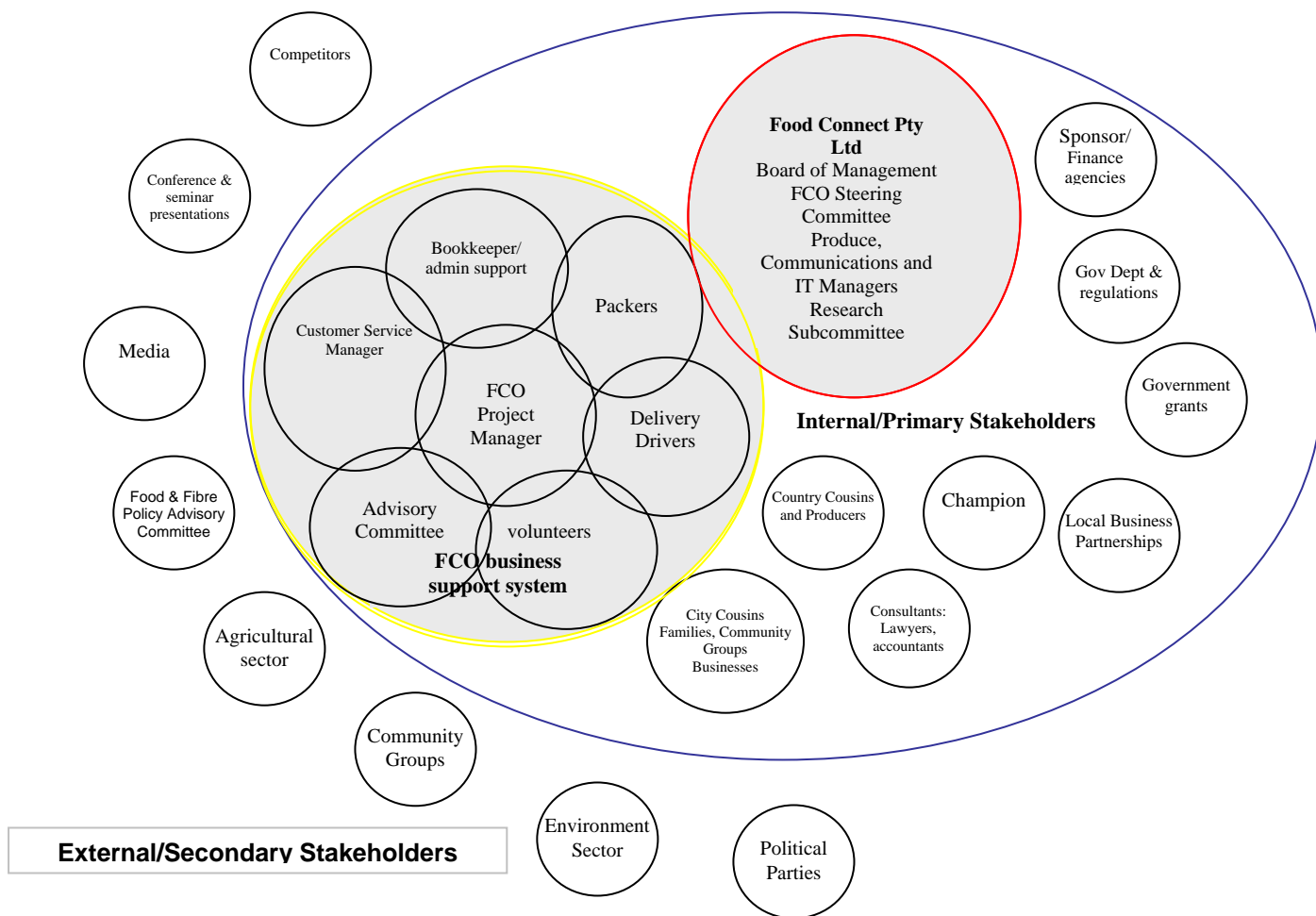


Diagram 4: FC and its community of internal and external stakeholders (individuals, groups and institutions) (author).

Thousands of individuals are now connected by the FC systems, sub-systems within systems. We are diverse in age, ethnicity, interest and position and cover hundreds of kilometers in distance and motivated to be involved for different reasons. However I would like to propose that three statements may account for one or all of an individual's broader concerns to be a FC subscriber, producer, staff member or volunteer.

1. FC people seek the lost nature. They are trying to reconnect in a wholistic, spiritual sense, to their natural environment by seeking healthy, fresh, in season, foods derived from progressive farming systems. These include organic, chemical free, natural farming, biological farming, ecologically sustainable and rich diversity or ecosystems supporting wildlife and polycultures. They are joining

non-violent, positive activism, to challenge dominant paradigms justifying unsound agribusiness and food distribution practices.

2. FC people seek community and belonging. People are trying to reach out in neighbourhoods to make friends, support communities and share childrearing. Fragmentation of community is a perception FC people resist.
3. FC people seek equity and justice. FC people are concerned for workers, animals, women, children, people with special needs and the elderly. It is a system driven by ethics of care, compassion, non-profit, social profit, education, environmental, community and human health.

These are propositions that require testing. However, as a member of the community, former City Cousin and now chairperson of the company, I am a participant-observer and although not an absolutely objective researcher, I see first hand, and discuss with many, the inspiring influences that draw our FC communities together. We are standing in a blooming garden. Some days I am a mushroom, some days a rose and on others a scarecrow.

FC is a garden oasis within a barren social justice landscape

“We are in the post-feminist stage of the debate”
Australian Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, quoted in Summers, 2005, p 21.

If we are to accept the opinion of John Howard, we might also be asked to blame feminism for its own demise. Ongoing ideological battles have relegated feminism as an irrelevant intellectual activity divorced and distant from the experience of women and children across the world. Howard’s perspective concludes that in a ‘post feminist’ environment, the battles have been won. A focus on a ‘universal public’ in public policy, undifferentiated by gender, leads to claims that we have ‘gone beyond’ gender (Buckingham, 2004). “There is a widespread assumption that simply because my (sic) generation of women has the good fortune to live in a world touched by the feminist movement, that means everything we do is magically imbued with its agenda. It doesn’t work that way” (Levy, 2005, pp 5 - 6).

A snap-shot review of the Australian social and cultural landscape, in which our garden of FC is situated, reveals ongoing issues of social and sexual inequality that prevail at every scale insidiously perpetuated by the Howard government’s policies “...designed to undermine women’s equality [and] ... blatantly seeks to remove women from economic activity and to deskill them, ensuring they can never return to anything like the same level of employment” (Summers, 2005, p 153). Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) data reveals that women were still earning only 85% of the average weekly ordinary time earnings. In the category of employees’ total earnings, Australian women earned only 66% of the male figure. Changing social attitudes may help to explain the increasing trend in labour market participation among younger women in Australia. In fact, employment growth between 1981 and 2001 has been skewed towards female with female employment, as a proportion of total employment, increasing from 37% to 45%. However the driving force behind this growth, and a causal factor in the disparity between men’s and women’s earnings, is the increase in part-time employment, especially in the services sector (ABS Cat. No. 1350.0, 2004). Professor Bob Gregory, professor of economics at the Australian National University argues that the ‘spectacular’ growth areas for women who need full-time incomes has been in welfare dependency rather than in employment in full-time jobs (Summers, 2003, p157). In 2005, 45% of Australia’s female workers were part-time compared with 14% of male employees, a figure expected to continue to rise (ABS, Cat. No. 1301.0, 2005). At the top end of the social scale, women’s exclusion from top management and executive positions, or ‘the glass ceiling’ phenomena is the subject of ongoing campaigns by the Federal Office of the Status of Women to increase women’s representation on boards which is presently only 8 percent of the top 200 companies (NCWA, 2006). “Rather than glass ceilings, women are confronted by closed doors, doors that are being increasingly slammed in their faces... There is no evidence whatsoever of any willingness on the part of men to share power” (Summer, 2005, p 174).

The Women's Lifework report into labour market transitions (2005) reports that "Matching child care hours with work needs was an ongoing struggle for many women..." (Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski, 2006, p v). Childcare availability, paid maternity leave and eligibility for child care assistance remain ongoing concerns. Sole parent working mothers, carry an inordinate emotional and physical burden, reporting that juggling full-time work, home responsibilities and complex child care arrangements is a constant challenge.

Australian women carry the burden of a rigid division of labour. The report found that in two-parent heterosexual households, there were few examples of genuine sharing of domestic responsibilities. "Most male partners had some involvement in the dropping and picking up of children from various child care arrangements or school. Beyond this, however, cooking, cleaning, organising child care, packing lunches, preparing for the next day, attending doctor appointments and supporting children's education were viewed as primarily 'women's work'" (p vi).

These numerous tasks are the thankless, mundane and repetitive drudgery that most of the women surveyed inevitably accept as their greater share of household duties and women's home responsibilities appear to be constant, regardless of the age of their children or the extent of their workforce participation. Whilst most of the women accepted a traditional division of household labour, this did not mean that they were happy with this situation (Smyth, Rawsthorne & Siminski, 2006).

In all societies, disadvantaged women affect the living conditions of children. The number of female one-parent families was around five times greater than the number of male one-parent families (ABS, Cat. No. 3236.0, 2005) Households comprising one parent with dependent children had a mean household income of \$329 per week, but only 14% of the one-parent households fully owned their home and therefore a substantially greater proportion had to make mortgage or rental payments from their income. Of those households, 53% had government pensions and benefits as their principal source of income (ABS, Cat. No. 6523.0, 2005). Sixty-five per cent of female lone parents with dependent children rely on government support payments as the principle source of income, and the incomes of these female lone parent-headed families are declining relative to other families with children (Summers, 2005, p 157).

Symptomatic of social disadvantage, mental health disorders, one expression of the cycle of poverty and social exclusion females affective disorders such as depression accounted for 39% of the mental health burden in Australia (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 1999). Together, mental disorders accounted for 6.1% of allocated recurrent health system expenditure.

According to the 1996 National Women's Safety Survey, half a million Australian women 7.1% of the population, experienced an incident of violence. 22% reported incidents by more than one perpetrator. Sexual violence was 1.9% of reports. This includes sexual assault and threats of sexual assault which a woman believed were likely to be carried out. Younger women were more at risk of violence than older women. 19% of women aged 18 to 24 had experienced an incident of violence in the previous 12 month period (ABS, Cat. No. 4518-0, 1996).

The Howard Government's humanitarian response to Australia's mainstream white population is irreprehensible, however, its conduct towards our Indigenous population, and those seeking refugee protection is obscene. Shocking levels of sexual and domestic violence, physical and social exclusion from employment, limited access to education and training opportunities and even the provision of basic health care and service amenities are virtually non-existent to communities of Australia's Indigenous communities (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2004).

Ongoing social exclusion and political neglect from all levels of governance have led to a crisis in Aboriginal communities. Similarly, the Howard Government, despite ongoing calls from the International Community, continues to enforce draconian responses to 'boat people', desperate people

making the dangerous voyage across seas to Australian shores seeking humanitarian protection from imminent threats of rape, murder and torture (Amnesty International Australia, 2006).

In addition to our primary focus on supporting Australian agricultural communities, FC's value statements (see appendix 1), seek to provide a political response to a variety of social and ethical issues particularly around environmental and humanitarian concerns. If a social system that has these underpinning values cannot or will not consider the people and their issues who are on the margins of the system, that does not bode well for the Australian feminist agenda.

The tools to tend the garden

“Eco-feminism thus rejects the dominance, competition, materialism, and techno scientific exploitation inherent in modernist, competition-based social systems. Ecofeminism instead assumes that healthy interactions are based on caring and compassion and the creation and nurturing of life... compassion and caring for nature are part of ecofeminist processes because all of nature is seen as intimately connected with humans and as having inherent value. Nature has an existence and voice worth hearing and experiencing”

(Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p 226)

May we return now to examine the fragrance of Barbara Hanson's (2001) *Systems theory and the Spirit of Feminism: Grounds for a Connection*. Just as Hanson acknowledges that her work has ‘...roots in a number of gardens’, it is this work that argues the case for a merger between systems theory and feminism, in that they seem ‘compatible, even inseparable’ (p 546).

Feminists and general systems scientists often see an urgent need for interventions to create a just, sustainable future. It follows that an imbrication of processes that address sexual and gender equality and mistreatment of the environment, are a necessary focus of analysis because “... the parts of all energy, matter, and reality are related to the greater whole. All things are connected in complex webs of communal networks... This whole is not a abstracted mentalism but has infinitely complicated characteristics somewhat analogous to the way communities of beings manage individual and collectivists realities” (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p 225). It is this then, that justifies my call to expand the notion of a ‘spirit of feminism’. In saying this, I am not proposing an essentialism argument that suggests women have a particular relationship with nature by virtue of their biology and that this proximity to nature qualifies them to speak more eloquently on nature's behalf. Rather I subscribe to the view that due to women's experience of gendered discrimination and sexual mistreatment, which is derived from the same prevailing social and economic structures that has produced wide-scale environmental damage, women are often well placed to ‘share’ this experience and argue on nature's behalf (Buckingham, 2004, p 2).

Eco-feminism seeks to remind humanity that we are an integral part of the physical environment. An analysis of human systems that separate our part from the whole physical environment perpetuate dualist sexist dominant paradigms which at issue is not a masculine identity pure and simple, but a multiple, complex cultural identity of the ‘master’ framed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination.

“An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognises that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of cooperation, and mutual care and love. Only in this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms, including their cultural expressions, as true sources of our wellbeing and happiness. To this end eco-feminists use metaphors like ‘reweaving the world’, ‘healing the wounds’ and reconnecting and interconnecting the ‘web’. This effort to create a holistic, all life embracing cosmology and anthropology, must necessarily imply a concept of freedom different from that used since the Enlightenment” (Plumwood, 1993, p 6).

Feminist thinkers have been concerned with 'dualisms' just as systems thinkers are concerned with modernism's separation of parts. "Structural approaches require separation of parts... The need to define common structural notions sets up a situation where individual cases or groups of cases do not apply... A general system theory approach makes it possible to get past non-resolvable questions of structure and level by seeing that the issue derives from a mechanistic epistemology" (Hanson, 2001, p 549). Categories of concern include: man/woman, bourgeoisie/proletariat, producer/consumer, public/private; and for eco-feminists, man/nature (Coole, 1993; Plumwood 1993; Mias & Shiva, 2003). Dualisms, agrees Midgley (2000), are the 'enemies' of systems thinking "... the challenge to subject/object dualism is so important... because subject/object dualism underlies the mechanism that has characterized so much scientific theorizing in the past three centuries, but which is now being undermined by a variety of research perspectives from across the disciplines" (Midgley, 2000 , p 69).

Systems theory offers feminists an avoidance strategy to evade 'the blame trap'. "Blame is non-sequitur to a general systems theory approach in that it violates the principle of non-summativity". Feminists, entering a discourse using the notion of blame, are separating parts of a system in order to isolate the causal factor, then attribute responsibility to that factor. This requires two aspects of epistemology: separating parts from whole, and finite linear causality. Neither are appropriate to a general systems theory approach (Hanson 2001, p 551). However, this should not preclude researchers pursuing methodologies that actively seek to find the gendered contribution of either men or women, or for that matter, other groups of self-identified people, i.e. indigenous people, people of colour, or those living with disability.

Feminism, and systems both have transdisciplinary application. Both can be considered 'an approach' for research and to open up dialogue among the natural, physical and medical sciences and expand interdisciplinary discussions that have primarily focused on the social sciences and humanities. Feminist empiricist and action research methodologies can resonate well with notions of 'parallogic', capturing the insights of a person or persons in a context, as well as allowing for the observations of those who try to understand a context but are not part of it. I have drawn explicit attention to my own 'participant/observer' status in *Food Connect*, for example. Maturana's theory of autopoiesis, that all knowledge is known from a particular standpoint by human beings, and the invocation of emotion in language, make human beings switch from one 'reality' or human activity to another (Midgley, 2000, p 54 - 56) is similarly helpful when one considers that feminist scholars argue that the relegation of emotion to relative or second status has co-emerged in a social historical context with the ideology of sexism. A move to give prominence to emotion in models of human behaviour may provide more gender balanced theories. We can be less concerned with whether something makes sense, and more concerned with its own patterned redundancies (Hanson, 2000, p 554). Thus echoing the research cited above by Forrest (1993), action research and methodologies that seek to produce a 'less biased' description of the world by including and revealing women's perspectives in the analysis, intentionally counter the 'single society' approach to questions that assume a homogenous society in which gender and race are insignificant. (Braidotti, 1999; Chiappe & Flora, 1998; Forrest, 2005; Jamison, 2004; Mias & Shiva, 2003). Being able to analyse situations through the 'hearts of people embedded in a context' removes universal judgments about what is 'right' or 'wrong', to understand what things mean to people in context. "Systems theory is a way to look at action-reaction in the long term in order to guide intervention" (Hanson, 2001, p552). Therefore, a critical systems thinker exposes deliberately the taken for granted assumptions about who and what is relevant to an analysis that may hide important impacts, making visible work that implicitly supports power and privilege imbalances (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2004, p 12).

Methodological pluralism enables sets of techniques to operate sequentially or iteratively, to achieve a given purpose (Midgely, 2000, p 171). This concept offers a great deal to a feminist-systems research because distinct schools of twentieth century second wave feminist epistemology have forged perspectives from politics and philosophy to find ways to elevate the status of women and remove them from culturally subordinate roles. However, the diversity of feminisms brings out contradictions that may not appear to those working within a single discipline or practice, leading to 'what kind of feminist?'

questions that are divisive. These divisions can be transcended by methodological pluralism and relationship epistemology. Thus the issue is reframed in terms of causality, back and forth actions, rather than the separation of parts into levels (Hanson, 2001, p 549), and recognition that multiple feminist political ideologies can be employed despite the "...tensions and the paradoxes this produces but accepting this as the price of a relevant and dynamic politics within a fragmented, if phallogocentric, world... [Reflecting that] women, especially, occupy a variety of world's [political spaces]; traditional (as wives and mothers), modern (as workers and citizens) and post-modern (as consumers and participants in contemporary culture), each with its own oppressions, opportunities and politics" (Coole, 1993, p 222).

Harvesting the poly-cultural delights

"...the failure to give sufficient consideration to the fact that culture provides the context within which economic and technological developments take place is leading to ... disturbing results, since these developments are being achieved at great psychological, social, ethical, environmental and human cost... there is a price to be paid whenever discussions are made without sufficient consideration given to the context in which they are situated" (Schafer, 1993, quoted in King, 2000, p 2).

Where are the women of FC? In the description of the FC system above, the gender neutral language has given us no insight into the actual status, opinion or benefits women in the FC system derive from its operation, culture and community. Nor does it reveal the extent to which they contribute to its multiple operations and socially overlapping social, business, agricultural, economic, IT and communications sub-systems.

A non-assumptive feminist-systems approach will involve asking questions and actively looking in the obvious and hidden places for the women's activity; examining the processes that encourage and involve; it will listen to and utilise women's contributions, whether they are situated in the centre or at the margins of the systems and sub-systems.

Researchers can utilise the different perspectives learnt from the schools of feminism and apply these to different contexts of FC. With the garden metaphor, we might see the use of a liberal feminist approach to lightly prune - to tinker around the edges, in places like the workforce to weed out, plant and nurture the existing structure of the garden. However, a radical feminist's tools build new structures replacing old; reform, change, and establish new plants to propagate new fruits. An ecofeminist will worship the sacred nature of the garden and its elements. Some may believe that the garden's energy has feminine attributes and that these are to be highly valued. While the post-structuralist's understand that metaphor and meaning are a continual negotiation between the signifier and the signified. Meaning is never fixed, always dynamic. The metaphor can be deconstructed and meanings rebuilt. As FC and the garden metaphor are constructs in language, the boundaries are arbitrarily chosen and discursive. There are no universals, (except perhaps this one).

Similarly, researchers can bring a Checkland and Scholes 'soft systems' thinking perspective (King, 2000; Midgley 2002), to FC that should seek to reveal the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives of stakeholders within the systems, and show that the many different ways of viewing a situation can be rational. Our process would lead to problem formulation rather than problem identification, and prepare the ground for mutual understanding and negotiations of the problem(s) in question. We would invite researchers to position themselves as actors rather than attempt to remain as objective, dispassionate observers and researchers, and be endowed with an ethical responsibility to acknowledge their role in bringing about change, and be accountable for their research outcomes (King, 2000, p 46). We can be formulating problems for understanding around issues such as:

- Male misogyny, by eco-feminist interpretation, represents violence and repression against women and nature. Are these contrapunctual to the general aims of FC? Where is it explicitly stated that women's particular needs and contributions will be valued?

- What are the patterns of behaviour and attitudes of the personnel within FC? Do they mirror or echo dominant paradigms operating in Australian culture and society at large?
- Negative loops prevent change while positive loops are open to change and can amplify change. What feedback processes are in place to discuss, monitor and build on relationships and how are women, children and the environment, affected by these processes?
- How does FC retain and build upon its knowledge generation systems for the betterment of FC's operational systems, social, cultural and natural environment systems in which FC is dependent. How do each these systems impact on women?
- Where are the power differentials between the systems and the relationships between the individual and groups functioning within the systems and sub-systems?

If the recommendations made by the findings of research are fed back into the FC systems (like an organic fertilizer, rich and diverse), the growth of the FC garden, and the cultural expressions which govern the behaviour and decision making of agents within the FC system at different scales, will be strengthened by its proactive stance. This will lead to inclusion and learning from the representations and experience of all members of the FC community. Furthermore FC can influence and educate its community to recognise and adopt ways of thinking and behaving around equal opportunity and anti-discrimination, the valuing of the contribution of all the people of systems and sub-systems, and the natural and cultural environments in which we are all grounded. For those of us that enjoy FC's bounty of fresh fruit and vegetables every week, FC has the opportunity to enhance their taste and flavour, which in turn, will help firmly establish FC as a permanent and sustainable business entity well into our future.

Conclusion

Business and social systems need to recognise their fundamental relationships to the local ecological environment, to restore, maintain and prevent ongoing abusive practice. Similarly, valuing the contribution women make in society to the wellbeing of our society is an essential project. In this era of backlash and political excuses that effectively ignore women in political and social commentaries, it will be a telling indictment of our age if an entity, like FC, cannot or will not be open to a feminist critique of its systems and sub-systems. We have journeyed through a proposal outlining a merging of feminist and systems research approaches and perspectives to enable critical engagement with an emerging community based business in Brisbane, Australia. Like all keen gardeners, I am hopeful that you have enjoyed this brief tour where I have highlighted some of the exciting features. I would love to hear what you think and listen to your responses.

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Appendix 1

“Food Connect engages communities to support agriculture enabling equitable and efficient distribution of genuine quality food between local farmers and families”. Through its operations (Food Connect Operations or FCO) FC will seek to achieve the following things:

- Educate families to be more ecologically aware of food production;
- Educate families about the challenges of farming;
- Share the risks associated with food production between farmers and consumers;
- Provide opportunities for all farmers to adopt world’s best practice by educating and supporting them through conversion to organic production and the Food Connect Food Accreditation (FCFA) system;
- Provide an alternative distribution point for local farmers;
- Facilitate the development of relationships between farmers, families, and local networks, in communities;
- Enable and facilitate the establishment of FCO in other regions; and
- Facilitate and enable networks to establish a set of accreditation standards for FC food production and distribution.

Results from our actions do and will provide:

- An easily transferable and user friendly model of FCOs;
- Families feel connected to where their food is coming from and as a result are more empowered and motivated to make a stand about issues around food; and
- Farmers feel valued, supported, connected and acknowledged. Become more engaged and able to make changes to ways food is produced and the way they care for the landscape.

(Food Connect Business Plan, 2006, p 3 – 4)

FC customers or families accrue multiple benefits. They have:

- knowledge of the people and agricultural systems producing their weekly food,
- produce that tastes 'the way it used to' bursting with flavour,
- flexible choice of box sizes and varieties of value-added products,
- opportunity to share in seasonal surpluses,
- reduced fuel consumption by taking fewer trips to the supermarket,
- received their boxes anywhere in the greater Brisbane area,
- the option to collect their boxes in the late afternoon or evening from their local City Cousin,
- saved money. FC produce is below the Brisbane average organic retail prices, and
- flexible ordering and delivery systems enabling subscribers to skip a week or two for holidays.

Social Contribution

- Making accessible mostly organic, nutritious, wholesome food at a more affordable price. Translates into a cost effective way to budget for weekly meals and improve eating habits
- Local employment opportunities for those groups disenfranchised by mainstream including ex-farmers, women, refugees, long term unemployed and elderly
- Providing an opportunity for young people to remain on the family farm and providing employment for those wishing to learn farming skills
- Promoting self-sufficiency and self-reliance within local communities, effecting a reduction in reliance on external markets for food supplies

- Ensurance of stable market channels for small farms and hence on-going economic viability for regional communities
- Increased capacity of local networks to actively contribute towards positive social change
- Capacity building amongst participating communities to enable them to develop their own community food distribution system
- Long term; creating the opportunity for growth of related industries such as cottage industries and eco-education/tourism

Environmental Contribution

- Small scale farming leads to sustainable natural resource use; as the farmer maintains a close and mutual relationship with the land. The family farm may otherwise have been bought out by a bigger farm business, sold up or lay unused due to financial difficulty.
- Although organic certification is not essential to operate a CSA farm, farmers will be supported in transition to best practice organic growing methodologies to suit thier farm.
- To develop an environmentally stable and sustainable agricultural system. Moving away from the detrimental effects of monoculture, genetically modified plant species, and chemical fertilization and pest control to sustainable organic farming models.
- The produce from Food Connect is all sourced from within a five-hour radius of Brisbane which allows the freshness to be retained. Any green vegetables you receive will have been picked with the shortest time frame possible between harvest and delivery.
- FC encourages farmers to grow more traditional varieties of vegetables and fruit converting to world's best practice farming methods and by providing education and support to convert to organic and biological systems.
- We pack boxes with a mix of standard, fortnightly and seasonal produce. This means our farmers are not forced to grow out of season.