

Paul B. Thompson

The Spirit of the Soil, 2nd edition

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Readers of Thompson's revised edition of *The Spirit of the Soil* will likely be of two distinct groups, those who have already read and are familiar with the first edition and those who have not yet read the original book. Those who haven't read the first edition will need a review of the content itself, in order to understand the context of the revisions, while the other group will likely be more interested in how this second edition is different from the first. I endeavour in this review to give adequate information to all interested in this book, regardless of their familiarity with the original edition, and so will start by catering to those who have not yet read *The Spirit of the Soil*. Those of you who have read the original edition will find the most relevant information in the last few paragraphs of this review.

When the first edition of *The Spirit of the Soil* was published in 1995, Thompson was not yet the agricultural philosophy icon he is today, and agricultural philosophy itself was not yet the developed field of study it is today. While there were certainly people writing about particular problems in agriculture, Thompson was one of the first to critique the agriculture industry as a whole as a matter of philosophic engagement. In *The Spirit of the Soil*, Thompson critiques the presuppositions of the agricultural industry and explores potential alternatives in order to prove that how we choose to manage farming/agriculture in America isn't the only way to go about it (nor is it how we've always done it). Further, it is possible that other methods have potential to be better overall. Thompson was especially concerned with large scale agricultural operations and how their implicit values gave the industry a particular definition of success. Valuing production yields has led to our productionist paradigm, which in turn has led to an array of problems. As with all competing values, in order to achieve success as the industry has defined it, it is necessary to sacrifice certain other things in order to achieve that success. The productionist paradigm in the agricultural industry values an increase in production as its definition of success and so is willing to put aside animal and environmental (and in certain ways human) welfare as a necessary sacrifice for achieving higher yields of production. Even when faced with particular problems that result from the focus on increasing production, the solutions that are considered acceptable would be those that mitigate these problems without sacrificing the higher yield, which are largely suggested technological fixes.

Thompson argues that the industry is ignoring that their definition of what counts as better or worse outcomes is dependent on the presuppositions of the productionist model; it is unable to truly step back and assess what needs to be done to improve the industry as a whole. In 1995, the public largely was unaware of the problems resulting from the food industry – such as methane emissions, toxic runoff and water contamination, Earth's limited fresh water usage, fertilizer and pesticide usage in feed crops, antibiotic or hormone usage in animals, and the discomfort (to put

it mildly) of livestock, to name a few. As a result, another part of this book's aim was to bring some of these issues to light, and to explain how they resulted or were compounded by our productionist paradigm (Thompson focuses on the issues of pesticide use and the environmental consequences resulting from industrial livestock production.) One of Thompson's greatest philosophical successes in this book was to show that the industry, when forced to respond to a scientifically-proven harm, only focuses on solving the problem without sacrificing production (through a technological fix), instead of considering this growing list of consequences as an opportunity to reflect on the righteousness of their presuppositions.

The Spirit of the Soil, since being published in 1995, has proven itself as a foundational text in agrarian philosophy. While it no longer provides a uniquely solitary view-point, as there are others who have since argued for agriculture's place of prominence in environmental ethics and other authors who since 1995 have published longer, more in-depth works on the various issues related to industrial agriculture, the importance of this text as a groundwork for sustainable agriculture cannot be denied. So what does this second edition add to the value of the original edition? Thompson has done a beautiful job editing the text so that it now simultaneously responds to some of the progress that has been made over the last 20 years in agricultural research, while maintaining the force and eloquence of the original arguments that are still as relevant to our food industry today as they were in 1995. There are minor edits throughout the book for clarity, which are appreciated, but the main changes to the second edition are: the addition of a new introduction, an entirely new last chapter titled 'The Agrarian Vision', substantial revision of chapter 5 'Calculating the True Cost of Food', and the inclusion of the '2015 Preface to the Japanese Translation'. Thompson adds the most content (in comparison to the original edition) with his new introduction and with the inclusion of an additional chapter 8, which combine to add over 50 pages to the final page count (taking it from 196 to 252 pages).

The introduction to the second edition is surprisingly rich; Thompson not only gives the standard introductory information of the goals of the book and a broad summary of the argument, but he also gives the reader his motivation behind writing this second edition and responds to a couple of themes of criticisms of his book that have emerged since it was published, namely those of animal rights theorists and feminists. The other substantial addition, a new chapter added at the end of the book, Thompson provides the connections that link this book to his 2010 book *The Agrarian Vision*. In it he lays out that agrarian philosophy values the connection between people and the land and there is currently a lack of that connection in most persons, which is indicative of a problem that cannot be summarised simply by listing environmental consequences that result from the agricultural industry. Thompson ends *The Spirit of the Soil* by setting out in this chapter what an agrarian vision of sustainability can look like.

These two main additions, the introduction and chapter 8, plus the clarity of language and focus of arguments that emerges from the editing, are substantial enough that I strongly recommend to everyone that they use this second edition over the first. Whether as an introductory textbook for a class on agricultural sustainability, information for your own research

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or as a book simply for the pleasure of reading, this updated version from Paul Thompson of his classic book should be your new go-to.

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