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Notes on the Tensions of US Agricultural Governance**

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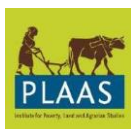


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Farmer & Non-Farmer Responsibility to Each Other: Notes on the Tensions of US Agricultural Governance

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“[I]f farmers expect society to help protect them against the crushing effect of surpluses, they must be prepared to protect society by working out permanent arrangements for storing of reserve food supplies. Both farmers and non-farmers have a responsibility to each other, and any dodging of this responsibility by either group is likely to end in disaster” (Wallace 1936:14).

Introduction

This is a preliminary draft of an exploratory essay on farmer and non-farmer responsibility to each other, in the United States. At the nexus of this mutual dependence is a tenuous contract, straining against the chronic crisis of overproduction. This old secret crisis of surplus, coupled with the crisis of its own invisibility (hidden by assertions of scarcity), and the new enclosures and markets created in the wake of overproduction’s destructive impacts, all comprise the engine of late agro-capitalist expansionism. Drawing upon archival research¹ at the US Department of Agriculture’s National Archive Library Special Collections, this paper chronicles the origin of this contract, which forms the basis for US agricultural policy, specifically the Farm Bill. This contract between farmers and non-farmers was leveraged through the federal government but was compromised from the beginning by the originary coloniality of US agriculture (Mignolo 2007, Graddy-Lovelace 2016). As Carolyn Finney punctuated her Plenary Remarks at last weekend’s Dimensions of Political Ecology conference at University of Kentucky: “All. This. Land. Was. Stolen.” The contract eroded over the course of the 20th century, subsumed by these foundational contradictions, which currently flare as cognitive dissonance regarding labor (xenophobia amidst labor shortages), ecology (deregulation amidst climate change-induced disasters), trade (one-eyed fixation on exports), and social discriminations (ongoing racism and patriarchal heteronormativity amidst rise in diverse growers). But, it is worth excavating the attempt at this core social contract between farmers and non-farmers, extricating it from the ethno-nationalism at work in dominant farm policy, exemplified by the American Farm Bureau Federation. It is worth recognizing the core agrarian honesty of this mutual responsibility—and the risks of dodging it.

Crushing Effects

In the throes of the first World War, the United States government aggressively incentivized wheat production expansion across the vast prairie lands. Tens of millions of acres of deeply rooted perennials were plowed under to plant amber waves of grain to export to warring Europeans. Deploying the new agricultural cooperative extension service through the new County Farm Bureaus, the federal government pressured farmers to maximize production. In the ‘Food Will Win the War’

¹ Archives: Throughout the Fall 2017, I researched all Farm Bill related documents in the USDA National Archive Library Special Collections that chronicled farmer engagement, farmer organization advocacy and influence and impact, from 1910s through 1940s. Content and Discourse analysis (using NVivo qualitative coding) of federal and state policy documents (27), twelve video speeches from FB, and recordings of four 2017 USDA Farm Bill hearings. Content and discourse analysis of US Farm Bills (from 1980s-2018 mark-ups). Five Key-informant Interviews regarding Farm Bureau political process and goals and influence on upcoming Farm Bill.

campaign, the Federal Extension Bulletin declared: “More Farm Bureaus needed to Federate Agricultural Forces for National Defense” (O’Neal 1939: 6).

Prices were good, farmers kept plowing. Production was good, thanks to feet of topsoil. Then European survivors crawled out of the trenches and back to their fields. The world market groaned at the bounty, depressing prices. Farmers organized, suffering the consequences of unfettered competition. In a 1920 letter, Mr. Mellon of the Iowa-based American Society of Equity (“An Organization That Teaches Co-operation Among Farmers”) wrote: “The development of producer co-operation among farmers is, more or less certain.” Conditions force cooperation, with the rapid increase in tenant farming: 54% of farmers in Iowa were tenant, and “many of the rest only own a portion of what they till...From this I glean that there is going to have to be some tall hustling done on the part of our farmers to make ends meet. I am afraid that the teaching of increased production won’t solve the problem.”

According to a US Department of Agriculture internal overview, a whole spectrum of farmer organizations emerged, from the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry to the Farmers Holiday Association: “a full-blown representative of traditional agrarian radicalism” (Notes on Farm Bloc: 20), that called on farmers to stage a general strike in the face of Depression farm foreclosures. Bank officials had been turned away by crowds of desperate farmers losing their land. The National Guard was brought in during farm auctions. The United Farmers League comprised “the extreme left wing of the farmers’ movement, [and] sought to organize small farmers against rich farmers, land bankers, and New Dealers” (20), while the Farmers’ Educational and Cooperative Union of America began in 1902 as agrarian radicalism. Calling for “three-year moratoriums for farmers facing foreclosure and eviction; legislation forcing middlemen who purchase farm produce to pay minimum prices based on costs of production; a complete embargo on all farm produce that would compete with domestic markets,” the National Farmers Union “claims to be the only organization which speaks for the ‘Class interests’ of American farmers. It carries its radicalism a good long way” (15). Calling for strikes, but aiming for independence from government, the NFU “maintains further that most of the ‘orthodox and respectable’ farmers organizations are in effect ‘company unions’” (Notes on Farm Bloc: 15)—a reference to the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF).

The collapse of agricultural prices in 1920, while nonagricultural prices and wages remained rigid led to alarming disparity between farm income and costs. Farm-gate prices plummeted, driving farmers further afield for more land to plow and plant, further driving down prices. The stock market crash, Dust Bowl, and Great Depression ensued. AFBF, set up DC headquarters and lobbied hard to secure bipartisan leverage. Despite extreme political differences, many organizations forged alliances out of necessity, and became known as the Farm Bloc. The Farm Bloc successfully established the Grain Futures Act and the Packers and Stockyards Act to counter collusion in the notoriously corrupt and consolidated meat industry. The USDA responded the proliferation of diverse farmer organizations, and their improbable coalitions: “Agriculture has inherent difficulties which can not [sic] be overcome by the individual producer. It is a far-flung industry characterized by small producing units...All of these farms are in competition with each other” (Hyde 1929). The inherent difficulties of agriculture “can be met only by organization...We cannot merge six million farms into one gigantic producing corporation” (Hyde 1929). Farmer leaders demanded “parity” to bring domestic prices up to the “ratio-price” based on the pre-WWI purchasing power of agricultural producers. George Peek declared he would “strip to the waist to fight for remedial legislation which will provide for the disposal of the surplus” (as quoted in Porter 2000: 385). The National Grange advocated for the 1928 The Export Debenture Plan to mitigate the imbalance of buying from a protected market (high, retail prices) and selling on a world market (with low farm-gate prices) (Davis 1929). The Farm Bloc fought for the comparable 1928 and 1929 McNary-Haugen Acts, which dominated farm organizations debates and coalitions between 1924 and 1928 (Porter 2000).

Cotton farmer and general manager of NC Cotton Growers Cooperative Association Benton Blalock testified before Congress in 1933 about the poverty ensuing from postwar overproduction: “We taught the American farmer how to operate in high gear but have not taught him how to get back into low

gear in production, or even in intermediate...I know that the landlords are unable to pay their mortgage payments and that rents are not equal to taxes. I know that tenants have been reduced to mere serfs – I know that farm laborers with their measly daily wage of 40 cents per day cannot provide even the bare necessities of life for themselves and families. It is absurd even to think of still following a policy of Letting Nature Take Its Course” (2-3). Likewise, the National Cooperative Council decried—and analyzed—“the Farm Problem”: “What are the reasons for this low purchasing power of farmers? The principal factor responsible for this condition was the war and the great need of developing a food supply for the allied armies. Under the pressure of this great need the government urged as a patriotic duty that farmers increase their production in every possible way” (1936: 5)—leading to egregious soil erosion and price collapses.

Shortly after the 1932 Domestic Price Adjustment Plan, the idea of prewar purchasing power, “parity” became the consensus objective, with production control deemed necessary, and domestic allotment as the chosen means. The meeting that solidified the plan for the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (the first Farm Bill) or “the magna charta of American Ag...was the most harmonious farm meeting I ever attended” (Gregory 1935) with the AFBF, National Grange, NFU, and other groups all in back-to-the-wall consensus. Supply management entailed a number of mechanisms to limit production so as to support a viable price floor including grain reserves, idling lands, non-recourse loans, and domestic allotments (Goldstein 1989). “The Farm Act calls for cooperation with a new promise – the promise that from now on those who cooperate will get the main benefits, and those who do not co-operate will have to take their chances and stand the loss,” the American Farm Bureau Federation wrote in 1933: farmers’ “strong desire for speedy action and a determination to fully cooperate if the way of cooperation is made plain to them” (AFBF 1933: 2).

But, in early 1936, the Supreme Court majority (in *US vs Butler 1936*) invalidated the processing tax provisions of the AAA and stopped production control programs. Within days, hundreds of farm organization leaders convened on Washington. Long before commercial flights and internet, the group response was remarkable. On January 14, 1936, over the National Broadcasting Company’s National Farm and Home Hour radio show, USDA Secretary Henry A. Wallace commented: “It seems to me significant that they [‘some 70 farm organization folks’] were able to complete agreement on recommendations [to the USDA and Congress] in less than two full days. In so doing, they displayed once more the spirit of farm solidarity which characterized the conference on March 10, 1933” (Wallace 1936), when farm leaders had first formulated the AAA. Within three months, farmers across the country had deliberated, decided upon, and proposed what became the Soil Conservation & Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and the 1938 Agricultural Adjustment Act: effectively, the second Farm Bill. Here, foregoing processing taxes, Congress would pay producers for limiting production of surplus, soil-depleting crops, and/or switching them to soil-conserving crops and rotations. Benefit payments stove for “not only parity in prices but also parity in income between agricultural and nonagricultural producers” (Goldstein 1989: 45). AFBF president Edward O’Neil, who wielded significant influence in these Acts, framed the policies as escape from the well-known disasters of glut: the farmer “remembers what happened to agriculture after the World War period. He has not forgotten how his unsaleable surpluses accumulated during the years when industry was most prosperous” (O’Neil 1936:1). That the risks of overproduction were such an obvious threat, such a catalyzing force in politics and policy, is noteworthy.

“No statement by anyone can warp the thinking of the man on the land about the ill-effect of farm surpluses on national prosperity. He discounts the statements of those who say that, to restore the purchasing power of the people of the United States requires maximum production of food and fibre and maximum consumption of that products of the farm. He is not misled by the statements of those who say that if we could return to the 1925-29 period of urban prosperity consumers would buy all that farmers can produce at fair prices...But the very fact that huge mountains of surpluses were accumulating was also the cause for ruining farm prices at home...[he] remembers the distress which came to him and his neighbors because the price of farm products went down, frightfully depressed by mountains of surpluses” (O’Neil 1936: 2).

In a vividly Polanyian moment of social protection against marketization, the first Administrator of the AAA, H.R. Tolley addressed the AFBF in 1936:

“There are those who say that it is somehow wrong for farmers to cooperate in any program to overcome such dangers. These people contend that the free play of economic forces, with unlimited competition for farmers, are enough to solve the problem. But although these rugged individualists may now know it, the tide of progress has passed them by. The day has gone when farmers can be denied the opportunity to join together for their common good. The day has gone when they are content to come to grips single handedly with cruel forces of nature such as drought, or with economic forces just as cruel. In our time, farmers are learning to work together to moderate these forces. So I say that I believe we are determined to keep on fighting to overcome or minimize the two greatest dangers to agricultural security—the double threat against farm income through crop failure and through price collapse” (4)

In an address to farm organization leaders at the USDA on February 8, 1937, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace summarized the concerns of farmers: “For many years those who have profited at the expense of agriculture have labeled as ‘impractical’ every proposal that threatened, while helping agriculture, to interfere with their liberty to exploit. Farmers know now that programs to improve farm income and stabilize supply and price can be made to work” (Wallace 1937: 2). Policy unfolded accordingly with a tiered solution, starting with commodity loans, grain reserves, then payments in kind, then ‘storage-in-the-ground’ soil conservation as last resort (5). The prioritization of domestic agrarian viability led to a protectionism that is remembered as isolationism for its short- and long-term impacts on the nation’s trade policies (Goldstein 1989), but that paved the way for the second food regime (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Graddy-Lovelace and Diamond 2017).

Farmer cooperation—along racialized and gendered lines of white supremacy and patriarchy—congealed at this time out of necessity:

“An individual farmer who wanted to reduce his acreage in cash crops had no assurance that other farms would do the same. Lacking such assurance, he felt it necessary to work his land to its maximum production, in order to bring his unit costs below low prices. Thus the vicious circle continued, high production swelling surpluses to larger proportions, larger surpluses depressing prices to still lower levels, and lower prices causing farmers to make still greater use of their lands” (Wilson 1936: 6). “All these readjustments should make for saving instead of wasting the surplus wealth of the land, for re-investing surplus wealth in improved living for the people” (15).

Importantly, this consensus on the ecological and economic disasters of overproduction for farmers—a consensus that saturates USDA Special Collection National Archives from the inter-war period—extended to the impacts on consumers. “Did the surplus help the consumer? Farm from it. As farmers quit buying and factories shut down, the breadlines grew longer and longer. Not until the government itself stepped in, bought surplus food and gave it to those on relief was the gap between surplus and hunger finally bridged,” Tolley concluded at a 1936 address (11). Wallace concurred in a radio show later that year: “We want our consumers abundantly taken care of but we do not want to plow an unduly high percentage of soil which washes and blows away and give the product of that soil away for practically nothing merely to satisfy certain special interests which profit by volume. These special interests would be delighted to give 6-cent cotton, 30-cent wheat, 5-cent lard, 8-cent tobacco to foreign nations. Their altruism is amazing as long as it is someone else’s labor and soil fertility that is being given away” (7). O’Neill echoed the benefits to non-farmers of supply management policies, which “preserve for the benefit of both city and country the greatest national resource the country possesses...the conservation and restoration of the source of all basic wealth, the soil” (1936: 4). Three years later, as WWII loomed, Wallace reiterated the mutual benefit—and interdependency—of farmer and non-farmer well-being, though this contract become consumed in nationalism: “farm

solidarity is more than ever essential. If you allow yourselves to be broken up into discordant groups, the enemies of agriculture who always have opposed any workable farm program and will oppose any such program will have their way. But if you ‘stand with your neighbor,’ you cannot fail...The nation need always guard its agriculture, so that agriculture can always guard the nation” (Wallace 1939: 16-17). At that point, years of government support for farmers had drawn a few raised eyebrows among urbanizing populations. Testimony in a Congressional Hearing sought to allay the concerns by re-emphasizing the crux of the contract:

“So far as the matter of making such payments to agriculture, which someone from city districts without full information might, perhaps question, it seems to me that we have every justification to ask for this aid to agriculture. We now have a law on the statute books fixing minimum wages and maximum hours for labor. Industry has long had price control and governmental aid...And all the farmers have ever asked for—at leader all that our organization has ever asked for—is the aid of the Government to help bring them to a parity position. We do not ask the help of the Government to bring us any higher than parity...Even at parity prices, agriculture will be getting far from her proper share of the national income. This is due to several causes, among which are the monopolistic price controls in industry” (Ogg 1939: 1691-2).

In 1942, “[p]arity agitation entered an all time high,” when the federal government pursued vigorous anti-inflation measures (Saloutos 1947: 319). Farm labor prices had risen with the onset of the War, and Farm Bloc leaders strove to review the parity price formula to include labor costs. With increased industrialization, farmers the “role that farmers performed as consumers had grown as commercial agriculture had expanded” (Saloutos 1947: 322), but their purchasing power decreased as their farm-gate prices decreased and other products including farm inputs increased. The early 20th century agrarian populism—much less radicalism—had been subsumed by a more paradoxical, fraught populism led by the farmer elites through the American Farm Bureau Federation (Berger 1971; Vogeler 1981; Berlage 2000; Graddy-Lovelace, under review). The AAA program benefits largely fell upon class and race hierarchies, and though striving to stave off farmer bankruptcies, ended up exacerbating consolidation regardless and rural, racialized class disparity (Grubbs 2000; Winders 2007; Kendi 2016). But, a core commitment to farmer viability is worth extricating, if at all possible, from the coloniality of the agricultural situation.

I have been conducting interviews with Farm Bureau policy directors at the federal and state levels. A number of complex themes have already arisen, showing the internal contradictions between acute farmer financial pressures and AFBF national policy lobbying richly for renewed liberalization. The original, driving force of farmer advocacy, organization, and subsequent agricultural policy—recognition of the risks of surplus—have been largely erased from AFBF federal policy books, and thus from the Farm Bill itself. In-person interviews with federal AFBF leaders and phone interviews with state-level Farm Bureau leaders demonstrate tensions: “only 3% of farms are corporate-owned” (Western state FB policy director: November 2017), I was reminded repeatedly, as if to stave off assertions of corporate capture. Farmers are struggling to make ends meet, and the safety nets “barely cover the cost of doing business” (Western state FB policy director: October 2017). As I chronicle in a paper under review, the Farm Bureau claims nearly 6 million members as support for its farm policies, though only 2 million people farm in the US, and of course some are not members of AFBF. Over two-thirds of AFBF members have joined to receive the Farm Bureau’s affordable and heavily-advertised home, farm, and auto insurance services. Farm Bureaus run a multibillion-dollar network of insurance companies, the third-largest insurance group in the US, with premiums generating more than \$11 billion in 2010, on top of has assets worth more than \$22 billion (Shearn 2011).

Nevertheless, as overall numbers of farmers decreased over the 20th century, and mainstream imaginaries omitted, if not outright excluded—farm-based life and livelihoods, Farm Bureau, through effectively rural-targeted public relations, came to represent social dignity for rural communities. Interviews described this in manifold ways: “there’s an old adage: everyone needs a doctor or lawyer once in their life. And a farmer three times daily, or some people, like me, more than three times,” a

Farm Bureau policy director from a Western state told me: “Only 2% of US population engaged in growing food for the rest of the world. We’ve got to safeguard that handful of folks growing food.” Farmers, activists, and scholars have lambasted the feeding-the-world rhetoric (So much to cite here; Patel 2008; Sommerville et al 2014; Hunter et al 2017), but it is worth working through the many confluences at work in these discourses: in particular, the concern with agrarian viability, so dangerously misguided and misunderstood in these policies, and yet so admirably centered. Researchers in and out of academia are already doing important work on this front, from critical agrarian scholars at this ERPI conference, to Public Policy Polling pollsters, who found that 89% of Americans who voted for Trump in 2016 are “concerned that the proposed merger between Bayer and Monsanto will harm independent farmers and agricultural communities, according a survey of 1,506 registered voters; 92 percent believe the Trump administration should take a more aggressive stance toward corporate monopolies” (*Politico* June 14, 2017). The farmer/non-farmer contract framework strengthens the anti-trust argument. It also shows the hypocrisy of AFBF, who in the 1990s, helped defeat national legislation by Senator Wellstone that would have imposed an 18-month moratorium on corporate agribusiness mergers. The Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation then passed a unanimous resolution condemning the AFBF’s stance against the merger moratorium as a “gross breach of faith and detrimental to the interests of producer members” (Wallace 2000).

Foregrounding the farmer/non-farmer contract also strengthens the case for regulating commodity future exchanges to prevent speculation. Summarizing the AFBF’s support for the Commodity Exchange Bill, O’Neil asserted:

“The man on the land asks this question: ‘Why should not the commodity exchanges, upon which futures are bought and sold, be subject to regulation by the Secretary of Agriculture, so that wild speculation in the commodities themselves or in the future of those commodities, can be prohibited? Why should a farm crop be placed practically on the level of a horse race, so that anyone who has the cash and who is speculatively minded, can come in freely and bid on a probable winner?’...More than ten years ago, the Farm Bureau started to prepare bills to regulate grain gambling on the Boards of Trade. We wanted to take out a lot of this speculative influence which now determines more than does the quantity of our commodity, the prices which the man on the land gets. Always, there have been great opposition to these measures, but the farm Bureau has moved along steadily in this direction. Now the present commodity exchange bill, instead of being applicable only to grain, applies also to cotton, rice, corn, oats, barley, rye, flaxseed, grain sorghum, mill feeds, and even butter and eggs. We are indeed on our way to eventual success in eliminating speculation in foodstuffs” (1936: 6).

Nevertheless, these policy goals have shifted radically over the 20th century, as has dominant farmer organization support—and thus policies—for supply management (Ray et al 2003: 1; Wilson 2011).² Correspondingly, the ideal of the family farm has turned into the myth of the family farm, with agribusiness benefitting off of this myth (Vogeler 1981). As farmer plights compound, latent alliances exist for rural-urban solidarity, around the question of how to support viable, diversified agricultural livelihoods for diverse growers and agricultural communities. The very crises wrought by current agri-food economies, policies, practices, and imaginaries are themselves opportunities to actualize these shared critiques.

Farmgate prices for commodity crops remain close to or below their reference prices (Zulauf 2017). Farmer participation increasingly shifting to PLC, though ecol disasters trigger ARC....Only 6% of nonmetropolitan (rural) populations lives in counties economically dependent on farming (Ahearn 2017). Rise of off-farm income, out of necessity. According to USDA ERS 2018 statistics, 82% of

² The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) had historically ensured non-recourse loans, with interest rates commensurate with cost of production. This created a price floor: commodity crop purchasers had to pay at least the loan rate. Otherwise, the crop—not the land upon which it was grown—would be forfeited to a government reserve. These were replaced with marketing loans in 1996; the 2002 Farm Bill allowed prices to drop below loan rates because of Loan Deficiency Payments and Marketing Loan Gains.

farmer household income from off-farm sources, with net farm income forecast to decrease \$4.3 billion (6.7%) to \$59.5 billion in 2018: the lowest level in nominal terms since 2006” (ERS 2018). Slightly more than half of farm households continue the recent trend of negative farm income. Ongoing cost-price squeezes continue to churn surviving farmers into bankruptcy and foreclosure. The boom-and-bust cycles, exemplified in late 2000 ethanol price rise due to Renewable Fuel Standard. Producers were incentivized by banks and policies to invest in larger combines, more acreage, increased inputs (Shields 2009). A few years later, commodity and dairy prices have fallen precipitously.

Consolidation proceeded throughout the 20th century despite supply management programs, but accelerated in the 1980s. Remaining farmers have grown richer, thereby obscuring the agrarian crisis itself. Since the 1980s, average (mean) farm size has remained steady, but according to MacDonald et al 2013, this “seeming stability” hides major, continuing shift of cropland and production to larger operations (i.e., operations with at least 2,000 cropland acres), a sharp decline in midsize crop farms, and “an increase in the counted number of very small farms with very limited amounts of land and production (i.e., farms with fewer than 50 cropland acres)” (McFadden and Hoppe 2017: 20). The midpoint acreage of this average increases each year, especially in sectors with extreme economies of scale pressures, like livestock and dairy. From 1991-2015, large farms—those with gross cash farm income before expenses of \$1 million or more (in inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars)—increased their share of agricultural production from 23-41% (ERS 2016: iii). Agricultural policies, attempting to help, keep enabling the trend, with Land Grant Universities, agricultural research apparatuses, and cooperative agricultural extension geared increasingly toward high-input high yield production, and federal supports going to the farmers still in the game, i.e, wealthier ones. Commodity program payments, most conservation program payments, and crop insurance indemnities have shifted to larger farms following consolidation trends—and thus to higher income households (McFadden and Hoppe 2017). A vicious financial, political, and socio-economic cycle ensues. Larger farms can handle vagaries better than smaller ones, but the larger vagaries also cause instability and risk for large operations, which have much to lose. Mergers compound the trends: consolidation as a phenomenon results from and causes more consolidation. Insurance, in attempting to mitigate this, exacerbates it: “Since commodity program payments are based on current or recent historical production of program commodities, payments will shift to larger farms as they consolidate acreage receiving payments for currently produced or historically produced crops” (ibid: 24): in 1991, farms with at least \$1 million in GCFI (in 2015 dollars) received nearly 11 percent of commodity program payments; by 2015, their share had increased to 34 percent. In 1991, 61.3 percent of commodity program payments went to small operations with less than \$350,000 in GCFI, but that share fell to 30.2 percent by 2015. Likewise, data for Environmental Quality Incentive Program show a marked shift away from smaller operations in 2006-15 and toward midsize and large operations, with a significant shift of working-land payments to farms with higher household incomes (ibid: 32).

Rural sociologists and community leaders have attempted to show causal correlation between agricultural consolidation and rural problems: surveying 51 studies investigating the effects of industrialized farming on community well-being from the 1930s to 2007, Lobo and Stofferahn found that “Adverse impacts were found across an array of indicators measuring socioeconomic conditions, community social fabric, and environmental conditions. Few positive effects of industrialized farming were found across studies” (2008: 219). A decade later, the opioid epidemic claimed 64,000 overdose deaths in 2016, double 2006 rates. Three farmers of Agri-Mark Inc., a dairy cooperative with about 1,000 members in northeastern US, committed suicide in the past three years, according to NPR. When the cooperative mailed its farmer-members their milk check in February 2018, it included a USDA Economic Research Services forecast for 2018 milk prices forecast, and a list of suicide prevention hotlines (Smith 2018).

What would a farmer/non-farmer social contract look like that was not bound in ethno-nationalism and coloniality? The mobilizations around the Farm Bill give scant clues, but they are worth attending to so as to recall the honesty of the central problem of unfettered competition and overproduction. USDA historian Ball reflects upon the farm policy goal of the common good:

“Planning for the stabilization of the agricultural industry as a whole, and to restore and maintain its parity with other industries; Planning for a level of cultural opportunity and attractive and satisfying environment under rural conditions as high as can be achieved under urban conditions; The concept of the nation as an agricultural unit rather than as a collection of sections, States, counties, communities, or individual farms; Consideration of the economic life of the US as one economic and social problem, rather than as the separate problems of agriculture, commerce, finance, industry, transportation, labor, or other professions; the viewpoint that the welfare of the people of the US is the joint welfare of one people and not the separate welfares of producers, handlers, and consumers; Development of a completely coordinated program of conservation and stabilized use of all the natural resources related to agriculture, including land, soil, water, vegetative cover, wild life, recreation, minerals, air, and radiation; expansion of the program of cooperation to include all Federal, State, regional, or local official agencies having activities of mutual importance and responsibility, and with a much fuller participation of private individuals and corporations, for the common good” (Ball 1936: 19).

What would agricultural policy look like that shed the pre-corporate leanings, white supremacy, and militarized ethno-nationalism?

Scholars of European history have chronicled the authoritarian implications of agrarian crisis. According to historical statistical analysis of aggregate electoral data: “The higher the share of middle peasants, the higher the success of the Nazi party, beginning with the election in July 1932” (Thurner et al 2014: 62): “rural stratum most susceptible to fascism are so-called ‘proprietors of farmer-capitalist agricultural enterprises’ (Linz 1976: 375)” (62). The racist, xenophobic layers of the American Farm Bureau Federation 2017 Policy Book bode ominously. It upholds marriage as the union between one man and one woman, and opposes “granting special privileges to those that participate in alternative lifestyles” (5.1). It demands English-only Star-Spangled Banner and pledge of allegiance, and decries desecration of the American flag or “purging of United States history by the removal of symbols that represent historic events and/or persons from our nation’s past.” It opposes “Any program which tends to separate, isolate, segregate or divide the people of our country under the guise of emphasizing ethnic diversity.” The militarized, racialized, heteronormative overtones unfold into a prosperity theology of individualized accumulation: “We believe in the American capitalistic, private, competitive enterprise system in which property is privately owned, privately managed and operated for profit and individual satisfaction. Any erosion of that right weakens all other rights guaranteed to individuals by the Constitution,” the Policy Book asserts, articulating the contours of contemporary U.S. hyper-nationalism. “America’s unparalleled progress is based on freedom and dignity of the individual, sustained by our founding principles rooted in Judeo/Christian values, commandments and the sanctity of life” (AFBF 2017), even as it opposes indigenous tribal sovereignty. The stakes are frighteningly high.

These egregious policies, as many have argued, are dangerous reactions to a real plight. At the heart of that plight, less have argued, is that broken social contract between farmers and non-farmers. The resulting economic and ecological disasters lead to social and more recently political ones. The consumer-producer divide, predicated on dichotomized urban and rural realms, have led to reactionary backlashes against urban biases and lack of understanding of agricultural struggles in (neo)liberalist politics and journalism. Congresswoman Cheri Bustos (D-IL) launched a 2018 “Hope from the Heartland” political pamphlet on the steady Democratic losses in rural America over the course of the 20th century on into 21st century, and her counsel, based on interviews with the remaining rural-based Democrats in Congress. “We never recovered from the economic recession of the 1980’s,” said former State Rep. Tate from northwestern Missouri. “We need candidates that have backgrounds in agriculture and understand agriculture,” said Iowa State Rep. Beringer. “We need to bring farmers and miners into the conversation about regulation,” said former Minnesota State Rep. Morrow. The dysfunctions of a two-party system? Regardless, avoid urban-rural dichotomizations that hierarchize the former over the latter: “Don’t Give Up on Rural.”

Thought AFBF and commodity groups continue to dominate USDA policies, grassroots agrarian organizations are working hard to forge coalitions of advocacy, from the National Family Farm Coalition and Rural Coalition—both longtime advocates for agrarian justice through, in part, fair prices for farmers—to the National Farmers Union and the National Young Farmers Coalition. The NFFC’s 2007 Food from Family Farms Act asserted it is “time for a new farm bill that acts as a consumer-farmer economic bill of rights” (1). The US “must take the lead in promoting international commodity agreements aimed at setting floor prices and equitable sharing of responsibility for international reserves and supply management, thus eliminating the destructive practice of dumping” (4), through a proposal for Market Price Supports, established through Commodity Credit Corporation nonrecourse loans for key commodity crops.

Trump’s recent proposed cuts to farm support, rural development, conservation, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance programs may soon force a reckoning for AFBF contingents. The proposed budget eliminates funding for the USDA rural single-family housing direct loan program and eliminates USDA funding for water and wastewater treatment facilities. eliminate rural business and cooperative programs (Schaffer and Ray 2017). It would reduce ten-year expenditures to agriculture by \$46.5 billion and nutrition by \$190 billion and slash the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) annual budget by 21 percent: “an assault on the farm safety net and rural communities” according to NFU (2017). The 2014 Farm Bill more than quadrupled funds for popular Value Added Producer Grant, from discretionary to mandatory spending, Trump budget though “zeroed out” its funding (Ahearn 2017).

In an op-ed from last month’s *Times-Republican* newspaper, farmer advocate Larry Ginter asks why Iowa has budget problems when its farmers produced over 2 billion bushels of corn and one billion of soybeans. Policy-makers remain “ignorant of Iowa’s history and how they helped to undermine the diversified independent family farm system in favor of giant agribusiness monopolization and their capture of farm gate profits,” firstly by dismantling the price support system, and then enabling neoliberalized race to the bottom in deregulated world market prices: “the battleground has always been between the Blue Jeans — voices from the land standing on their historical knowledge and economic experiences, and the Suits — voices reflecting Milton Friedman’s theories from the elite schools of economic thought. So far, the Suits are winning the battle, and farmers and workers are losing. It’s time for a farmer and worker alliance, perhaps even a Farmer-Worker political party” (Ginter 2018).

In the wreckage of agro-capitalism, there is an important opportunity potential of recovering and updating this framework of farmer and non-farmer mutual responsibility and dependency. Better than ‘producer and consumer’ dichotomization, this contract framework acknowledges mutual need and the public goods of agriculture. Following robust analysis of agricultural multifunctionality (IAASTD 2008), particularly how the Common Agricultural Policy could correct market failures with policy that supports European farmers and supplies public goods (Westhaoek et al 2013) and environmental services (Howley et al 2014), more research is need in the US context, building off of for instance, the National Young Farmers Coalition’s recent report on farming as a public service (Hansen et al 2015).

What is the role of government in such an agrarian social contract? Primarily, to help stave off commodity surpluses, through mechanisms of multiple, dialogic scales of collective self-governance. This would necessitate de-commodification of staple foods (Schaffer, forthcoming), but for the layers of the food system still circulated via monetized markets: viable farm-gate prices that cover costs of production, as well as corresponding land and water stewardship, and living wages for any farmworkers. This would by definition need to unfold in city councils, county boards, tribal customary governments, and—unless reformed or overthrown: state legislatures and federal branches of judicial, legislative, and executive governance, checked and balanced. And any bilateral, multilateral agricultural trade frameworks.

There are a number of scalar contradictions of America First, or hyper-nationalism. That the spatial and scalar contradictions of hyper-nationalism manifest so acutely in agriculture is itself paradoxical

since farm policy builds upon and amplifies the alleged populism that cries for the hyper-nationalism of American exceptionalism (Graddy-Lovelace, under review). At the heart of these paradoxes is the long-observed need for a social contract between farmers and non-farmers, collaborating out of acknowledged necessity. Wallace spoke of this eighty years ago as the need to protect society by working out permanent arrangements for storing of reserve food supplies and conserving soil. What would this contract look like extricated from the coloniality of this original 1936 context? Expanded to include public goods of land and water care, cooperative and collective land tenure, fair wages for workers, and the cultivation of nourishing foods, with scale-appropriate food safety protocols and agricultural biodiversity?

To help answer these pressing questions, I am pursuing a research project called US Agricultural Policy: An (Auto)Ethnography of Empire. Reflecting on the imperialist legacies of US agricultural policy requires also reflecting on the imperialist legacies of academia. They are related in a shared failure to connect the plights of farmers and non-farmers. The coloniality of US agricultural policies mirrors the coloniality of decentering agricultural, an illusion perpetuated in dominant academia. Re-agrarianizing academia is as important as re-agrarianizing US agricultural policy—re-centering this agrarian contract in both institutions. And, following the lead of grassroots agrarian movements around the world—from NFFC to its broader umbrella La Via Campesina—re-agrarianizing is key to de-colonizing.

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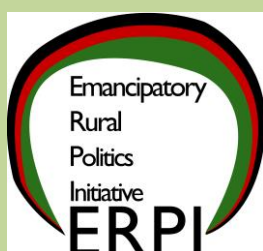
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About the Author

Garrett Graddy-Lovelace researches and teaches agricultural policy and agrarian politics at American University School of International Service in Washington DC. A critical geographer and feminist political ecologist, she studies agricultural biodiversity, agrarian viability, gender equity in agriculture, and the coloniality—and decolonial potential—of US agricultural policy domestically and internationally. Her forthcoming book *The Power of Seeds & Politics of Agricultural Biodiversity* analyzes bioethics and biopolitics of in and ex situ crop diversity conservation, and another project chronicles US and Cuban agrarian cooperatives. She has learned much working with grassroots farmer organizations in community-partnered research-action for the past five years; this work aims to inform, reform, and transform the US Farm Bill for food, farm, and ecological justice. She is a founding member of the Agroecology Research-Action Collaborative.



The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless ‘growth’, climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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