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Food Rebellion: Contemporary Food Movements as a Reflection of Our Agrarian Past

James Gordon
Pomona College

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Food Rebellion: Contemporary Food Movements as a Reflection of Our Agrarian Past

James Gordon

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis,
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Readers:
Char Miller
Samuel Yamashita

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INTRODUCTION

Every Saturday morning, dozens of stalls arise in Honfleur, France. The stalls carry produce and are manned by their producer. There is cheese from the nearby towns of Pont L'Eveque, Livarot, and Camembert. The cheese bears the name of the place where it was produced, or perhaps the other way around; the French joke that no one is sure which came first. The bread smacks of freshly milled flour and carefully treated yeast. The vegetable produce is fresh and necessarily seasonal, because no self-respecting French farmer would succumb to the inherent frivolity, as agri-theorist Wendell Berry would call it, of growing something out of season. The chicken, cooked simply on a rotisserie, tastes how it is supposed to: deeply flavorful, laden with juices, with crisp skin. It is lamentable that very few Americans ever have the opportunity to eat such a chicken.

Similarly, every Sunday morning, several dozen stalls arise in Claremont, California, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, where I have lived for the last four years. Each year, a few more stalls are added and a few more people end up becoming regulars. Claremont is a predominantly wealthy, white community - the target audience of contemporary organic and local food movements - but many activists would still call the market's prosperity progress. We have a bread baker now, for instance, who sells under the name Rustic Loaf. He is deeply concerned with how customers cut and store his bread, as if he does not expect anyone to have previously encountered quality bread.

That that expectation is not absurd is one reason I am writing this thesis; that he is successfully selling his bread - that there is now truly interest in a more refined, carefully constructed loaf of bread - is another. It is true that America is dominated by people more familiar with Wonder Bread laced with preservatives than the kind of

whole-grained, thick-crust version that Rustic Loaf bakes. It is also true that the interest in the Rustic Loaf bread has never been higher. What would it take to seize that interest and create something less trendy and more tangible, something with a clear cultural foundation built with pride, something, perhaps, more like Honfleur's Saturday market? And, more importantly, what makes that scenario worth pursuing?

At this point, this is not a new topic of inquiry. Contemporary food movements in America - beginning with Carl Petrini's Italian Slow Food movement and its American counterpart, Slow Food USA, and including the organic and local food movements and the recent rise of foodie-ism - are familiar to most of us. Food, now more so than ever before, has become a topic worthy of deep consideration. In his recent final column in *The New York Times*, food columnist Mark Bittman, who had written for five years on topics ranging from cooking to food politics, declared that the subject of food has expanded in the American consciousness in ways even he could not have predicted.¹ When he started writing about food five years ago, his editor was skeptical that Bittman could come up with a weekly topic; now it seems questionable we could ever run out of something to talk about.

Food is pervasive in our lives. We could not subsist without it, of course, but food is also important to us culturally, historically, politically, and morally. How we eat reflects our societal and cultural priorities. It is hard to envision Honfleur without its Saturday market, and it is equally hard to consider Paris without its patisseries and boulangeries, Napoli without pizza, Bangkok without its street noodle vendors, Shanghai without soup dumplings, Tokyo without ramen, or Lima without ceviche. (This is to say nothing of the vast multitudes of rural peasant cuisines that remain

¹ Bittman, Mark. "A Farewell." *The New York Times*. September 12, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015.

broadly unrecognized and unappreciated around the world and particularly the United States.) It should be a source of great consternation that America's most prevalent culinary symbol remains not the perfectly executed New York pizza or slow-cooked Memphis barbecue but instead a McDonald's Big Mac.

Central to how we perceive food, consciously or not, is how it is produced. Wendell Berry once wrote that eating is an agricultural act.² In America, where so much effort has been placed in separating eating and agriculture, such a statement is radical. The process of getting food from where it is produced to our dinner tables could not be more obscure. There are benefits, at least perceived ones, to that reality. Creating dinner is no burden. I can prepare a meal in minutes by pressing a button on my microwave. Food is cheap and purchased at a modern supermarket, where I can find virtually any type of food I want without worrying about its availability or who or what produced it. I am assured that it is sanitized and am told the exact date at which I should worry that it may not be. My dinner can easily involve no labor of the mind or the body, which liberates me to be entertained by something else.

There are significant consequences in creating such a meal, however. The reason Americans have not tasted a chicken like one available at Honfleur's Saturday market is because our chickens are cooped up by the millions in enclosures too small for a single chicken to turn around. Their beaks are removed to prevent them from pecking each other to death from stress. Our pigs are similarly slaughtered in mass and their waste, instead of being usefully gathered as manure to sustainably create more food, is poured into toxic cesspools that leech into our water tables, effectively creating a new problem rather than solving one. Our cows are raised in such an unhealthy environment that the

² Berry, Wendell. *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009.

system would be impossible without the mass use of antibiotics, which has its own human health implications. This is to say nothing of our massive, impersonal farms designed explicitly to produce as much profit as possible.³

Even someone who struggles to summon empathy for a chicken should see the obvious consequences of this food system. Our chicken tastes stringy and bland. There is no pride or care involved in creating such a chicken - and it is our creation. It is a system based on labor done efficiently rather than well. It is a system based on a foundation of exploitation - of each other, of farmers, of animals, of our communities, of ecosystems - and our incessant drive for more money and more profit. This thesis is about how this system came to be, both from the perspective of growing food and the perspective of eating it. Among food activists there has been much debate about the ultimate aims of contemporary food movements, and I hope to reveal, by analyzing the turbulent history of farming in America and how our food culture changed with it, that these movements have great promise to inspire change but must address fundamental aspects of American culture - on an individual level, and, by extension, the community and societal levels - before that change can take place.

One focus of contemporary food movements is its commitment to change how we function as food consumers.⁴ Just as significant an issue is how we function as food producers. The perception that our food system should be industrialized dates back to the beginning of American history. The first Europeans who arrived in what is now the United States arrived with the implicit mission to seize, exploit, and profit off the land

³ Butz, Earl L., "Food, Farm Programs, and the Future." Address delivered to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C. April 3, 1973.

⁴ Pollan, Michael. "Voting With Your Fork." New York Times. May 7, 2006. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://pollan.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/05/07/voting-with-your-fork/>.

around them. The English settlers who followed them were interested in timber and the exchange of furs with Native Americans.⁵ The first colonists in Virginia found tobacco to be a profitable exportable crop.

While colonial agriculture from the beginning was commercial and particularly exploitative in the use of slave labor, there was also an underlying grain of a nurturing culture advocated by a group of agricultural theorists now known as the early agrarians. These agrarians strongly believed in self-reliance, particularly independence from market forces and large-scale government programs that undermined that self-reliance. They accomplished this by owning their own land, producing most of their own food, engaging in a diversified local economy, and avoiding debts and dependence on outside markets over which they had no control.⁶

It should be noted that the early agrarian perception of moral superiority is clearly undermined by their involvement in slavery and mass displacement of Native Americans. Indeed, the foundation of early agrarianism was the premise that white male Americans should have the right to own land that was often not theirs to begin with. Women had a critical role in the early American farm but were virtually absent in the public sphere and thus had no voice in early agrarian political theory. But Jeffersonian agrarians, although dominated by white males in a society that contradicted many of their own arguments, were often nurturing rather than exploitative - a distinction articulated by Wendell Berry - in that there was concern was health rather than profit: their health, their families', their communities', and the land's.⁷ These farmers were

⁵ Conkin, Paul Keith. *A Revolution down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

⁶ Hagenstein, Edwin C., *American Georgics Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2011., 372

⁷ Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977.

fiercely independent but their sole concern was not self-interest, and many of the values of the early agrarians ought to be admired.

Pertinently, the debates taking place today over the industrialization of agriculture were being argued in the early 19th century between the agrarians, led most famously by Thomas Jefferson, and those in favor of industrialization, for whom Alexander Hamilton spoke. Early agrarians were deeply concerned with the impact of the Hamiltonian industrialization of American farming culture and the ultimate success of the American democratic experiment, which they believed could not succeed in a society dominated by self-interest and lacking agrarian virtues. Clearly, Hamilton's vision won out. As American agriculture increasingly industrialized - often through policies that made it extraordinarily difficult for small farmers to succeed - the agrarian vision would appear repeatedly in American political thought, though never at a scale significant enough to truly challenge the status quo.

At an industrial scale, agriculture has always been limited primarily by two variables: labor and environment. The labor problem was and still is treated aggressively and relentlessly with a singular focus on increasing production. White Americans employed the use of human slave labor from the country's inception. Technological innovation bolstered labor efficiency. When production degraded local soils to too high a degree, farmers broke ties with their community, usually moving West, forcibly displacing Native Americans and Mexicans in the process. The Civil War, which caused unprecedented political upheaval and forced a reevaluation of American identity, removed most traces of traditional agrarian thought.

Following the war, small farmers, black and white alike, were tied to an exploitative, broken financial system that resulted in the Populist revolt, the largest

mass democratic movement in American history, which attempted to create a system of regional farming cooperatives.⁸ The movement failed. With American policymakers working against them, small farmers were increasingly into forced in landless peonage. The American agriculture system became necessarily centralized beginning not in the late 1940s, as Michael Pollan and others have suggested, but post-civil war, with sharecropping.⁹ The goal of farming - that is, what made a “good” farmer - became understood as the need to produce as much as possible. Other concerns, particularly maintaining the long-term health of the farm and its soil, became secondary or nonexistent.

By the beginning of the 20th century, there was concern, created in large part because of a mass deterioration of soil health, that there would be sufficient productive farmland to feed a growing population.¹⁰ The introduction of the Haber-Bosch process, which powered the creation of synthetic fertilizers, solved this issue by eliminating a critical aspect of the environmental limitation on production. Soil health continued to decline until the dust bowl raged, and, in response, a “permanent agriculture” movement arose that drew from agrarian thought but also articulated the first vision of organic farming.¹¹ The onset of the Second World War and the accompanying development of mass chemical infrastructures, however, provided a new means to expand industrial production of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. In the 1970s, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz urged American farmers to plant “fencerow to fencerow,” which had the effect of consolidating a farming culture that prioritizes

⁸ Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*

¹⁰ Cockrail-King, Jennifer. *Food and the City: Urban Agriculture and the New Food Revolution*. Prometheus Books, 2012.

¹¹ Guthman, Julie. *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

efficiency over all other concerns. We now irresponsibly genetically modify crops, for example, not to address critical issues like hunger, but rather to marginally increase the amount we produce. Exploitation has continued: of our environment, of migrant workers, of increasingly isolated rural communities, and of predominantly poor Americans mired in health issues including obesity and diabetes caused by the market and cultural dominance of cheap fast food and industrially produced food products.

This narrative is simplistic - I will go into more detail in chapters one and two - but it outlines the destructive foundation of industrialization in agriculture. Agriculture in America is not intrinsically oppressive and exploitative; these issues can be traced to the industrialization forces, the agricultural industry's attempt to deal with labor and environmental limitations, and the industry's fundamental assumption that our ultimate goal should be to make as much money off of food as possible, most often to the great benefit of the few and at the expense of small farmers and the rest of American consumers. Today, only a few companies own the seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, and the patented genetic properties of the few crops that we eat; these entities—Monsanto, most famously—have a monopolistic control of the global food system.¹²

Contemporary food movements can be interpreted as the latest revival of agrarian thought, admittedly with important contextual distinctions, to address the problems caused by industrializing and monetizing our food to such a degree². For these movements to succeed, they need to promote not just a change in consumption patterns but also a reconsideration of our relationship with our food, our environment, and each other. The last large scale food and sustainable farming movement occurred in the 1970s responding to the same symptoms that sparked contemporary movements -

¹² Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 44

economic crisis and environmental degradation - but ultimately failed to reach most Americans. What will become of these new movements?

What makes contemporary food movements particularly intriguing is that unlike previous sustainable farming movements they are based not just on the plight of the farmer or the environment but also the quality of the food being produced. This is an explicit aim of the Slow Food movement, which has the slogan Clean, Fair, and Good. “Clean” food is sustainably produced and “Fair” food is produced without animals or workers being exploited in the production process. Both of those two core goals are based on the circumstances of production. The emphasis on “Good” food is instead based on intangible culinary qualities: food that is pleasurable, tastes good, and requires care and thoughtfulness to create.

This is important because it prioritizes these qualities as truly meaningful. This, of course, is certainly the case in Italy, the source of Slow Food, but has never been the case in America, where food culture remains dominated by industrially produced food products and corporate restaurant chains. For Slow Food and, to a lesser extent, local, organic, and foodie movements, to prioritize “Good” food at the same level as social justice and environmental ends is to essentially call for a reform of the cultural values that have guided our food history. Americans are familiar with dealing with social and environmental issues; prioritizing something so abstract as taste and pleasure is new territory.

In a 2012 op-ed for the *New York Times*, William Deresiewicz criticized Americans for placing food above art as high culture.¹³ “Americans,” he wrote, “are learning to value their senses - learning to value pleasure, distinguish subtle differences, and make fine judgments,” but he cautions that “food, for all that, is not art.... food isn’t going to give you insight into other people, allow you to see food in a new way, or force you to take inventory of your soul.” He is right: food is not art, nor should we attempt to see it that way. For the first time, however, we can value the history and culture that goes into properly making a dish. We can value the care that goes into properly growing a tomato. Should we accomplish that, we will also be able to clearly see the tragedy of industrial food and its accompanying consequences.

We are making progress in this regard. The local and organic food movements have resulted in an upsurge in community supported agriculture (CSA) groups, urban agriculture developments, farmer’s markets, and local and organic groceries. The impact of the rise of foodie-ism, where people pursue tasty food with nearly religious zeal, should not be understated. Food justice advocates, who argue that these market-based movements exclude people without the means to vote with their wallet, should be encouraged that these movements have extended beyond the upper and middle classes.¹⁴ Farmer’s markets are accepting food stamps, public school cafeterias in cities across the country are beginning to source healthy and local foods, non-profits are forming explicitly to address issues like eliminating food deserts, and food policy councils are being created in cities to more carefully craft municipal food policy.

¹³ Deresiewicz, William. "A Matter of Taste?" *The New York Times*. October 27, 2012. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/opinion/sunday/how-food-replaced-art-as-high-culture.html>.

¹⁴ *American Geographics*, 373

Increased interest in food, however, also provides an opportunity for people to make money, and activists must be careful lest the movements be engulfed by the same forces they are meant to fight. Americans have proven to be very manipulable in how they eat. A food culture should be rooted in tradition and history, resistant to change, but ours is just as likely to conform based on the conjoined forces of industry and marketing. There was justifiable concern, for instance, when Wal-Mart began to sell what it marketed as local produce. It could have been a sign the local food movement had won a victory, but in reality executives were concerned not about produce quality, soil health, or the strength of local economies, but rather seizing an “opportunity to limit transport costs.”¹⁵ The Food Network has experienced a surge in viewers in the last decade, which reflects the increased interest in cooking and food, but becomes worrisome when one of the most popular shows is *Semi-Homemade Cooking with Sandra Lee*, which teaches viewers how to craft meals from pre-made grocery store products.

In Los Angeles, about whose food culture I have written for four years, the foodie movement has reached frenetic levels. The latest regional Chinese restaurant opening becomes a trending item on the blogosphere and social media, the latest ramen opening results in lines that can stretch a block, and the subject of the best hamburger can inspire searing debates. This level of interest has the potential for great benefits: it connects people across classes and ethnic communities, trains people to engage in carefully produced food, and forces people to consider food beyond just taste but also sociologically, culturally, and historically. This interest should provide some of the foundation for the success of contemporary food movements. It is important that we

¹⁵ DeLind, Laura B. "Are Local Food and the Local Food Movement Taking Us Where We Want to Go? Or Are We Hitching Our Wagons to the Wrong Stars?" *Agriculture and Human Values* (2010): 273-83. Print.

nurture that interest in the right direction and that Americans not lose sight of important goals - lessening the devastating environmental and cultural consequences of industrial agriculture, improving our sense of community and place, creating a market for small farmers, and simply improving the state of cooking in the United States - while the Wal-Marts and the Food Networks circle overhead, seeking to capitalize on a trend before it has a chance to accomplish meaningful change.

CHAPTER ONE: THE AGRARIAN BACKDROP

The great fallacy of the present is that of mistaking the increase of our national wealth for the advancement of civilization.

Wilson Flagg, 1872

In 1776, the vast majority of Americans were intimately familiar with the processes that created their food. For instance, Martha Ballard, one of the few 19th century American women to keep a diary, chronicled her involvement in the dinner she ate on August 15, 1790, which was composed of “bakt lamb with string beens and cucumbers.”¹⁶ The string beans and cucumbers came from Ballard’s personal garden. The lamb came from a nearby farm as repayment for work done by her son. The trading of food was common practice among neighbors and reflected the necessity of engaging with one’s community. Most of Ballard’s meals followed this model: the use of personally grown herbs and vegetables, of personally raised meat, and of bartered foods sourced locally.

We have strayed about as far possible from that self-determining way of life. Yes, early Americans did not have the conveniences of vast food markets, but the independence of self-sustenance was an important part of early American identity. As that identity began to evolve, the nation faced a critical question: to what extent would it take on the industrial identity of England, the country with which it had just fought a war? More specifically, would the decision to industrialize extend to agriculture, which was by far the largest sector of the economy? This decision was not simply a question of economics but a question of whether Americans would continue to embrace an agrarian

¹⁶ Vileisis, Ann. *Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes from and Why We Need to Get It Back*. Washington: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2008.

way of life or instead lead a life revolving around the forces of urbanization and manufacturing that would accompany the reform effort to industrialize.

The majority of the people who faced this question were farmers, or were at least involved in some way in raising food. America was initially presented to immigrants as a place with limitless land and opportunity, and for many that ideal materialized. Small farmers savored their newfound independence, which was a stark contrast to a European rural society characterized by landless peonage. They considered the agrarian ideals of independence and self-determination to be critical to the ultimate success of American democracy because they believed they operated as a critical check on the unrestrained pursuit of wealth that accompanies capitalist industry.

The Revolutionary War and the economic downturn that followed it, however, convinced many Americans that there was a need to develop a centralized commercial economy and expand agricultural markets.¹⁷ Because the nature of the capitalist-industrialist system excludes alternatives by eliminating competition, the decision to embrace Hamiltonian reforms and pursue the industrialization of agriculture would signal the decline the agrarian ideal. Even farmers who preferred to tend their land with deliberate care would be forced to alter farming practices or else be left behind. Two centuries later, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz would repeat the mantra that would have been very familiar to American farmers: get big or get out.

The impacts of industrialization would fundamentally alter American lifestyles and particularly the way we grow, eat, and think about food, and the dialogue surrounding this decision should inform our consideration of contemporary food reform movements. Central to this dialogue was the contention that it was possible to have a

¹⁷ *American Georgics*, 12

society with a dominant focus on well-being rather than wealth. Early debates about industrializing forces took this contention seriously, but as those forces overwhelmed farmers, particularly the prioritization of efficiency, that idea became increasingly absent.

Where it does exist today, it has been promoted by agri-theorists that include Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Gary Paul Nabhan, and others that have heavily influenced by agrarian thought. The promotion of those ideas is a challenging prospect in a country where less than one out of a hundred people are farmers, and where the vast majority of those farmers have become necessarily embedded in an agriculture industrial complex that fundamentally contradicts early agrarian values. Yet it should be telling that agrarian theory in various forms has appeared repeatedly in American political thought despite the unrelenting push to drive farmers off the land over the past two plus centuries.

Early Agrarianism

Thomas Jefferson never wrote extensively about his agrarian beliefs, but they permeated his political thought, and he did write in 1781 that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”¹⁸ To Jefferson, only the small farmer, whose primary concern was not wealth but preserving the family farm, could remain free of the corruption of commerce. Where commerce and manufacturing encouraged dependence and decadence, agriculture encouraged self-discipline and moderation, principles he believed are necessary to a healthy society.

¹⁸ *American Georgics*, 1

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a Frenchman who became an English citizen and farmer in colonial New York, was the first writer to articulate the concerns of Jeffersonian agrarians.¹⁹ In his 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur considered the nature of personal fulfillment and argued that thoughtful cultivation was the foundation of moral virtue and an essential part of American identity. He compares himself to his European counterparts - “thank God that my lot is to be an American farmer, instead of a Russian boor or an Hungarian peasant,” who are “condemned to a slavery worse than that of our negroes” - and writes that there is no “more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer, possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government that requires but little of us,” resulting in “the most perfect society now existing in the world.”²⁰ Crevecoeur’s book received great acclaim both at home and abroad, reflecting the popularity of the early agrarian ideal. The threat of a central government and industry, then, was an attack on that ideal. These farmers were justifiably afraid of becoming exposed to the forces that dictated European rural society.

The fiercest advocate of those forces - the challenger to Jefferson - was Alexander Hamilton, who as secretary of the treasury would enable the reforms that came to characterize the American economy.²¹ At first, most American leaders were wary of those reforms.²² They had no desire to mimic England’s capitalist model, which they feared had the potential to threaten the individual liberties that they had fought a war to protect. They had seen the impact of the Industrial Revolution on English society. Hamilton, however, saw great promise in England’s constitution, provided it was

¹⁹ *American Georgics*, 9

²⁰ St. John de Crevecoeur, J. Hector. *Letters from an American Farmer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

²¹ *American Georgics*, 27

²² *American Georgics*, 12

supplemented by additional checks and balances to discourage corruption, and was able to muster support in large part because of his renowned skills as a debater.²³ Hamilton wrote three major reports between 1789 and 1791 that described the purpose of his proposed policies. The first two focused on America's financial system - the nation's debt and the purpose of a national bank - but the third, his *Report on Manufactures*, argued specifically for the benefits of an industrialized society.

Hamilton was well aware that agrarians were the most likely to be opposed to his argument; indeed, he began his essay by acknowledging "that the cultivation of the earth... has *intrinsically a strong claim to preeminence over every other kind of industry.*"²⁴ But he was also wary of the idea that it has any kind of "exclusive predilection" when opponents contended that agriculture should not be thought of as an industry.²⁵ Hamilton had a variety of arguments for what he saw as the great benefits of industrialization, including the division of labor (specialization or "constant and undivided application to a single object"), the potential for the use of machinery ("an accession of strength, *unencumbered by the expence of maintaining the laborer*"), the additional employment of classes of the community not ordinarily employed (such as women and children), the promoting of emigration from foreign countries (through the attraction of newly available jobs), and increasing "the diversity of talents and dispositions, which discriminate men from each other."²⁶ He also argued that it would increase agricultural production and revenue.

Hamilton's essay began the debate in earnest. *The National Gazette*, a newspaper founded as a voice for the Democratic-Republican Party in opposition to Hamilton's

²³ *American Georgics*, 12

²⁴ Hamilton, Alexander. *Selections*. Edited by Morton J. Frisch. Washington, D.C.: AEI Institute for Public Policy Research, 1985.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Selections*

²⁶ Hamilton, *Selections*

ideas, ran an article in 1792 that aggressively attacked Hamilton's *Report on Manufactures*:²⁷

About the year 1792, the people of the United States shall offer a curious phenomenon to the philosophic eye of the world--A whole nation, and that too a republic in the morning of their glory, smitten with the love of gold!....this great minister seems not to be so skilful in the science of human nature as his genius and philanthropy deserve--hence all his schemes and plans have tended and tended only to meliorate the pockets, and not the heads and hearts of the people--that he has talked to them so much of imposts, and of funds, and of banks, and of manufactures, that they are considered the cardinal virtues of the nation.--Hence liberty, independence, philosophy, and genius have been struck out from the American vocabulary, and the hieroglyphic of money inserted in their stead, as a symbol of every thing worthy the estimation of a man.²⁸

In 1797, Thomas Paine would insert himself into the argument with a pamphlet titled *Agrarian Justice*, in which he argues that Native Americans must operate in an infinitely happier society than European "civilization" and that "misery" and "poverty... are created by that which is called civilized life."²⁹ These arguments reflected the contention that Hamilton's ideas would foster a culture with an unhealthy obsession with money rather than, as Hamilton believed, expand human freedoms.³⁰ Hamilton, of course, was ultimately successful in implementing most of his reforms, including founding the Bank of the United States, creating the national mint, and imposing new

²⁷ *American Georgics*, 33

²⁸ *American Georgics*, 34

²⁹ Paine, *Agrarian Justice*

³⁰ *American Georgics*, 13

taxes and tariffs and a system to collect them.³¹ The first half of the nineteenth century became celebrated as the capitalist “takeoff.”³²

Industrial Thought

Industrialization succeeded in making many people wealthy. Farmers were not excluded from that benefit; many of them enjoyed the prosperity that accompanied the development of new technologies that increased production and created new markets to sell that production and new transportation systems to deliver that production. With wealth, however, came risks. Historian Melvyn Stokes argues that the capitalist takeoff ultimately “undermined the security, dignity, and personal autonomy of subsistence life, substituting the pressures of a competitive marketplace for the characteristic independence and neighborliness of the subsistence economy.”³³ Farmers began to grow a more narrow range of cash crops to appease market demands. They began to borrow credit to purchase equipment, often exposing themselves to major debt. Farming was always a risky enterprise, but the risk that came with new market forces was new.

Most importantly, the industrialization of agriculture inspired great changes in farming culture that had important social and environmental consequences. One critical change was how farmers considered their relationship with their land and particularly the importance of soil health. Crevecoeur, for example, emphasized the importance of his father having passed down his farm and having taught him how to manage his land: “he left me a good farm and his experience; he left me free from debts and no kind of difficulties to struggle with.”³⁴ He wrote that the “father, thus ploughing with his child, and to feed his family, is inferior only to the emperor of China ploughing as an example

³¹ *American Georgics*, 13

³² *American Georgics*, 58

³³ *American Georgics*, 58

³⁴ *American Georgics*, 15

to his kingdom.”³⁵ To Crevecoeur, farming was an intergenerational process that necessarily required the careful maintenance of one’s land, symbolized by the state of the soil: “Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? It feeds us, clothes us: from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes this privileged spot. No wonder we should thus cherish its possession.”

Throughout the 19th century that cherishment became conspicuously absent as farmers increasingly exhausted the soil in their efforts to produce more. This would have important implications for how Americans related to their environment and nature in general. It would certainly lead to a decline in knowledge of sustainable farming practices as farmers virtually abandoned crop rotations. When farmers wore out soil, they moved west, often at the urging of federal policies. In a 1945 essay, novelist and agri-theorist Louis Bromfield wrote scathingly:

The formula was simple. First you simply cut off or burned over the forest or prairie and then you went to work wresting the fertility from the soil in terms of crops as rapidly as possible. Sometimes the fertility or the topsoil lasted two or three generations, sometimes longer. Then when the soil was worn out you went west to Ohio or Indiana and repeated the formula. When land was exhausted there, Iowa and Kansas and Dakota lay ahead, and finally Oregon and Washington and California. The good land that could be had for little or no investment and could be “mined” seemed without limits. “The West” became a byword for opportunity--opportunity for more free, rich, virgin land. Very often

³⁵ St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*

men went west to take up land less good than the land they had recklessly destroyed... They could have done better and been happier and more prosperous and comfortable if they had cherished the good land they destroyed and remained on it.³⁶

Bromfield even goes so far as to say that “the good farmer [in America] was and is as a rule a ‘foreigner’” whose perspective on land was not so warped.³⁷

The increasingly casual degradation of soil also reflected an increased absence of sense of place. In 1847, Vermont farmer George Perkins Marsh, in response to rampant clearing for sheep pastures, wrote that there must be “better economy in the management of our forest lands.”³⁸ Marsh also wrote that the “Yankee has in general, far too little... a feeling of attachment to his home, and by a natural association, to the institutions of his native New England.”³⁹ Perhaps the most shocking defense of soil health came from Edmund Ruffin, a man so committed to the Southern secessionist cause that when the South lost the Civil War, he wrapped himself in a Confederate flag and committed suicide.⁴⁰ In an 1852 essay, Ruffin argued that the Southern farmer’s haphazard treatment of the soil was weakening the South’s political and social strength in relation to the North by lessening long-term productivity and forcing Southern farmers to seek new land, usually in the West.⁴¹ He does not go so far as to condemn slavery, but he does suggest that “more abundant labour enables us to the work of exhaustion... more rapidly and effectively.”⁴²

³⁶ Bromfield, Lewis. *Malabar Farm*. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1947.

³⁷ Bromfield, *Malabar Farm*.

³⁸ Marsh, *American Georgics*, 74

³⁹ Marsh, *American Georgics*, 77

⁴⁰ *American Georgics*, 97

⁴¹ Ruffin, Edmund. *Incidents of My Life: Edmund Ruffin’s Autobiographical Essays*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996.

⁴² Ruffin, *Incidents of My Life*

Slavery itself reflected another important change in farming culture brought by industry: a change in attitudes toward labor. Agrarians strongly believed in honest labor as a virtue. Jesse Buel, a New York farmer who wrote several books and published in journals advocating for the importance of agriculture, wrote in 1839 that “while rural labor is the great source of physical health and constitutional vigor to our population, it interposes the most formidable barrier to the demoralizing influence of luxury and vice.”⁴³ Among the most vocal critics of this new attitude against labor was Wilson Flagg, who saw it as a reflection of the urban industrial lifestyle and considered it a great social issue. In an 1859 essay, he wrote: “Men are too prone to base their theories of human progress on the assumption that labor is a curse, and not, as it is undoubtedly, when it is free and justly rewarded--a blessing. But labor ceases to be free, in the highest sense, when the laborers are under the control and in the power of mammoth associations. Labor then becomes *servitude*, which is closely allied to *slavery*.”⁴⁴ He concludes that “if we could double the agricultural produce of the whole country at the present cost, by a system which would destroy the independence of our farmers, we should turn all our forces against it, as against the invasion of a foreign army.”⁴⁵

Slavery at any scale is repugnant, but mass industrial markets fed the belief that mass slavery was acceptable and desirable. George Washington Julian, a Republican Congressman best known as an abolitionist, believed a critical strategy in the fight against slavery was the discouragement of massive plantations. In an address before Congress in 1851, Julian argued that “slavery only thrives on extensive estates. In a country cut up into small farms, occupied by as many independent proprietors who live

⁴³ Buel, Jesse. *Jesse Buel, Agricultural Reformer: Selections from His Writings*. Edited by Harry J. Carman. New York: Columbia University Press. 1947.

⁴⁴ Flagg, in *American Georgics*, 83

⁴⁵ Flagg, in *American Georgics*, 83

by their own toil, it would be impossible,--there would be no room for it.” But even with slavery outlawed, the fundamental belief of industrialists is that productivity should be as efficient as possible - that is, involving as little labor as possible for as much reward as possible. While agrarians relished work done well, industrialists instead promoted work done efficiently.

The Rise of the Romantics

The first cohesive agrarian stand against industrial reforms came with the rise of romantic thought in the early 19th century. Romanticism was born in Europe as a reaction against the Industrial Revolution. As the United States industrialized, romanticism became increasingly attractive to American theorists, lead most prominently by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Romanticism was not entirely reconcilable with traditional agrarianism. Romantics questioned the right of humans to control nature in any sense, including farming, which is, of course, the blatant manipulation of environment for human ends.⁴⁶ In practice, however, romantics recognized the need for farming as a means of subsistence, and they advocated for a kind of cultivation that minimized human impacts on nature.

Romantics particularly wanted to revive a positive relationship between farmers and the land, which they believed had declined as farmers increasingly viewed the landscape as something to conquer in the name of crop productivity. In *Walden*, for example, Thoreau dedicates a chapter to his planting of beans in which he suggests a “half-cultivation” of the landscape.⁴⁷ Thoreau despises the industrial farmer, arguing that “By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape

⁴⁶ *American Georgics*, 107

⁴⁷ Thoreau, Henry David. *Writings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949.

is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.”⁴⁸ Thoreau, like other romantics, also believed that education and the pursuit of arts, literature, and writing were essential, and he advocated minimizing time on the farm both to refrain from disturbing nature and to have time to read, write, and take contemplative walks. That is not to say he promoted idleness--he worked on his bean field seven hours a day, from five in the morning to noon--but he did not believe that farming alone provided fulfillment.

The romantic period had important impacts on agrarian thought - particularly viewing farming as having educational value and the agrarian lifestyle as being an ideal educational environment to consider our place in nature. It was, unsurprisingly, a romanticized ideal of farming life, and many romantics who attempted to realize that ideal found that “haphazard” farming was difficult to implement in practice. Several romantic communities formed as experiments in communal, farm-based living, including the Brook Farm experiment, which functioned as a school and attracted intellectuals like Charles A. Dana, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emerson. The Brook Farm community lasted just six years, from 1841 to 1847.⁴⁹ In 1843, Bronson Alcott gathered fellow transcendentalists to settle at the Fruitlands in Harvard, Massachusetts, but the community, whose principles included a strict vegetarian ethic and eccentric priorities like the favoring of “aspiring” vegetables that grew upwards, lasted less than a year and nearly resulted in the starvation of its members.⁵⁰ While many of the romantic utopian communities of the 1840s and 1850s may have failed, they reflected an increasing anxiety with industrial life and an uncompromising belief that there was a better way.

⁴⁸ Thoreau, *Writings*

⁴⁹ *American Georgics*, 124

⁵⁰ *American Georgics*, 124

The Populist Revolt

On the eve of the Civil War, the country was seventy five percent rural and agriculture remained the largest sector of the economy.⁵¹ As an industry, agriculture, with the aid of new productive machines like John Deere's steel plow and Cyrus McCormick's reaper, would continue to boom for the remainder of the 19th century, with the total acreage of cultivated land more than doubling between 1870 and 1900.⁵² As agriculture became increasingly productive, however, farmers increasingly found themselves at the mercy of banking merchants, extractive railroad freight charges, and market prices that were beyond their control.⁵³

The frustration culminated in the 1880s and 1890s in the form of the Populist movement, which remains the most significant agrarian rebellion against the principles of the industrial system and the largest mass democratic movement in American history. Populism in practice did not necessarily align itself completely with agrarian values, but it did operate on the assertion that farmers had lost their independence, that "the economic premises of their society were working against them," and that they, as producers, deserved the fruits of their production.⁵⁴

The outcome of the Civil War had placed power in the hands of the Eastern banking and manufacturing community. This became problematic for farmers for complex financial and political reasons. Central to the issue was the gold standard of currency. The financial community favored the gold standard because they believed the gold supply to be stable and also considered its "intrinsic value" important. More importantly, as Lawrence Goodwyn explains in his book *The Populist Moment*, currency

⁵¹ *American Georgics*, 57

⁵² *American Georgics* 150-151

⁵³ *American Georgics* 152

⁵⁴ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, VII

values had decreased dramatically during the Civil War. Bankers had helped fund the war effort by purchasing bonds with the depreciated money with the assumption that the currency value would return to pre-war levels when the war ended.⁵⁵ Because U.S. prices were so high compared to world prices, changing to hard money required significant currency contraction, which had great consequences for farmers:

Letting ten farmers symbolize the entire population, and ten dollars the entire money supply, and ten bushels of wheat the entire production of the economy, it is at once evident that a bushel of wheat would sell for one dollar. Should the population, production, and money supply increase to twenty over a period of, say, two generations, the farmers' return would still be one dollar per bushel. But should population and production double to twenty while the money supply was held at ten--currency contraction--the price of wheat would drop to fifty cents... Moreover, money rates being more scarce, interest rates would have risen considerably.⁵⁶

This is what ultimately happened to farmers in the latter half of the 19th century. While contraction became immensely profitable for banker-creditors, it became a backbreaking burden for farmers.

The crop-lien system compounded that burden.⁵⁷ To meet increasingly rising demand, farmers were forced to invest in supplies and livestock that they could not afford. After the Civil War, the Southern banking community collapsed, so farmers turned to Northern banking merchants, who would offer supplies, taking a lien on the farmer's crop for security. Interest rates were brutally exploitative, often exceeding one

⁵⁵ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 10-11

⁵⁶ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 12

⁵⁷ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 22

hundred and even two hundred percent annually, and almost as a rule farmers were forced into debt, most of them losing their land in the process. The crop lien system “became for millions of Southerners, white and black, little more than slavery.”⁵⁸ This is to say nothing of equally exploitative railroad freight costs, which connected Western farms and food supply to the rest of the country but often required a farmer to pay a bushel of corn for every bushel that was shipped, even for a short distance.⁵⁹

The exploitative nature of this system was a stark contrast to the agrarian ideal of self-determination that permeated early agrarian thought. It illustrates an important point about the nature of agricultural industrialization: farmers often did not choose to degrade soil or simply produce as much as possible in the name of profit. In reality, they were victims of a system of commerce that required and supported unreasonable production levels. As one Southern historian described the attitude: “Let... the soil be worn out, let the people move to Texas.... let almost anything happen provided all possible cotton is produced each year.”⁶⁰

The Populist movement was a powerful response to this system. The movement informally began in 1877 when a group of Texas farmers gathered together as the “Knights of Reliance.”⁶¹ They would later change their name to the Farmer’s Alliance. For the next two decades, the Alliance and other farmer groups would follow this model of democratic meetings to establish goals, reflecting extraordinary democratic organization in the face of very little political support. The leaders of the movement came up with a number of strategies to attempt to upend the crop lien system, and at

⁵⁸ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 23

⁵⁹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 70

⁶⁰ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 25

⁶¹ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 25

root of all of them was the problem of how to deal with the farmers' need for credit and the fact that farm prices were constantly falling as currency contracted.

The basic solution was to come up with a system of regional cooperatives that could eliminate the exploitative middlemen and sell directly to Eastern factories. The problem, however, returned to credit: the farmers did not have sufficient capital to implement the system and banks had no interest in helping them. The strategy they came up with, which they called the "joint-note plan," reflected the desperation of the farming community.⁶² The joint-note plan asked landowning farmers to give all of their individual holdings to the Alliance, which would collectively purchase farming supplies with the landowners signing a joint note on behalf of both themselves and tenants, effectively forcing landowning farmers to stake their futures on the success of the cooperative. As Goodwyn explained: "the farmers would sink or swim together; the landless would escape the crop lien, too, or none of them would."⁶³ Even with sufficient capital, however, banks continued to refuse to offer loans with reasonable interest rates to the cooperative just as they had to the farmers. The Alliance tried other innovative strategies, including attempting to print their own currency, but those, too, ultimately failed. When the Democrats and Populists attempted an alliance in the 1896 elections, the movement had lost its cohesiveness. The Republican victories in that election signaled the end of the Populist revolt.

In the *The Populist Moment*, Lawrence Goodwyn makes important claims about the Populist movement that are worth considering in light of contemporary farming and food culture. The first is a matter of historical interpretation: Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and many others have suggested that centralized large-scale

⁶² Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 75

⁶³ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* 75

industrial agriculture developed in the period from 1940 to 1970. Goodwyn instead argues that farm credit policies created by the American banking community forced this process to begin much earlier, as millions of Americans were driven off the land or forced into landless peonage beginning in the late 19th century.⁶⁴ While large farming interests received credit, family farmers were effectively penalized, which had the effect of sanctioning industrial agriculture at the expense of millions of small farmers. This process is still occurring today with federal subsidies.⁶⁵

The defeat of the Populists, Goodwyn ultimately argues, signaled the last true opportunity to challenge the principles of the American industrial economic system, as the Eastern financial community was able to consolidate its power throughout the 20th century. As Goodwyn articulated it, “the idea of a substantial democratic influence over the structure of the nation’s financial system, a principle that had been the operative political objective of [the Populists], quietly passed out of American dialogue.”⁶⁶ As farmers lost their sense of democratic empowerment, the agricultural industrial system faced increasingly less opposition.

The ideas of agrarianism, romanticism, and populism forces us to question our autonomy in a hyper-industrial society. They should remind us that the events leading to the complete industrialization and mechanization of agriculture dates back to the inception of the nation. They should jar us into remembering that while this system has been questioned by millions throughout American history, it remains resiliently prevalent.

⁶⁴ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 269

⁶⁵ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*

⁶⁶ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, 269-270

These ideas are embedded, explicitly and implicitly, in contemporary food movements. When we argue for farmer independence, for instance, we are referring to our agrarian past. When we suggest that we have lost our sense of place and community, we are echoing earlier calls for a reevaluation of the values that guide our society. When we question the priorities of an industrial food system and reflect on our role in nature, we are considering a romantic alternative way of life. When we fight against the consequences of the industrialization of agriculture, we are engaging in the kind of rebellion that the Populists believed in. Acknowledging the long history of this fight is important because it places our efforts in their rightful context.

Although the defeat of the Populists signaled the ultimate victory for industrial agriculture, agrarianism in various forms continued to erupt throughout the 20th century advocating for change. In the 1930s, the Great Depression and the ecological disaster of the dust bowl supported agrarian critiques of industrialization, and a new “permanent agriculture” movement arose attempting to promote soil conservation measures such as crop rotation and terracing.⁶⁷ Responding to those events, a group of southerners led by John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson would draw from Jeffersonian agrarianism to create a new “southern agrarianism” that argued for an alternative to the industrialized lifestyle of the North.⁶⁸ The 1930s would also spawn the first true “back to the land” movements, led most prominently by Raphael Borsodi and Louis Bromfield, who would argue for a return to subsistence agriculture.⁶⁹ The most famous of Borsodi’s followers, Scott and Helen Nearing, would leave New York City for

⁶⁷ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 4

⁶⁸ *American Georgics*, 251

⁶⁹ *American Georgics*, 230

the hills of northern New England to successfully lead a life of subsistence farming.⁷⁰

The account of the Nearing's experiences, first published in 1954, would have a heavily influence on the counterculture and back to the land movements of the 1960s.⁷¹

None of these movements, however, would seriously threaten the dominance of industrial agriculture. While the 1960s featured a significant back to the land movement that was influenced in important ways by agrarianism - such as the appearance of hundreds of subsistence-style farming communes - that decade also proved to be critical to the consolidation of the industrial system. Led by Earl L. Butz, who would become the secretary of agriculture under Presidents Nixon and Ford from 1971 to 1976, the industrial drive in the 1960s and 1970s operated with an explicit goal to remove as many Americans - or, as they saw it, to "free" as many Americans - off the land as possible. In 1960, Butz would write that "the declining trend in farm population is itself a sign of strong agriculture."⁷² Thus, while agrarianism in certain circles retained stubborn support, it was drowned out by the same industrial forces that overwhelmed the Populists.

⁷⁰ Nearing, Helen, and Scott Nearing. *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

⁷¹ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 5

⁷² Butz, "Food, Farm Programs, and the Future"

CHAPTER TWO: THE INDUSTRIAL EATER

The United States now has more prison inmates than full time farmers.
Eric Schlosser, in *Fast Food Nation*, 2001

My grandmother passed before I was born, but by all accounts she was a fantastic chef. I can attest to that because she left behind mimeographed recipes from the cooking courses she taught and I am in the process of recreating them. One of the most notable characteristics of her recipes is that they nearly always incorporate brand products. Her cheesecake recipe calls for Food Fair, Breakstone, Raskas, or Borden cream cheese “in that order” - but do not use Philadelphia, because it has “too much vegetable gum.” Her meatloaf recipe calls for Hunt’s tomato sauce. Her chicken francaise recipe requires lemon juice, but she notes “bottled ReaLemon will do.” What does it say about American food culture that even families who care deeply about the quality of the food have embraced the prevalence of industrial products?

To be clear, food culture is immensely complex, with historical, political, and sociological influences that are often difficult to identify. Among its many other influences, American food culture has been defined by its regional cooking styles, such as Southern cooking, and 20th century immigration waves, which reflect the uncommon diversity of foods available in American cities. Despite these important influences, the single most dominant factor driving American eating habits is the industrial agricultural system.

Consider the modern supermarket, which along with fast food is perhaps the most notable symbol of American food culture. Supermarkets are ingrained in our lives - the average American visits a supermarket 1.7 times a week - but they have only existed

for about four generations.⁷³ In 1916, Clarence Saunders opened a King Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Memphis, which was the first store that followed the now-familiar self-service model where customers enter with a basket, browse aisles of products, and pay at a checkout register. Before Piggly Wiggly, Americans bought their meat from their local butcher and their produce from their local market. Saunders' idea appealed to the American consciousness: by 1932, there were 2,660 Piggly Wiggly stores across the United States.⁷⁴

The supermarket concept neatly compliments industrial food production. As agriculture industrialized, it also specialized to maximize the production value of machines that were often only capable of dealing with one task. Because the most important priority was to produce as much as possible, it made sense to concentrate a farm's resources into growing as few crops as possible, such as corn or soybeans. Among other important effects, such as drastically lessening the diversity of crops grown in the United States, monocropping forced food producers and retailers to become talented at repurposing and recombining the same few raw ingredients into a variety of products, which is perhaps represented most famously by the development of high fructose corn syrup as a replacement for sugar. Food producers became so efficient at production that the issue became overproduction. Thus, the focus shifted to increasing *consumption*.

Increasing consumption was accomplished in large part by lowering prices because, as with other retail products, if the price of food is low enough people can be convinced to buy surplus. The expansion of the modern grocery store was another solution. Supermarkets expose consumers to a buffet of cheap food products, whereas before 1916 it would have been common to give a shopkeeper a list of items that had

⁷³ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 25

⁷⁴ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 26

been decided on beforehand, which had the effect of preventing excess consumption.⁷⁵ It is not an accident, for example, that most grocery stores will place the most sought-after products in the back of the store to force customers to consider other products. Today, the modern supermarket provides 99 percent of the food eaten in the United States.⁷⁶ The popularity of grocery stores speaks to their benefits. They minimize the effort involved in purchasing food. They seemingly provide everything a food consumer would require. Most importantly, the food at American grocery stores is extremely cheap. Americans spend about 9 percent of income on food, the lowest rate in the world.⁷⁷

Despite its benefits, however, the modern supermarket's most important characteristic is how effectively it obscures its costs. Food quality has suffered drastically, nutritionally and in taste. My grandmother's recipes are an example of how ingrained industrial products are into our cooking culture, particularly their effect of prioritizing convenience over quality. It is easy, for example, to make popcorn on a stove or pasta from its raw ingredients, yet few Americans take the few minutes to do so. This should call to mind the agrarian belief in honest labor, which agrarians had argued was disappearing with the industrialist preoccupation with avoiding hard work. That issue does not even begin to address how hard-pressed one would be to find an American household without chips from Frito-Lay, a drink from the Coca-Cola company, or meat from Tyson Foods. It is entirely appropriate that what we call American cheese is a product from Kraft.

The lack of quality of these foods - that is, what they lack in taste and nutrition - is easy to see because we interact with them nearly daily, but the industrial food system

⁷⁵ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 28

⁷⁶ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 27

⁷⁷ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 27

has also degraded our food culture in subtle ways. Industrial food production only works if food products can handle issues of storage, transportation, and shelf life that are essential to the system, and that often requires sacrificing flavor and nutrition.

Consider bread, which was once an important symbol of regional food culture in America and has now been reduced to the uniform, nutritionless, and preservative-soaked loaves with which Americans are most familiar. Before the push to industrialize, bread was crafted from diverse flours and wheats that reflected regional preferences and were carefully adapted to local soils.⁷⁸ These varieties - Java, China, Pacific Bluestem, Purple Straw - had a considerable range of flavors and were very nutritious. The problem with these grains was shelf life: the oils in freshly ground wheat flour turn rancid within weeks, which was not at all conducive to long transportation and storage. To solve this problem, the flour industry modified the milling process. A grain of wheat has three main components: the bran, the germ, and the endosperm. Traditionally, the entire grain of wheat is mashed together, with all three components combining into a flour that provides the necessary complexity for tasteful, nutritious bread. Industrial milling, however, discards the bran and germ, producing the simple white flour we can find at our local supermarket that is virtually unspoilable, but lacks the oils and bran that make nutritious bread. To make up for the created nutrient deficiency, the flour industry “fortifies” our Wonder Bread with iron and B vitamins. The once-diverse American bread baking culture has virtually died out. In 1840, there were 23,000 flour mills in the United States. Today, there are about 200.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Jabr, Ferris. "Bread Is Broken." The New York Times. October 31, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/magazine/bread-is-broken.html?_r=0.

⁷⁹ Jabr, Ferris. "Bread Is Broken."

This story could be played out for most industrial food products. The modern supermarket seems to provide all the options we would ever need – the average supermarket carries over 38,000 food products – but in truth its seeming plenty offers just the illusion of choice.⁸⁰ Just as our bread options are limited, we are lucky to find six varieties of apples at our local grocery store despite the fact that there are about one hundred varieties of apples still cultivated in North America.⁸¹ Many of these apples are seasonal. They have different flavors and shapes and textures. Some are perfect for an apple pie while some make excellent cider. We are limited to the few that can hold up to industrial transportation and storage. By systematically limiting the diversity of food products, the industrial system has limited our ability to cook and bake or even conceive of better recipes.

In her 1976 cookbook “The Taste of Country Cookbook,” Edna Lewis recalls a time from her childhood when Southern cooking was thoroughly seasonal. Even fried chicken, a food that has been mass-produced in some form by nearly every fast food chain, was once considered a seasonal dish, where chickens were picked out in the late spring to early summer, “when the birds were the right size and had the right feed.”⁸² She also argued that when one only makes a food at certain times during the year, the dish retains a sense of being special and is always made well. Every healthy food culture - French, Italian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Peruvian - values seasonal and regional cooking because there is an understanding that foods are best eaten during certain times of the year. The industrial system does not care about quality or seasonality of

⁸⁰ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 27

⁸¹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 28

⁸²Lam, Francis. "Edna Lewis and the Black Roots of American Cooking." *The New York Times*. October 31, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/magazine/edna-lewis-and-the-black-roots-of-american-cooking.html>.

ingredients. The result is that the American home cook has forgotten about seasonal focus or believes it to be a luxury.

Above all, purchasing food at a grocery store separates us from the production process. This effectively removes any accountability from the producer to give as much attention as it should to each step in that process. Americans have lost the personal relationships that they used to have with their butcher, baker, and local farmers. Those relationships maintained the quality of the food and the integrity of the production process. Most importantly, this separation lessens accountability for any consequences of production because no single individual – or, at an industrial system level, company – is aware of every step of the process. Those that are aware of consequences often deflect blame to the “system.” In industrial agriculture, the specialization concept is indeed ingrained into the entire system: the individuals and companies involved in growing, harvesting, transporting, assembling, delivering, storing, and selling food are distinct because, of course, diversity is the enemy of mechanization. Among the harshest critics of the fetishization of specialization is Wendell Berry, who in his book *The Unsettling of America* argues that it has undermined the moral fabric of American society:

The disease of the modern character is specialization.... A system of specialization requires the abdication to specialists of various competences and responsibilities that were once personal and universal. Thus, the average--one is tempted to say, the ideal--American citizen now consigns the problems of food production to agriculturists and “agribusinessmen,” the problems of health to doctors and sanitation experts, the problems of education to school teachers and educators, the problems of conservation to conservationists, and so on. This supposedly

fortunate citizen is therefore left with only two concerns: making money and entertaining himself.⁸³

Such a narrow band of interests, Berry concludes, is symptomatic of a broader problem. “From a public point of view, the specialist system is a failure because, though everything is done by an expert, very little is done well,” by which he means that without having the perspective of understanding an entire system of production, or at least impact, it is impossible to be aware of any greater consequences that accompany individual action.

It is worth examining Berry’s claim in terms of industrial agriculture because the consequences of the industrial system, particularly ecological consequences, are vast, and, until recently, many of them were unknown to most Americans. Even now, when significant information is available to us about widespread environmental degradation, separation from production has removed accountability from individual Americans to make change. This mentality is a stark contrast to that of the early agrarians, whose commitment to self-determination was inspired by a refusal to have aspects of their life – in this case, their food – dictated by forces outside of their control.

Importantly, the consequences of industrial agriculture are often not easy to segregate. It is difficult, for example, to distinguish the issue of declining soil health from fertilizer overuse, which acidifies soils but also has led to other critical environmental issues. The mistreatment of animals in American meat factories is ethically repugnant to some Americans, but it also has important human health implications. Genetically modified crops threaten crop biodiversity, but they also empower corporations like Monsanto at the expense of small farmers. This dizzying

⁸³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 11-12

array of consequences reflect the systematic issues with the industrialization of the production process. Insofar as they can be segregated, they can be divided into environmental costs and human costs, outlined below. This analysis of these costs is simplistic – almost every one of these costs warrants a thesis with it as the subject – but it should demonstrate how the simple act of eating has become a deeply moral issue.

Environmental Costs

The negative environmental impact of intensive agriculture has been acknowledged and debated since the early nineteenth century (see chapter one). Interest in the relationship between agricultural practices and soil fertility goes back much longer, to at least the sixteenth century.⁸⁴ I have already presented the arguments of nineteenth century agrarians who suggested that the industrialization of agriculture resulted in a critical change in how Americans interacted with the land and particularly soil health, but it is worth articulating how the problem of soil health has only worsened in the twentieth century with increasingly harmful industrial practices.

Part of the problem is the widespread use of heavy machinery, which has the effect of compacting the soil, degrading soil structure, and impeding biological activity that maintains soil health.⁸⁵ Part of the problem is overgrazing, which also compacts soil and strips the land of vegetation that holds soil in place. (Grazing itself is not problematic when done sustainably. One study found that moderately grazed land, defined as one cow per 16 acres of land, had more biodiversity than ungrazed land and heavily grazed land.⁸⁶) The combined effects of heavy machinery, overgrazing,

⁸⁴ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 4

⁸⁵ . Managing your soil microherds for healthier plants, better profits. LandOwner: Newsletter of Farmland Investment and Stewardship 20(6):7 (1998)

⁸⁶ Comis D. Moderate grazing promotes plant diversity. *AgrRes* 47(5):7 (1999). Also available: www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/may99/plant0599.htm [cited 7 May 1999].

overcultivation, and overuse of water have resulted in a global issue of desertification, or the conversion of fertile land to non-arable land in arid and semi-arid environments.⁸⁷

The root of the soil problem, however, is the industrial system's failure to appreciate the benefits of sustainable agricultural practices. Maintaining healthy soil without chemical fertilizer requires maintenance practices like crop rotation (e.g. the regular planting of legumes) to reinject the soil with the nutrients that support plant growth. At its most basic level, soil requires three nutrients - nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium - to make plants grow. Soil fertility is not a renewable resource in that it takes time, from 80 to 1,000 years depending on the climate, for soil to build up those nutrients naturally.⁸⁸ A 1990 study estimated that since World War II, industrial agriculture has damaged 550 million hectares of land, which, for perspective, is equivalent to 38% of farmland in use today.⁸⁹ This is particularly troubling because 90% of the earth's available arable land is already in use.⁹⁰

Not coincidentally, our wholesale reliance on fertilizers dates back to World War II. Throughout the nineteenth century, American farmers would simply move west when they wore out their soil. By the beginning of the 20th century, the interior of the continent was largely settled; in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner would declare this the "end of the frontier." Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution had resulted in a population boom.⁹¹ The conjoined problems of limited healthy soil and a growing population sparked fears of mass famine; in 1898, British scientist Sir William Crookes declared that "England and all civilized nations stand in deadly peril of not having enough to

⁸⁷ Horrigan, Leo; Lawrence, Robert S., and Walker, Polly. *How Sustainable Agriculture Can Address the Environmental and Human Health Harms of Industrial Agriculture*, *Environ Health Perspect* 110:445–456 (2002).

⁸⁸ Horrigan et al. 2002

⁸⁹ Horrigan et al. 2002

⁹⁰ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 64

⁹¹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 38

eat.”⁹² The production issue was solved by German chemist Fritz Haber, who in 1908 discovered how to turn atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia, which could be used to fertilize soil.⁹³ Another German scientist, Carl Bosch, learned how to industrialize the process.

In the sense that it warded off mass famine, the Haber-Bosch process, as it is known, is among the most important inventions of the 20th century. It also had the effect, however, of reinforcing poor farming practices. By solving the issue of limitation of soil nutrients, the Haber-Bosch process seemingly provided the framework for the unlimited production of food. Companies could begin in earnest to create food as an industrial product. At the end of the World War II, the war machine infrastructure, which no longer needed to create bombs, was altered to create chemical pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and tractors, which (often literally) fueled the industrial system.⁹⁴

The issue is that the Haber-Bosch process is a short-term solution to reviving soil health, and an ecologically damaging one at that. Rather than learning from the mistake of mistreating soil, farmers used chemical fertilizers to re-affirm the industrial mindset: produce as much as efficiently as possible regardless of long-term costs. “Agriscientists,” in turn, began to treat farming as a factory with “inputs” - nitrogen, pesticides, seeds - with the goal of creating “outputs.”⁹⁵ The new conception that soil only needed to be injected with nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium to produce food (the “NPK mentality”) ignored the valuable role of humus and the maintenance of the organic matter and biological activity in soil that make up the soil food web in long-term soil

⁹² Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 38

⁹³ Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006., 43

⁹⁴ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 40

⁹⁵ Horrigan, et al. 2002

health. If overused, chemical fertilizers have the effect of destroying soil biomass and gradually increasing the acidity of the soil until it impedes plant growth.⁹⁶

Chemical fertilizers are indeed overused: one study estimates that crops only absorb one-third to one-half of the nitrogen applied to farmland as fertilizer; another study found the figure to be as low as 17%.⁹⁷ In addition to degrading long-term soil health, excess nitrogen in the form of runoff pollutes ecological systems and water tables. Mass fertilizer use in the Midwest, for example, finds its way to the Mississippi River, where it eventually gets deposited in the Gulf of Mexico. Because nitrogen stimulates the growth of algae, which absorb oxygen, nitrogen runoff has the effect of creating “hypoxic,” or dead, zones where fish and other oxygen-dependent species cannot survive. The hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico is over 5,000 square miles, as big as the state of New Jersey.⁹⁸ More than half of the world’s supply of usable nitrogen is now man-made, which has fundamentally altered the global nitrogen cycle, often to the detriment of a multitude of ecological systems.⁹⁹

Pesticides, meanwhile, are dramatically overused: one study estimates only 0.1% of applied pesticides reach the target pests.¹⁰⁰ Their toxicity to humans is often not well understood, they can have a significant detrimental impact on bird and beneficial insect populations, and they can disrupt predator-prey balances because rapidly reproducing insects can recover from pesticide application faster than the predators that naturally keep them under control, effectively creating dangerous pesticide-resistant insects that

⁹⁶ Raupp J. Yield, Product quality and soil life after long-term organic or mineral fertilization. In: *Agricultural Production and Nutrition: Proceedings of an International Conference*, Medford, MA: Tufts University, 1997;91–102.

⁹⁷ Horrigan et al.; UNEP and WHRC. *Reactive Nitrogen in the Environment: Too Much or Too Little of a Good Thing*. United Nations Environment Programme, Paris, 2007

⁹⁸ Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 47

⁹⁹ Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 47

¹⁰⁰ Horrigan et al. 2002.

pose a serious food security threat.¹⁰¹ The number of insect species known to display pesticide resistance increased from less than twenty in 1950 to over 500 in 1990, and it is surely much higher than that today.¹⁰² Pesticides have also had a large role in the decline in the honeybee populations that pollinate our food, in creating developmental abnormalities in amphibians, and in compromising the immune systems of dolphins, seals, and whales.¹⁰³ It is important to understand that high levels of pesticide use are required in large part because of the nature of the industrial system, which employs monocropping, a system that actively attracts pests and disease.

Pesticides and fertilizer pollution have also contributed to water issues. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency blames industrial agriculture products - that is, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, animal waste, and silt runoff - for 70% of the pollution of the nation's rivers and streams.¹⁰⁴ Industrial agriculture is also water-intensive. It accounts for two-thirds of water use worldwide, and much higher in certain areas like the western United State. This rate of usage is often unsustainable because irrigation frequently relies on aquifers that receive little or no recharge.¹⁰⁵ The Ogallala Aquifer supplies water to eight states in the Midwest, for example, but is dropping about a meter a year, a rate that would make its water prohibitively expensive in about a decade.¹⁰⁶ This issue is exacerbated by inefficient use of water in agriculture: one study estimates

¹⁰¹ Horrigan et al. 2002.

¹⁰² Horrigan et al; U.S. National Research Council, Committee on Pest and Pathogen Control. *Ecologically Based Pest Management: New Solutions for a New Century*; Washington,DC:National Academy Press, 1996.

¹⁰³ Horrigan et al., Repetto R, Baliga SS. *Pesticides and the Immune System: The Public Health Risks*. Washington, DC:World Resources Institute, 1996.

¹⁰⁴ Horrigan et al., Cook M. *Reducing Water Pollution from Animal Feeding Operations*. Testimony before Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research of the Committee on Agriculture, U.S. House of Representatives, 13 May 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Horrigan et al., Postel S. *Dividing the Waters: Food Security, Ecosystem Health, and the New Politics of Scarcity*. Worldwatch Paper No. 132. Washington, DC:Worldwatch Institute, 1996

¹⁰⁶ Horrigan et al.; Gardner G. *Shrinking Fields: Cropland Loss in a World of Eight Billion*. Worldwatch paper no. 131. Washington, DC:Worldwatch Institute, 1996.

that crops waste about 55% of irrigation water.¹⁰⁷ Beef production in particular requires unsustainable amounts of water, an issue particularly pertinent to California's current drought crisis.

Those types of extreme droughts will only increase as climate change takes hold, and industrial agriculture is also fossil fuel intensive. Industrial agriculture is responsible for 19% of all fossil emissions in the United States, which is more than any sector of the economy other than cars.¹⁰⁸ Thus, it is practically impossible to meaningfully address climate change issues without reconsidering our food system. The Haber-Bosch process requires fossil fuels because it combines nitrogen and hydrogen under immense heat and pressure in the presence of a catalyst.¹⁰⁹ Heavy machinery on farms require fossil fuels. Transporting, processing, and packaging our food requires energy. The average food item in a grocery store travels over 1,500 miles, which is, appropriately, about the distance from Iowa to Los Angeles.¹¹⁰ The forests cut down to create land for grazing and farming is contributing to climate change because the biosphere is an important sink in the carbon cycle. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), in addition to creating gigantic toxic waste lagoons, also has dramatically increased the emission of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.¹¹¹ The consequences of climate change are significant, with rising sea levels, ocean acidification, extreme storms, and intense droughts among other serious environmental impacts.

One of the most alarming features of contemporary agriculture is the prevalence of genetically modified crops, which reflects the hubris of the industrial mindset.

¹⁰⁷ Horrigan et al., 47

¹⁰⁸ Pollan, Michael. "Farmer in Chief." *New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 47

¹¹⁰ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 38

¹¹¹ Horrigan et al. 2002

Genetic modification of crops can be valuable in certain instances, such as the case of genetically modified “golden” rice solving beta-carotene deficiency in Bangladesh.¹¹² Genetic modification in the United States, however, is not employed to solve critical health issues or diminish world hunger, as has often been portrayed in the media, but rather to marginally increase profit margins and productivity. That in and of itself would not be problematic, but the practice is risky.

Genetic modification is usually undertaken to increase (short-term) resistance to pests or herbicides. One popular gene modification, for example, enables crops to naturally release the *Bt* toxin - that is, produce its own pesticide. This not only increases the rate at which pests develop resistance to the *Bt* toxin, but it will eventually eliminate an important organic pest control method “often used by organic growers as a last resort.”¹¹³ Similarly, creating crop resistance to herbicides increases the rate at which weeds develop natural resistance because it encourages the increased use of the relevant herbicides.¹¹⁴ Genes can also transfer to wild relatives, which leads to development of “superweeds” that are difficult to control. Moreover, agri-scientists and plant breeders often target single genes, which is dangerous, as Cary Fowler and Pat Mooney explain in *Shattering: Food, Politics, and the Loss of Genetic Diversity*:¹¹⁵

Frequently, resistance in a traditional landrace [wild variety] is not nearly so simple [as one gene]. Resistance may be the product of a complex of genes, literally hundreds of genes working together.... By utilizing one-gene resistance ... the plant breeder gives the pest or disease an easy target. It has only to overcome

¹¹² Harmon, Amy. "Golden Rice: Lifesaver?" The New York Times. August 24, 2013. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/sunday-review/golden-rice-lifesaver.html>.

¹¹³ Horrigan et al. 2002.

¹¹⁴ FAO. Technical Meeting on Benefits and Risks of Transgenic Herbicide Resistant Crops. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1999.

¹¹⁵ Horrigan et al.; Fowler C, Mooney P. *Shattering: Food, Politics, and the Loss of Genetic Diversity*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1990.

or find a way around that one line of defense.... The use of one gene for resistance, one gene which is routinely overcome by pest or disease, results in that gene being “used up.” It no longer provides resistance.

Thus, the natural resistance that wild plants developed over thousands of years is being undermined by genetic alteration practices, which have become quite common. While genetically modified crops have only been commercially planted since 1996, over seventy percent of processed foods contained genetically modified ingredients.¹¹⁶

The conjoined impact of genetic modification (which involves exclusive patented seed control) and industrial selection (the singular focus on crops that fit the industrial model) is leading to a major decline in the biodiversity of the food we eat. Industrial agriculture has not only made most produce unavailable to us in grocery stores but has also made them biologically obsolete. The United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that three-fourths of the global biological diversity of foods has been lost as a result of industrial agriculture; other sources estimate that the figure could be as much as ninety percent.¹¹⁷ Only 30 species of foods provide 95 percent of the human food energy consumed globally.¹¹⁸ It is true, as mentioned previously, that there are a hundred of varieties of apples still available in North America, but there were over 7,000 varieties in the 1800s!¹¹⁹ We are focused on genetically modifying foods to increase productivity; perhaps we should focus on retaining the genetic diversity that still exists.

¹¹⁶ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 43

¹¹⁷ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 27

¹¹⁸ Atalan-Hilecke, Nurcan. "Conserving Diversity at the Dinner Table: Plants, Food Security, and Gene Banks | Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective. January 2012. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://origins.osu.edu/article/conserving-diversity-dinner-table-plants-food-security-and-gene-banks>.

¹¹⁹ Atalan-Hilecke, Nurcan, “Conserving Diversity at the Dinner Table,” 2015

Human Costs

Some of the most extreme human costs of the industrial agriculture system are cultural: the virtual extinction of the small family farm, the decline of American rural society, the warping of American food culture, significant losses in farming knowledge, and the increased absence of agrarian ideals that were once profoundly important to much of the nation's population.

It is worth considering just how effectively industrial agriculture overwhelms alternative agricultural practices. Only a few companies control the vast majority of the industrial agriculture system.¹²⁰ Bayer Crop Science, Syngenta, and BASF control about half the agricultural chemicals on the global market. Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, and Bunge control 90 percent of the world's grain trade. Monsanto alone controls one-fifth of global seed production. This means that these companies can keep the sell-price of commodity crops low enough that only high-volume producers can turn a profit. Meanwhile, the prices of machines, seeds, and fertilizer-herbicide-fungicide combinations are too high for low-scale producers.¹²¹

GMOs have added another complication for small-scale farmers: genetic patent infringement. In one famous Canadian Supreme Court case, farmer Percy Schmeiser was found guilty of patent infringement because he grew some of Monsanto's patented Roundup Ready canola, which is engineered to be resistant to Monsanto's Roundup herbicide.¹²² Farmers who buy Monsanto seed are forced to agree to not save the seeds for replanting (a traditional farming practice), which ensures that farmers purchase new Monsanto seeds every year. Schmeiser ignored the agreement, and the court ruled that

¹²⁰ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 44

¹²¹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 43

¹²² Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 50

Schmeiser's crops had been grown illegally (even though Schmeiser did not even employ the GMO's perceived benefit, unlimited use of the Roundup herbicide). A similar case, *Bowman v. Monsanto*, appeared in the United States Supreme Court with a similar outcome. While these farmers were indeed guilty of using patented seeds, the fact that seeds can have their genetic makeup patented deserves reflection. It is at a minimum a powerful symbol for the corporatization of the food system.

Industrial agriculture has also had a contentious and generally exploitative relationship with labor. Even if we do not consider slavery a product of the industrial agriculture system per se - and there is certainly an argument that it was - the relationship between "growers" (those who run farm operations) and workers has always favored growers. The nature of centralized agriculture requires a large number of seasonal workers to be available whenever and wherever they are needed. As agriculture centralized in California in the early 20th century, for example, growers employed a dominantly immigrant workforce - generally Filipino, Japanese, and Mexican - with no political rights and no resources to defend themselves from exploitative working conditions.¹²³ In 1941, Congress enacted legislation that began the *braceros* program, which imported Mexican workers into the United States to meet labor demand. The *braceros* - translated loosely as "those who work with their arms" - were first brought into the United States during World War II, when growers faced labor shortages, but the program continued into the 1960s. Workers attempted to unionize multiple times throughout the first half of the 20th century to achieve bargaining power, but were unsuccessful until the Farm Workers Association, famously led by Cesar Chavez, was

¹²³ Ganz, Marshall. *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

able to launch an innovative and cohesive organizing campaign that led to first farm workers' union contract in California in 1966.

Although Californians celebrate Cesar Chavez day, farm working conditions in California are hardly better than they were in the 1960s following the Cesar Chavez victories.¹²⁴ The 400,000 farm workers employed by California's \$30 billion agriculture industry earn wages that, in real dollars, are twenty to twenty-five percent below what they were paid in the late 1970s.¹²⁵ Forty-three percent of farm worker jobs are managed through the abusive labor contracting system, and most farm workers remain immigrants with few political rights. In Florida, the plight of Immokalee workers has reached the public because of an organizing campaign run by Coalition of Immokalee Workers, but as recently as 2003 the Immokalee immigrant workers were essentially working in slave conditions:¹²⁶

Immokalee's tomato pickers are paid as little as forty cents per bucket. A filled bucket weighs thirty-two pounds. To earn fifty dollars in a day, an Immokalee picker must harvest two tons of tomatoes, or a hundred and twenty-five buckets. Orange- and grapefruit-picking pay slightly better, but the hours are longer. To get to the fruit, pickers must climb twelve-to-eighteen-foot-high ladders, propped on soggy soil, then reach deep into thorny branches, thrusting both hands among pesticide-coated leaves before twisting the fruit from its stem and rapidly stuffing it into a shoulder-slung *moral*, or pick sack. (Grove owners post guards in their fields to make sure that the workers do not harm the trees.) A full sack weighs about a hundred pounds; it takes ten sacks—about two thousand oranges—to fill

¹²⁴ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*

¹²⁵ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 231

¹²⁶ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 231

a *baño*, a bin the size of a large wading pool. Each bin earns the worker a *ficha*, or token, redeemable for about seven dollars. An average worker in a decent field can fill six, seven, maybe eight bins a day. After a rain, though, or in an aging field with overgrown trees, the same picker might work an entire day and fill only three bins.¹²⁷

Immokalee workers rarely complained about working conditions for fear of losing their job or, worse, being seized and deported. Social scientists have called the lack of regulation of fair wages in farm labor the “immigrant subsidy.”¹²⁸

Some of the most serious human costs are health related. Importantly, these health issues disproportionately affect people of lower-socioeconomic status who often do not have access to non-industrial foods. These health issues can be attributed to almost all aspects of the system and are remarkably pervasive. Industrial agriculture has increased the dominance of the American high-saturated fat animal-based diets that have led to high rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain cancers.¹²⁹ The prevalence of pesticides in our food has increased our susceptibility to cancer and disruption of reproductive, immune, endocrine, and nervous systems (and many pesticides have not been thoroughly tested). Water and air pollution from factory farms can have significant negative health consequences for those who live nearby or work in them. There has been large increase in foodborne pathogens, most famously *e. coli*. The mass use of antibiotics in CAFOs has dramatically increased the risk of creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria. GMOs have the potential to introduce new allergens to the

¹²⁷ Bowe, John. "Nobodies." *The New Yorker*. April 21, 2003. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/04/21/nobodies>.

¹²⁸ Alkon, Alison Hope. "Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*, 2014, 27-40.

¹²⁹ Horrigan et al. 2002

food supply. In short, in the attempt to make our food cheaper we have also undermined its nutritional foundation.

Eating Ethically

Thus, in addition to molding our food culture, the industrial food system forces consumers to face moral questions: How does my purchase reaffirm the dominance of this system? How can I take greater control over what I eat? Operating ethically in this industrial economy is challenging. Wendell Berry, in addition to arguing that specialization has led to moral aloofness, also argues that it has led to a profound gap between what we say and what we do. He was not at all surprised, for example, when he learned that the Sierra Club had owned stocks and bonds in environmentally destructive companies that included Exxon and General Motors. “To live undestructively in an economy that is overwhelmingly destructive,” he says, “would require of any one of us, or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do.”¹³⁰ But even if we are “not divided, or readily divisible, into environmental saints and sinners,” there “*are* legitimate distinctions to be made of degree and of consciousness.... some people are more destructive than others.” Considering the value of contemporary food movements is a good place to begin to make those distinctions.

¹³⁰ Berry, *Unsettling of America* 10-11

CHAPTER 3: FOOD MOVEMENTS

Eating is an agricultural act.

Wendell Berry

The rise of contemporary food movements and the dialogue that surrounds them is a response to the industrialization of the food system and its legacy of social and ecological exploitation. In the nineteenth century, the argument against the industrialization of agriculture was largely a greater argument against industrialization itself, advocated in a country dominated by farmers. This debate was not explicitly about the merits of centralized and industrialized agriculture, which did not yet exist in the way we currently understand it, but rather an argument that contemplated the impact of an industrial economy. I argued in chapter one that this argument dates to the theoretical debates between the followers of Alexander Hamilton, who advocated for an industrialized and specialized society, and those of Thomas Jefferson, who instead believed that a healthy democratic society requires a large percentage of the population to be agrarian in lifestyle and mindset. Because the Industrial Revolution had been well underway in England while these arguments were first taking place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both sides had a good idea of what an industrialized and urbanized society would look like. This debate between the agrarian and manufacturing communities would continue in various forms until the decline of the Populists, who were overwhelmed in the 1896 elections by a Republican party whose interests aligned with those involved in manufacturing and banking. Post-1896, no major political party would ever again represent the interests of the small-scale family farmer.

In the early 20th century, the agriculture industry was beginning to resemble the modern format: large, centralized farms controlled by a few companies (“growers”) that were harvested and labored on by a dominantly immigrant workforce (“workers”).¹³¹ In the 1930s, a “permanent agriculture” movement arose that was motivated by depressed agricultural prices and the ecological disaster of the dust bowl.¹³² Like previous agrarian movements, the permanent agriculture movement included an emphasis on interacting with the land, but there was also a new characteristic: the development of an articulated vision of an organic farming system. This vision was rooted in the principles of agroecology, which views the farm as part of ecological system and is concerned with the ecological impact of farming practices.¹³³ In 1940, British scientist Sir Albert Howard, drawing from his farming experience in India and observations throughout Asia, published “An Agricultural Testament,” which explained the scientific basis for agroecology.¹³⁴ Howard’s work was popularized by J.I. Rosdale, who in the early 1940s began to grow food to test Howard’s theories and supplemented his work by launching the *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine.¹³⁵ The permanent agriculture movement - supported by theorists like Louis Bromfield and Wendell Berry and put into experimental practice by farmers like J.I. Rosdale, Ralph Borsodi, and George and Helen Nearing - would lay the theoretical foundation for the contemporary organic farming movement; in 1971, *Organic Gardening and Farming* attracted over 700,000 readers.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*

¹³² Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 27

¹³³ Pollan, Michael. “Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex.” *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2001.

¹³⁴ Pollan, “Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex”

¹³⁵ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 28

¹³⁶ Pollan, “Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex”

The back-to-the-land organic farming movement in the 1960s was driven by the counterculturalist New Left, who sought alternative institutions as a way of modeling social change.¹³⁷ The beginning of modern environmentalism, which scholars have suggested began with publication of Rachel Carson's pesticide-damning *Silent Spring* in 1962, inspired this new political base to question the dominance of chemicals in the food system. Between 1965 and 1970, thousands of people would leave the city to form more than thirty-five hundred farming communes in the countryside, where small groups of individuals pooled money together to form subsistence-style farms.¹³⁸ Although some of the farms failed, their innovative collectively-owned agriculture system would be among the first distinct attacks on the centralized industrial system that had developed over the previous three decades. Other first-generation growers carved organic farms into urban spaces.¹³⁹ Organic agriculture, as it was first understood, "was envisioned as a system of small-scale local suppliers whose direct marketing, minimal processing, and alternative forms of ownership explicitly challenged the food system."¹⁴⁰ When the movement first began, then, it was more than simply alternative agricultural production. It was also primarily ideologically motivated and presented alternative distribution and consumption systems. The movement included, for example, the popularization of farmer cooperatives and health food stores.¹⁴¹

As the movement developed from this small base in the 1960s and 1970s to a much larger audience beginning in the 1980s, its ideology lost much of its ambition. Organic has come to mean something much simpler: less chemicals in the production

¹³⁷ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 27

¹³⁸ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 28

¹³⁹ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 38

¹⁴⁰ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 30

¹⁴¹ Pollan, "Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex"

process.¹⁴² Because the 1980s and 1990s growth in organic production was largely consumer driven, production increasingly became undertaken by conventional growers turning to newly profitable organic production.¹⁴³ These conventional growers did not have the ideological foundation that motivated the first wave of organic growers. Thus, beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, critiques of the organic and alternative food movement began to surface that suggested that they had become overwhelmingly financially motivated. Food activists began to argue that the organic movement was not setting out to do what it had originally sought to accomplish.

The “big organic” critique was one of several critiques of alternative food movements that have developed over the last two decades. Other critiques that have been developed both by food activists and scholars include the local critique (which aims for the development of a local food economy), the food justice critique (which suggests that food movements must do a better job addressing social and economic inequality in the food system), the neoliberal critique (which suggests that simply using the market to achieve social change is insufficient), the food workers’ critique (which suggests that all of these movements have ignored the plight of agricultural workers), and the agrarian critique (which argues that the agrarian ideal is romanticized and should not be the foundation for the movement’s culture). Each one of these critiques seeks to correct injustices in the industrial food system; in some cases they disagree on how to go about it and what to prioritize.

The “Big Organic” Critique

In 2001, the *New York Times Magazine* published Michael Pollan’s first landmark food politics piece, “Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex,” which served as

¹⁴² Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*

¹⁴³ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 27

an exposé to increase awareness for what was seen as a corporate takeover of an anti-industrial movement.¹⁴⁴ Pollan argued that organic farms had become so industrial that they had lost any sense of the agrarian ideal that activists had advocated for early in the movement:

When I think about organic farming, I think family farm, I think small scale, I think hedgerows and compost piles and battered pickup trucks. I don't think migrant laborers, combines, thousands of acres of broccoli reaching clear to the horizon. To the eye, these farms look exactly like any other industrial farm in California -- and in fact the biggest organic operations in the state today are owned and operated by conventional mega-farms. The same farmer who is applying toxic fumigants to sterilize the soil in one field is in the next field applying compost to nurture the soil's natural fertility.¹⁴⁵

This began the public debate over the viability of the movement: Had it become too large to sustain its ideals?

Again, when the movement started, it was small. For perspective, there were only fifty-six certified organic growers in California in 1971.¹⁴⁶ By 1997, there were 648. In her book *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*, Julie Guthman attributes the growth of the organic industry to two major reasons: the restructuring of the world's agrofood economy that occurred during the 1980s, which forced growers to reevaluate their production process, and the increased awareness of environmental and health issues, which had the effect of changing consumer attitudes

¹⁴⁴ Pollan, "Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex"

¹⁴⁵ Pollan, "Behind the Organic-Industrial Complex"

¹⁴⁶ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*

about food.¹⁴⁷ In short, the 1980s featured changes in commodity crop support programs that left many growers in debt and also featured a dramatic rise in international trade of fresh fruits and vegetables, which particularly affected California growers. The increase in demand for organic crops provided an attractive new alternative for these growers. Thus, an increasing percentage of organic production became undertaken by these “mixed” growers, which engage in both organic and non-organic production. Bursts of demand would occur following the Aldicarb and Alar scares in the 1980s, which convinced many more growers to invest in organic, particularly for crops that are not as reliant on pesticides, such as grapes.¹⁴⁸

The dominance of mixed growers in organic has resulted in an industry that is a far cry from Pollan’s hedgerows and compost piles. Namely, the organic movement on its own has done little to increase the success of small-scale farms or alternative ownership structures, improve the wage and working conditions of workers, employ agroecological practices (i.e., composting, cover cropping, etc.), engage in direct and local marketing, and operate under ideological rather than financial motivations. Even in 1997, over half the value of organic production was controlled by two percent of the organic growers.¹⁴⁹ The organic industry has grown over fourfold since then, and sales have only become increasingly imbalanced between small and large growers. In 2010, directly marketed organic sales, such as those from farmer’s markets and community-supported agriculture, accounted for less than seven percent of organic produce sold in the United States.¹⁵⁰ In the same year, mass-market retailers (defined as mainstream

¹⁴⁷ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 57

¹⁴⁸ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 57

¹⁴⁹ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 65

¹⁵⁰ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 207

supermarkets, club or warehouse stores, and mass merchandisers) were responsible for 54% of organic food sold.

Cover cropping (the regular planting of legumes or other crops that can help restore fertility to the soil) is not conducive to maximizing short-term profits. It requires a given piece of land to be without a cash crop for four months out of the year.¹⁵¹ Thus, in the agriculture industry, cover cropping is generally seen as a luxury, particularly in places where water is expensive and land is limited, and tends to be practiced only by growers who are ideologically inclined or own cheap or fully subsidized land.

Composting is similarly land intensive. Moreover, the theory behind composting is that it integrates and puts into use various wastes from the farm - manure, crop residues, household waste - but industrial organic growers rarely integrate livestock production into their farm, so they would need to source waste from elsewhere. (Indeed, before 2001, there was no organic label for meat.¹⁵²) As one grower phrased it, “making compost is like growing another crop.”¹⁵³ Instead of employing non-cash crops to assist in pest control or fertility, they use controversial sodium or Chilean nitrate, release predator insects from helicopters, and use the latest organic technology, such as bug vacuums and plastic mulch. Some crops have specific organic enhancements, like sulfur dust for grapes (which on its own has generated controversy). In short, large-scale organic producers rarely employ labor-intensive agronomic practices because they can get away with not doing so.

In terms of labor, organic producers rarely deviate from common industrial practices because in many cases they also function as conventional producers and

¹⁵¹ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 72

¹⁵² Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*

¹⁵³ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 72

employ the same labor force for all of their crops.¹⁵⁴ Only a few growers in the all-organic category refuse to use labor contractors, pay above minimum wage, or employ workers year-round. With that said, some organic crops are more labor intensive than conventional crops and require more year-round employment out of necessity, and growers take pride in exposing their workers to less toxicity.¹⁵⁵

The Local Critique

One of the most common critiques of large-scale organic producers is that they fundamentally cannot adhere to an agrarian ideal while shipping their produce across (or out of) the country. The local critique in general is a response to industrial agriculture's propensity to ship food vast distances, with the argument being that it is fossil fuel intensive process and that it discourages support of local economies. In 2001, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture released a landmark report that details the food system's production, processing, storage, and transportation processes and accuses the system of drastically increasing fossil fuel emissions and exacerbating environmental costs that are not incorporated into retail pricing.¹⁵⁶ The report was also the first to calculate that the average grocery store item travels 1,518 miles to get to the consumer, which has become a popular soundbite for local food rhetoric. The report noted, too, that accurately calculating that figure has become increasingly difficult as government-operated food terminals vanish and major national retailers adopt their own private distribution systems, which has become the standard since the report was released.¹⁵⁷ It is also important to understand that the 1,518 mile figure was estimated from single-item foods like fruits, vegetables, and meats. If we consider multi-ingredient

¹⁵⁴ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 74

¹⁵⁵ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 77

¹⁵⁶ Leopold, Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 50

¹⁵⁷ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 52

grocery store items with multiple processed products - xanthan gum, high-fructose corn syrup, soy proteins, etc. - it becomes clear that calculating the figure is complex and that the figure itself, in terms of accumulated transportation miles, is certainly much higher than the already-alarming 1,500 mile estimate.

The local critique, however, is more developed than simply reducing “food miles.” It is a fundamentally agrarian argument that has been championed most fiercely by neoagrarians Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, both of whom have become quite influential. Berry, in various books and publications, has argued that the development of local economies is a necessary check on the environmental social exploitation that becomes systematically ingrained in “total” economies:

A total economy is one in which everything — “life forms,” for instance, — or the “right to pollute” is “private property” and has a price and is for sale. In a total economy significant and sometimes critical choices that once belonged to individuals or communities become the property of corporations. A total economy, operating internationally, necessarily shrinks the powers of state and national governments, not only because those governments have signed over significant powers to an international bureaucracy or because political leaders become the paid hacks of the corporations but also because political processes — and especially democratic processes — are too slow to react to unrestrained economic and technological development on a global scale. And when state and national governments begin to act in effect as agents of the global economy, selling their people for low wages and their people’s products for low prices, then the rights and liberties of citizenship must necessarily shrink. A total economy is

an unrestrained taking of profits from the disintegration of nations:
communities, households, landscapes, and ecosystems.¹⁵⁸

Berry suggests that globalization and accompanying free-market processes have limited critical government protections against such exploitation. His proposed solution is development of local economies, where community bonds and direct marketing can provide a foundation of trust between producers and consumers, which is absent for a consumer in a total economy:

As such a consumer, one does not know the history of the products that one uses. Where, exactly, did they come from? Who produced them? What toxins were used in their production? What were the human and ecological costs of producing them and then of disposing of them? One sees that such questions cannot be answered easily, and perhaps not at all. Though one is shopping amid an astonishing variety of products, one is denied certain significant choices. In such a state of economic ignorance it is not possible to choose products that were produced locally or with reasonable kindness toward people and toward nature.¹⁵⁹

Berry recognizes that not everything can be produced locally, but he does suggest that the beginning of the development of local economies can most feasibly occur with food. He argues that a local economy need not produce all of its needs, but that it should not import what it can produce itself and not export while its own needs have not been met.

Many persistent components of alternative food movements including survivalism (getting by on little) and anti-modernism (the valorization of craft

¹⁵⁸ Berry, Wendell. "The Idea of a Local Economy." Orion Magazine. Accessed December 11, 2015. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-idea-of-a-local-economy/>.

¹⁵⁹ Berry, Wendell. "The Idea of a Local Economy."

production, food or otherwise) can be traced to Berry's message, who is, of course, drawing from an earlier tradition of agrarian thought.¹⁶⁰ Berry's political theory is fundamentally conservative in that he is an ardent supporter of regionalism, but he has become a champion of the local food movement in that he is equally anti-corporate. He is, for instance, enamored with what some agri-theorists refer to as "the Amish exception," where the Amish have managed to remain culturally self-contained and have made extraordinary efforts to distance themselves from Berry's total economy. In a 1981 piece, "Seven Amish Farms," Berry recounts a visit to Amish farms and details their agronomic practices - the use of horse manure, well-managed cover cropping, and diversification - that had been traditional among the community since the seventeenth century.¹⁶¹ He concludes that "these Amish farms suggest... that in farming there is inevitably a scale that is suitable both to the productive capacity of the land and to the abilities of the farmer; and that agricultural problems are to be properly solved, not in expansion, but in management, diversity, balance, order." Thus, Berry believes that scale itself is one of the fundamental problems with industrial agriculture, which has been viewed as a contentious claim among food scholars.¹⁶² Perhaps Berry's most contentious claim is that these types of small farms are inherently virtuous, or at least that they foster virtue, a claim that Julie Guthman denies most fervently.¹⁶³

While Berry is generally implicitly and often explicitly concerned with regionalism, sense of place, and rootlessness, the most prominent of activist of the role of place in virtue and fulfillment may be Wes Jackson, who writes most often from the perspective of an environmentalist. In a 1994 essay titled "Becoming Native to Our

¹⁶⁰ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 30

¹⁶¹ Berry, in *American Georgics*, 364

¹⁶² Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 32

¹⁶³ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*

Places,” he argued, “our task is to build cultural fortresses to protect our emerging nativeness. They must be strong enough to hold at bay the powers of consumerism, the powers of greed and envy and pride.”¹⁶⁴ By becoming “native,” he means beginning a revival of Americans’ ecological relationship with the land they live on and a revival of the relationships between the people and other living things that live on that land. Neoagrarians like Jackson and Bell Hooks believe that there is intrinsic value in establishing such a relationship and that avoiding doing so creates a sense of rootlessness than undermines capacity for kindness, community, civic engagement, and concern for nature. Rootlessness creates, in the words of Jackson, a “me, me, me” culture.¹⁶⁵ To Jackson, farming is the first critical step in establishing nativeness.

The Food Justice and Workers’ Critiques

Food justice can be defined as “the struggle against racism, exploitation, and oppression taking place within the food system that addresses inequality’s root causes both within and beyond the food chain.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, it attempts to incorporate alternative food movements into social justice ends. Central to this critique is the contention that there are barriers that low-income people and people of color face in accessing local and organic food as both consumers and producers.¹⁶⁷ In terms of production, food-justice scholars have pointed out that farmers of color have been continuously disenfranchised as a result of discriminatory USDA practices, forced relocation, and discriminatory immigration laws that prevent land ownership.¹⁶⁸ In 1920, for example, there were almost a million black farmers managing land, the bulk of which was in the south, but

¹⁶⁴ Jackson, in *American Georgics*, 346

¹⁶⁵ Jackson, in *American Georgics*, 348

¹⁶⁶ Alkon, Alison Hope. “Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism,” 2014; Hislop, Rasheed. 2014. “Reaping Equity Across the USA: FJ Organizations Observed at the National Scale.” MA thesis. University of California–Davis.

¹⁶⁷ Alkon, Alison Hope. “Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism,” 2014

¹⁶⁸ Alkon, Alison Hope. “Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism,” 2014

almost 600,000 of those farmers were driven off the land between 1940 and 1969.¹⁶⁹ Today, rural black farming culture has gone virtually extinct (Bell Hooks' book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* discusses the disappearance of rural black culture at length). While some scholars have attributed that astoundingly sharp decline to changing agricultural practices that led to a general shift away from the land, the USDA also employed discriminatory loan practices that prioritized white farmers. It should be understood, too, that the shift from labor-intensive to capital-intensive was very much a conscious effort by the USDA that dismissed what was ultimately a catastrophic impact on small farmers.¹⁷⁰

Most of the focus of food justice movement, though, has been on barriers for consumers.¹⁷¹ Organic food is often prohibitively expensive for low-income families. Some scholars have argued that the organic food movement has privileged the needs of organic farmers, which has maintained the high price of organic produce and made it inaccessible to a large swath of Americans. Moreover, because the price of organic produce is so high, natural food retailers are disproportionately located in wealthy, white-dominated areas, which make them difficult to access in the first place. This has compounded the issue of "food deserts," where affordability and other constraints create areas where all produce, organic or otherwise, becomes inaccessible. Finally, food justice activists have argued the language of sustainable agriculture itself is coded as white, both because farmers' markets are disproportionately frequented by whites and because phrases often associated with the movement (e.g. "getting your hands in the soil") are often more easily romanticized by whites than people of color. The food workers'

¹⁶⁹ Daniel, Pete. *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*. UNC Press, 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Daniel, Pete. *Dispossession: Discrimination against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*, 2013

¹⁷¹ Alkon, Alison Hope. "Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism," 2014

critique, in turn, argues that by focusing on consumption and prioritizing the needs of small growers, the plight of workers is ignored by the organic and local movements.

The Neoliberal Critique

In 2006, Michael Pollan - ever the source of food politics controversy - published a piece in the *New York Times* titled "Voting With Your Fork."¹⁷² In it, he argued that consumers were starting to face moral questions in their food shopping decisionmaking. He suggested that they educate themselves and use their purchase to "vote" for change, which the implication that shifting market demand will inspire changes in the food system. Neoliberalism, relatedly, is a brand of political thought that seeks to relieve the state of responsibilities it has historically held, such as management of prisons, or, more pertinently, protecting citizens from industrial toxins, protecting the environment, and limiting hunger.¹⁷³

Food activism within the organic and local movements has been dominated by neoliberal strategies largely because they subscribe to the idea that the state has failed to maintain those responsibilities. For agrarians like Berry, "voting with your fork" can mean developing a market for local minor products - for example, milk from a local dairy - which is essential to his ultimate vision of a local food economy. This view is markedly different from other successful social movement strategies, which, for example, have sought state-mandated protections for the environment and labor workers. Those social movements relied on direct political action and social agitation (e.g. a labor strike) to increase awareness among the public and pressure the state to address social issues. The neoliberal critique, which is related in many ways to these other discussed critiques, suggests that transformational social change cannot be

¹⁷² Pollan, "Voting With Your Fork," 2006

¹⁷³ Alkon, Alison Hope. "Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism," 2014

achieved with just market-based strategies, including “voting with your fork” or starting an organic farm business. The “big organic” critique has elements of the neoliberal critique in that it suggests that if a movement is financially motivated it will lose its grasp on core ideals.

This is not to say that food movements are exclusively neoliberal. Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Worker strike and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers campaign (both discussed in chapter two) involved more traditional strategies. The recent push against genetically modified foods has sought state intervention.¹⁷⁴ Worker cooperatives, which are businesses in which workers work in, manage, own, and share profits of the enterprise, have also been a tool of food movements, particularly for activists with a focus on food justice.¹⁷⁵ The Mandela Food Cooperative in West Oakland, California, for example, has several worker-owners that earn profits exclusively based on hours worked. While worker cooperatives in the food movement can engage in neoliberal strategies (such as selling produce to people who support their cause), they are fundamentally anti-capitalist in their cooperative vision.

The Agrarian Critique

Finally, some scholars and activists have questioned the validity of the agrarian ideal as a basis from which to lead movement discourse. The most prominent critic of the small farmer ideal is again Julie Guthman, who has argued that agrarianism romanticizes the small-scale family farm (which can be an extraordinarily difficult lifestyle), has historically promoted white privilege (a fact, given the racial history of U.S. land policy), reinforces the patriarchy (a dominantly feminist argument), and

¹⁷⁴ Alkon, Alison Hope. "Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism," 2014

¹⁷⁵ Alkon, Alison Hope. "Food Justice and the Challenge to Neoliberalism," 2014

perpetuates injustice for farm workers (the food workers' critique).¹⁷⁶ Guthman also questions the argument that a small family farm is less likely to promote social or ecological exploitation. She argues that organization of production, not scale, is the determining factor in those exploitative processes. She argues, for instance, that "once hired labor is admitted into the analysis, there is no evidence to suggest that working conditions and remuneration on small 'family' farms are better than on large 'corporate ones.'"¹⁷⁷

All of these critiques are valid to some extent and are worth considering carefully as activists propose future paths for alternative food systems. Even the critiques that are seemingly at odds with one another - such as Berry's and Guthman's - can be reconciled. It is likely true that the organization of production will ultimately determine the extent to which environmental and social issues are addressed. As Guthman acknowledges, however, growers that farm agroecologically tend to be ideologically rather than financially motivated. It stands to reason that the major motivation to scale up a farm is financial. The real dilemma that Guthman is attempting to consider is that of focus: Should these movements focus on neoliberal market-based strategies, alternative ownership strategies (such as community gardening), or a more traditional appeal for state regulation?

While neoliberal strategies have resulted in the development of a "big organic" system that fails to achieve many of the organic movement's perceived goals, Guthman and others have also argued that market strategies have exposed a much larger consumer base to organic foods and, perhaps more importantly (given the economic

¹⁷⁶ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 231

¹⁷⁷ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 231

inequality inherent in that consumer base), it has also “invigorated a much broader food movement” that has popularized alternative food dialogue and sparked a renewed focus on social justice, which is virtually absent in traditional agrarianism. The other lurking question, then, is whether to attempt, as Guthman phrases it, to “build near-perfect systems for the few rather than better systems for many.”¹⁷⁸

There are signs, however, that an increasing percentage of Americans will continue to become interested in the way food is produced and consumed, which suggests that a better food system may reach more people than Guthman could have anticipated. One of the most distinct aspects of these contemporary food movements in relation to previous agrarian movements is a substantial rise in interest in food that is healthy and tastes good.¹⁷⁹ Though the major perceived problem with the industrial agriculture system is that it irresponsibly creates and exacerbates social and environmental issues, it has also modified our food culture to the extent that it interferes with something less quantifiable: pleasure. This renewed interest in healthy and pleasurable eating dates back to the 1970s farm-to-table movement generally attributed to Alice Waters, whose Bay Area restaurant Chez Panisse sparked interest in seasonal and local-based cooking.¹⁸⁰ This interest was reinforced by the recent Slow Food campaign, which argues that the “quality of food, and not just its quantity, ought to guide our agriculture. The ways we grow, distribute, and prepare food should celebrate our various cultures and our shared humanity, providing not only sustenance, but justice, beauty and pleasure.”¹⁸¹ Invigorated by food writers, cookbooks, and

¹⁷⁸ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 241

¹⁷⁹ Johnston, Jose, and Shyon Baumann. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

¹⁸⁰ McNamee, Thomas. *Alice Waters & Chez Panisse: The Romantic, Impractical, Often Eccentric, Ultimately Brilliant Making of a Food Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

¹⁸¹ Slow Food’s “Declaration for Healthy Food and Agriculture,” 2008; *American Georgics* 370

television shows, the “foodie” movement promotes not just interest in high dining but also in home cooking and unpretentious and affordable eating. Indeed, the cultural importance of seasonal eating in other countries - most famously France and Italy, but there are numerous examples - suggest that a critical foundation for a healthy farming culture is an emphasis on the simple pleasure of eating food.

Another important consideration for the ultimate viability of these movements is the increasing emphasis on environmentalism. Environmental concerns were a major motivation for alternative food production in the back-to-the-land and organic production waves of the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s, and it will continue to be a critical aspect of these movements as the facts of widespread environmental degradation reach broader audiences and their consequences become increasingly apparent. These environmental issues will force Americans to seriously question their lifestyle and consumer decisions, and the way food is consumed will continue to center the discussion as activists call for more “balanced consumption.”¹⁸²

As Americans begin to revive their relationship with nutritious and tasteful food and reconsider environmental issues, social justice may ultimately become the significant hurdle in food activism, largely because it is a product of processes that exist beyond food chains. Non-capitalist strategies such as community gardens and urban agriculture are powerful tools for food justice, but the movement would do well to, as Guthman suggests, push for state protections to at least finally grant workers minimum wage and dismantle the “immigrant subsidy” system. Many have suggested reallocating subsidies away from big agriculture and toward a revival of small farming culture not only to promote these food movements but also to revive interest in farming as an

¹⁸² Dauvergne, Peter, *The Shadows of Consumption: Consequences for the Global Environment*, 2008

occupation. Farming work has become dangerously out of style: the average age of the farmer in the United States is about 60 and growing, which is particularly concerning given the general decline in agroeconomic farming knowledge perpetuated by the input-output system.¹⁸³ Just as important, these issues will need to be tackled in part by governments at state and municipal levels. There is already evidence of city initiatives across the United States promoting food reform, as local governments take steps to support urban agriculture projects, community gardens, school gardens, and other programs. Among the most prominent examples of this effort is visible in Los Angeles.

¹⁸³ Kurtzleben, Danielle. "The Rapidly Aging U.S. Farmer." February 24, 2014. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/02/24/us-farmers-are-old-and-getting-much-older>.

CHAPTER FOUR: ALTERNATIVE FOOD IN AND AROUND LOS ANGELES¹⁸⁴

It was a way of reconnecting.... It never started out as a political statement. It started as an evolutionary adaptation. We're hungry. We can't get a job. We're old. If you went to work, as a single mother, someone would have to take care of your kids, and you couldn't afford that. Tezozomoc, a South Los Angeles resident, on starting an urban garden¹⁸⁵

Due to its size, ethnic diversity, and economic inequality, Los Angeles and its environs is among the more complex and interesting sites of food activism in the United States. This is in part because California also has a distinct relationship with agriculture. While Northern and Southern California have been influential sources of food activism, the state never had an agrarian tradition of small family farms. Large landholdings were purchased by an elite few following the gold rush. When that land was split up in the late nineteenth century, it was used for industrial-scale fruit production that relied on immigrant (exploited) hired labor (see chapter two).¹⁸⁶ Today, the Central Valley, which runs 450 miles down the state, produces eight percent of the agricultural output in the United States.¹⁸⁷ Among nations, California's \$54 billion agricultural economy is the sixth largest in the world.¹⁸⁸

Yet, despite California's immense agricultural production, at least one million of Los Angeles County's thirteen million inhabitants are facing hunger or are food insecure.¹⁸⁹ For perspective, Downtown Los Angeles is about a two-hour drive from Bakersfield, a hub for agriculture in the Southern tip of the Central Valley. It is also worth noting that until the 1950s, Los Angeles County was the largest agricultural

¹⁸⁴ Note: Sections of this chapter were taken from a separate report written in August 2015; Gordon, L.A. Food Mellon Report 2015

¹⁸⁵ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 151

¹⁸⁶ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 36

¹⁸⁷ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City* 40

¹⁸⁸ Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 36; <https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/statistics/>

¹⁸⁹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 140

county in the United States.¹⁹⁰ Today, Los Angeles is a poster-child for both extreme excess and extreme poverty. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which distributes food stamps, calls Los Angeles the “epicenter of hunger” in the United States.¹⁹¹ Over a million children in the County are eligible for a free or reduced school lunch program. In L.A. County, 42% of all adults are food insecure and 61% of adults are obese or overweight.¹⁹² There is considerable overlap between those two figures: unequal access to healthy food has led to rates of obesity and diabetes that are three times higher in South L.A. than the wealthier Westside. The city’s food deserts are what are described in textbooks: predominantly white neighborhoods in Los Angeles have three times as many supermarkets as predominantly black neighborhoods.¹⁹³ In South L.A., 72% of restaurants are fast food establishments, compared with 41% in West L.A.

Many food activists are familiar with the prevalence and impact of food injustice in Los Angeles because of the *The Garden*, a 2009 Academy Award-nominated documentary. The film documents the creation and eventual destruction of the fourteen-acre community farm in South Central Los Angeles, a neighborhood known for extreme poverty and gang activity. The farm fed hundreds of families before a legal battle forced them out in 2004. The film provides a good backdrop for Los Angeles food politics by documenting the city’s racial tensions, poverty struggles, urbanization stresses, and, ultimately, many of the failures of the local food movement to address social justice. It also touches on one of the more divisive issues about farm policy and food movements more generally: the question of private ownership versus public good.

¹⁹⁰ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 141

¹⁹¹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 140

¹⁹² Hingorani, Anisha and Chau, Haan-Fawn. "LA Food System Snapshot 2013." Good Food LA. October 1, 2013. Accessed August 26, 2015. <http://goodfoodla.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/LA-Food-System-Snapshot-Oct-2013-small.pdf>.

¹⁹³ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*, 140

In the decade since the destruction of the urban farm in South Central L.A., there has been some progress. The city's Unified School District now has over five hundred school gardens.¹⁹⁴ The county contains seventy community gardens that help feed almost 4,000 families. Non-profits are helping plant gardens in underprivileged communities. An increasing number of restaurants are only serving food with local produce. This progress reflects the city's broad effort to address food access, affordability, and quality through both city-sponsored programs and non-profit efforts.

Crafting Food Policy

In 2010, the city created the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC), which advises the city on food justice issues and creates reports to help craft municipal and regional food policy. The LAFPC conducts its studies by analyzing Los Angeles as a "foodshed." Like a watershed, a foodshed is linked by a common source; in this case, the common source is the "structures of supply" that link the economic, political, and transportation systems guiding the distribution of local food.¹⁹⁵ The LAFPC defines the Los Angeles regional foodshed – and therefore what counts as local food – as the 200-square mile, ten-county region around Los Angeles (see Figure 1).

¹⁹⁴ Hingorani & Chau, La Food System Snapshot 2013

¹⁹⁵ Hingorani & Chau, La Food System Snapshot 2013

LOS ANGELES REGIONAL FOODSHED

The Los Angeles regional foodshed (or the LA foodshed) spans a 200-mile, ten county radius from the Los Angeles urban core. These counties include:



Figure 1. LA Regional Foodshed as defined by the LAFPC. Source: La Food System Snapshot 2013.

One of the LAFPC's main goals is to address L.A.'s unequal access to fresh and healthy food, which it sees as the most pressing obstacle to universalizing demand for local food. Part of the problem is education. The CalFresh program, the state version of SNAP, issues monthly benefits that can be used to buy fresh food (including local produce), but enrollment rates in L.A. County are a low 55%.¹⁹⁶ The County loses almost a billion dollars a year in unclaimed benefits. And while over a million children qualify for free or reduced school lunches, only six out of ten participate.¹⁹⁷

The LAFPC acknowledges the problem is complex and primarily linked to institutional racism and poverty. Part of the plan is to “leverage the purchasing power” of large institutions such as government agencies, hospitals, and universities to increase

¹⁹⁶ <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/foodstamps/>

¹⁹⁷ Hingorani & Chau, La Food System Snapshot 2013

the market for affordable local produce.¹⁹⁸ In addition to promoting healthy food businesses in underprivileged neighborhoods, the council has fought to legalize street food vending, which remains illegal in the city of Los Angeles and 31 cities out of the 88 cities in L.A. County. Street food vending is especially popular in poor neighborhoods because carts are portable and cheap to install, but the city is wary of health violations. There are 12,000 sidewalk food vendors in L.A. County, and the LAFPC advocates providing legalization for vendors selling healthy, sustainable, and locally grown food.

The council is also working to promote urban agriculture, which has developed as an international movement in the last decade.¹⁹⁹ Because one of the main obstacles to the viability of urban gardens and farms in general is land permanence - that is, people are reluctant to invest time in a piece of land (say, an empty lot) outside of their control - California enacted a law in 2013 that allows municipalities to lower the assessed value (and property taxes) for land that contains plots of three acres or less if the owners pledge to grow food for at least five years.²⁰⁰ A recent study found that there are over 1,200 urban farms in the county.²⁰¹

Contrary to activists' complaints about lack of affordability, the council tries to utilize farmers' markets as a source of fresh, local produce. There are now 148 farmers' markets in LA County (see Figure 2). About 53% of them accept stamps from the Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and 39% accept CalFresh Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. The city's two largest farmers' markets, located in Santa Monica and Hollywood, both accept EBT. There are, however, few farmers' markets in the poorest areas (see the relative absence of farmer's markets

¹⁹⁸ Hingorani & Chau, *La Food System Snapshot 2013*

¹⁹⁹ Cockrail-King, *Food and the City*

²⁰⁰ <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/02/local/la-me-urban-agriculture-law-20131003>

²⁰¹ Hingorani & Chau, *La Food System Snapshot 2013*

in South Los Angeles) and transportation remains an issue; public transportation Los Angeles is notoriously poor.

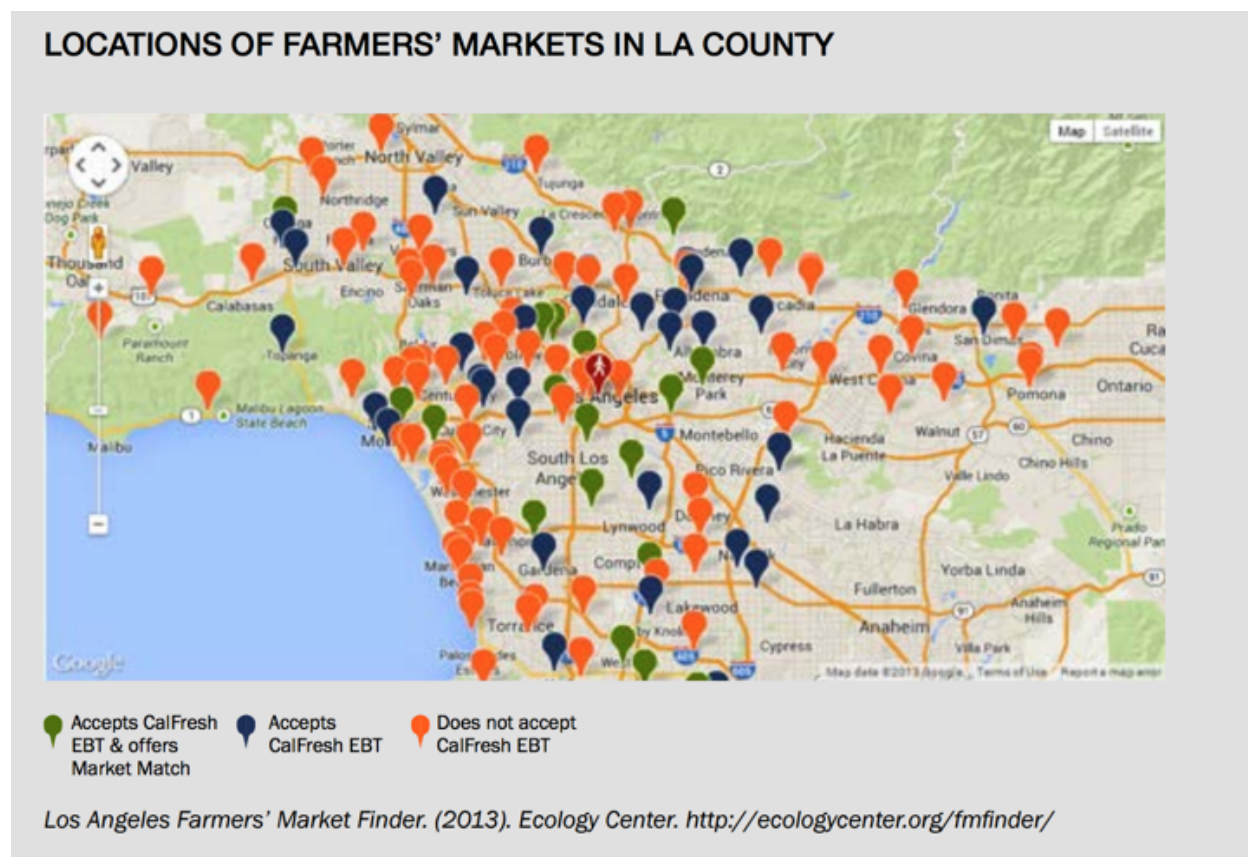


Figure 2. Location of farmer's markets in L.A. county. Source: LA Food System Snapshot 2013.

Non-state Efforts

While the LAFPC is helping organize the alternative food push, there are also individuals and groups that are operating independently to universalize access to fresh produce, which reflects the importance of non-state efforts in these food movements. On the eastern edge of the county, for example, the non-profit Uncommon Good helps locals who otherwise lack access to fresh produce plant gardens in their yards.²⁰² Uncommon Good follows all of the conditions of organic to its extremes: all of the food its farms produce is grown beyond organic conditions (i.e., no pesticides or chemicals,

²⁰² Nancy Mintie, interview with James Gordon, July 7, 2015.

even those approved for organic production by federal standards) and eaten and sold locally. Farmers are paid a living wage with benefits.

In a July 2015 interview, Uncommon Good's founder, Nancy Mintie, discussed the difficulties of selling local produce "at a price point that supports organic production and fair working conditions."²⁰³ Joining CSAs and registering with farmers' markets requires commission fees. Most farmers' markets require farms to be certified organic, which also involves a fee to the certifying entity. Other options, like selling to restaurants, can be inconsistent. Uncommon Good found those options to be financially unsustainable and is now attempting to sell the bulk of its produce directly through its location in Claremont. Growing food organically can also be difficult, with pests, for example, consistently presenting issues. Mintie, however, is not discouraged. She insists that "if we're going to have a healthy future where we can feed each other, we better learn how to do this. We better learn how to embed our farms into our dense urban areas. We think agribusiness is so unsustainable on so many levels that it will be the next bubble to collapse.... And it doesn't have to be that way."²⁰⁴

The Ontario area is an active site for food activism in general. There is an organic farm located on Pomona College's campus that has been institutionalized by the school but was originally "anarchist" (as the current farm manager describes it) in motivation as students in the late 1990s began to grow food without the college's knowledge. The Pomona College farm reflects the counterculture influence on the organic movement. Pitzer College has helped support Huerta del Valle, an Ontario community garden that helps feed 68 local families. A major motivation for the garden, which was launched in 2010, was lack of access to organic produce. The garden is supported by interns and

²⁰³ Nancy Mintie, interview with James Gordon, July 7, 2015.

²⁰⁴ Nancy Mintie, interview with James Gordon, July 7, 2015.

volunteers. Importantly, the city of Ontario has supported the project by giving them a 10-year deal to use the land.

Amy's Farm, also located in Ontario, is polyculture-oriented and has a focus on education, with thousands of visitors each year. In addition to organic produce, Amy's Farm produces grass-fed beef and organic pork and has a significant composting operation. Nearby in Upland, the Incredible Edible Garden operates small-scale community gardens at fourteen sites, including two aquaponic facilities and three community fruit parks.²⁰⁵ All of these projects reflect community grassroots efforts to take greater control over the food system.

Farm-to-Table in Los Angeles

Anyone that can afford it has access to locally produced food in Los Angeles, but activists suggest that demand must be higher to support a local food system. Part of the issue may be that Los Angeles food culture is not health-focused as is often perceived; the city is characterized by fast-food burger and donut shops, not the farm-to-table cuisine of Northern California. There is evidence, however, that the city's dining scene is changing to accommodate local food initiatives.

Los Angeles is not typically thought of as a high-end culinary destination, but that belief has recently changed. This year, the city has the number two and number three restaurants on *Bon Appetit Magazine's* list of the 10 best new restaurants in America. Influential chefs with Michelin-star experience, like Ludo Lefebvre and Michael Cimarusti, are changing how Angelinos think about food. Last year, Gary Menes, who cooked at The French Laundry, opened Le Comptoir, which only serves produce grown in Menes' personal garden.

²⁰⁵ Hughes, A.J. "Grassroots Efforts Target Food Insecurity in San Bernardino County, CA." September 9, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2015-09-09/grassroots-efforts-target-food-insecurity-in-san-bernardino-county-ca>.

Ari Taymor, an L.A. chef who was named American's Best New Chef by both *Bon Appetit* and *Food & Wine Magazine*, is an outspoken advocate of using local produce. In a July 2015 interview, Taymor said his motivation for cooking with fresh local food – every ingredient at his restaurant, Alma, is produced locally – was about “interacting with the community, sense of place, and supporting sustainable agricultural practices.”²⁰⁶ When asked to explain why some chefs may not cook with local produce, Taymor gave an impassioned response: “It’s the only way. I’ve never considered any other options... There’s just no excuse anymore.” Taymor thinks the only obstacle is consumer education; once consumers are willing to pay more for higher quality and more sustainable food, chefs will cook it.

Taymor’s views are indicative of a major shift in culinary thinking in the United States, and especially Los Angeles. Some prominent chefs and writers have argued that the term “farm-to-table” has lost its meaning because it is increasingly being used for marketing.²⁰⁷ (McDonald’s has recently tried to adopt farm-to-table.) The argument is not, however, that restaurants should not pursue food produced by local farmers; instead, the argument is that all restaurants should use local food and that the label is unnecessary.

Local food, however, remains an expensive and inconsistent option for most L.A. chefs, some of whom argue local food is only viable for well-funded restaurants with a large staff. One successful L.A. chef, who prefers anonymity, says only half of the produce he uses is local.²⁰⁸ He acknowledges that “sometimes, it’s easier to get avocados from Peru than from Pomona. In a small restaurant, those extra costs can add up

²⁰⁶ Ari Taymor, interview with James Gordon, July 23, 2015.

²⁰⁷ Corby, Kummer. "Is It Time to Table Farm-to-Table?" May 1, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/05/farm-to-table-what-does-it-mean-any-more>.

²⁰⁸ L.A. chef, interview with James Gordon, August 4, 2015.

extremely quickly.” Like Taymor, he thinks the fate of the local food push is ultimately up to consumers.

One idea to inform consumers is to have a certification process for farm-to-table restaurants much in the same way France labels its regional foods through appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC) labeling.²⁰⁹ Chefs, however, do not like the idea. The anonymous chef quoted above says that it should be up to consumers to do their research and talk to the chefs and that “the last thing restaurants in Los Angeles need is more regulation.”

For now, the farm-to-table movement in Los Angeles remains exclusive to expensive restaurants with chefs that have substantial culinary training. In addition to being expensive, which limits farm-to-table cooking to wealthy consumers, cooking with seasonal ingredients requires flexibility and skill. Until recently, chefs in the United States were not trained on how to cook with seasonal ingredients. There is no successful model for neighborhood restaurants with smaller staffs; even Chez Panisse was unprofitable for much of its early existence.²¹⁰ For now, says one chef, the model is simply: “Buy as much local as you can. Use every part of it, change your menu often.”²¹¹

According to Delyn Chow, the chef at the popular Burmese restaurant Daw Yee Myanmar, the most significant obstacle to popularizing farm-to-table is convincing chefs and consumers that consistency is not as important as fresh ingredients.²¹² In an August 2015 interview, Chow insisted that “when most customers revisit a certain eatery, they expect the same dish they ordered from last time to have the same taste with same ingredients.” According to Chow, the local food movement is virtually absent

²⁰⁹ http://www.uky.edu/~tmute2/geography_methods/readingPDFs/barnam_terroir.pdf

²¹⁰ McNamee, “Alice Waters,” 2008

²¹¹ L.A. chef, interview with James Gordon, August 4, 2015.

²¹² Delyn Chow, interview with James Gordon, August 5, 2015.

in the Asian restaurant community (which dominates the restaurant industry in the San Gabriel Valley), largely because consumers are not as informed or interested. Whereas chefs in West L.A. have seen an increase in demand for farm-to-table and farmers markets, Chow does not see “growth or excitement in the Monterey Park farmers market in the past 2 years.”

Even L.A.’s most celebrated chefs have room to expand their views on local produce. One of the most prominent proponents of the farm-to-table movement is Dan Barber, the chef at Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant in Pocantico Hills, New York. Barber uses the farm-to-table idea at his restaurant to promote the idea of a “nose-to-tail” approach to sourcing from local farms. Barber wants to introduce the concept to farms by incorporating underappreciated soil-building crops like buckwheat, barley, and millet in his menus.²¹³ He argues that including soil-supporting grains and legumes in his menu supports sustainable farming and helps local farmers, who generally lose money on those crops or use them to feed livestock. Popularizing that idea will take time, but it is one of the directions the farm-to-table movement can take.

The various manifestations of food activism in Los Angeles reflect the broad ambition of contemporary food movements in their attempt to modify food chains but also to address social justice issues through food-centered platforms. While the LAFPC considers food municipal policy as it relates to state functions (e.g. feeding children at school), non-profits like Uncommon Good are working to meet the needs of communities that otherwise would be powerless against the realities of the industrial food system. The diversity of these efforts suggest that defining the paths of food

²¹³ Barber, Dan. *Third Plate, The: Field Notes on the Future of Food*. London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2014.

movements will not be simple; in order to address a variety of economic, social, and environmental issues, activists will need to employ a variety of strategies. The movements will not always result in perfect systems and they may not be able to accomplish all of their goals, but the changing conditions of foodways in Los Angeles suggest that they are certainly beginning to accomplish some of them.

CONCLUSION: FOOD AS REBELLION

Throughout American history, food production has constantly been a source of rebellion. The early agrarians rebelled against the idea that their lives should be dictated by anything other than that which directly influenced themselves, their families, and their immediate surroundings. They had no interest in exposing themselves to market forces and the ruinous debt that all too often came with it. They had no interest in their actions being controlled by a central government that was far away and with which they had no personal interaction. They had no interest in prospective enrichment, in expansion, or in efficiency. They simply wanted to be left alone. The romantics rebelled against the notion that wealth should be the ultimate source of the value; they advocated living in simplicity and producing food with nature foremost in mind. The Populists rebelled against an economic system that worked against them rather than presented opportunity; for them, the American dream was absent. Today, those who grow organic food - whether in a community garden, an urban lot, or a rural farm - are similarly in rebellion. Drawing from that agrarian backdrop, consciously or not, they are fighting against a food system that is dictated by economic forces rather than values that would prioritize the well-being of human beings or nature. Given this series of agrarian rebellions, the context of this fight should not surprise us.

I wrote in chapter one that Lawrence Goodwyn, in his book *The Populist Moment*, suggested that the defeat of the Populists in the 1896 elections signaled the ultimate consolidation for capitalism and the culture it promotes in the United States. To go into more detail, Goodwyn is critiquing the dominant American belief that we are always progressing; that is, that the future will always be better than the past. A common argument against alternative food systems, for example, is that rural farming

life is romanticized and necessarily worse than the urban lifestyle that characterizes present life in America. To Goodwyn, this is a deeply flawed assumption that is a common characteristic of modern industrial populations, which have resulted in the “creation of mass modes of thought that literally make the need for major additional social changes difficult for the mass of the population to imagine.”²¹⁴ When this process is complete, “the population has been persuaded to define all conceivable political activity within the limits of existing custom.” Thus, although industrialization in general and industrial agriculture in particular has caused mass oppression and suffering for vast swaths of the population throughout American history, the dominant principles guiding agricultural policy and culture have remained in place. Even the Populist revolt, which certainly can qualify as a mass democratic movement, was not able to upend those principles because too large and too powerful a segment of the population benefited from the existing exploitative system.

While the poor in America are called lazy by the furthest right and black students are accused of needlessly victimizing themselves, so, too, will Monsanto and other powerful growers who have benefited and continue to benefit from systematic environmental degradation and social oppression continue to argue against reform by suggesting that alternative food systems are not compatible with the “real world.” What makes contemporary food movements particularly remarkable is that people are beginning to ignore those voices by literally taking matters into their own hands and growing food themselves. While some activists have argued that we should continue to appeal for government support to protect us from industrial toxins, climate change, water pollution, deadly pathogens, and food insecurity, others have decided that is taken

²¹⁴ Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, XI

far too long for democratic processes to respond to issues that so clearly require immediate action.

Contemporary food movements, then, are a reflection of our rebellious agrarian past but also a product of the current political context: the *Citizens United* case, the rightward turn of the federal government, and increasingly regular confirmations that the elite few are actively controlling American politicians to their benefit and at the expense of the well-being of the vast majority of Americans.²¹⁵ While the Occupy Wall Street movement and other demonstrations have indicated growing unrest with this status quo, it makes sense that some of the most concrete rebellion against growing income inequality and unchecked corporate power has come in the form of food movements. After all, there is no better way to separate oneself from this system than getting back to the simplest of roots: the farm.

This is not to say we should expect a mass exodus from cities to rural farms. Agrarianism is, at its most fundamental, a critique of capitalism and the “industrialist attitude.” Its suggestion that small, subsistence-style farms can rectify many of the social and environmental issues that plague contemporary society is intriguing and ultimately ought to be encouraged despite capitalist (or alternative food movement) critiques. It is clearly apparent, however, that in all likelihood most Americans will not return to the agrarian ideal any time soon. Thus, a critical aspect of neoagrarianism is that it leaves room for compromise in the form of urban agriculture, community gardens, and “co-production,” where city dwellers support rural farming life by, for example, purchasing food at a farmers’ market or spending some volunteering at a local farm.

²¹⁵ Confessore, Nicholas, Sarah Cohen, and Karen Yourish. "The Families Funding the 2016 Presidential Election." *The New York Times*. October 10, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/11/us/politics/2016-presidential-election-super-pac-donors.html>.

This new component of agrarianism seeks to restore balance between urban and rural America, or, as Wendell Berry as phrases it, “the center and the periphery.” For the last century, American policymaking and cultural discourse has dominantly focused on the center – financial markets and cities – while largely ignoring the needs or the value of the periphery. As the focus has shifted, rural communities, most notably those in the Appalachian south and the Midwest, have experienced dramatic social and economic decline, reinforcing the center’s notions of the periphery as “ignorant” and “crass” with little cultural value.²¹⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, a California farmer and classics scholar who draws from Berry and earlier agrarian traditions, argues that the imbalance between city and rural life has warped our perceptions of moral virtue:

Can we Americans, then, as we used to, and as the Greeks taught us, any longer mold the complete citizen, who – like Pericles, Socrates, and Sophocles – could wound, sail, build, plant, and chisel between speeches, plays, and debates? In short, we need town and city, which are nothing without each other. We have the latter of sorts, the increasingly specialized and narrow, to surfeit. But as for the former, is it tapped for its knowledge, is an active rural life even there any longer to be had?... The Greeks, who unlike us were seldom obese and occasionally even were hungry, knew that man farms not merely to be fed, but also to learn how his society should be organized. We now farm to eat cheaply (as if America’s ongoing problem is famine or an absence of disposable income, as if Americans are too thin), and so have lost the best – and is it the only? – blueprint of how we are to organize as a society.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Hanson, Victor Davis. “The Land Was Everything: Letters from an American Farmer,” 2000

²¹⁷ *American Georgics*, 339-340

Thus, while high culture – “speeches, plays, and debates” – is undoubtedly important, its value is undermined without a clear conception of the foundation that made it possible in the first place.

I began this thesis by drawing a comparison between American and French food culture. It seems fitting to end it that way. One could argue that, in terms of food culture, the French (or Italian) ideal is not possible in America because there was never a similar foundational peasant class that valorized craftsmanship and husbandry. It did, however, exist once in America, particularly in the South. Its remnants exist still – in the form of, for example, barbecue, seasonal cooking, chow-chow, and homemade jams – and yet few food writers have argued for its appreciation. Rural cooking culture in America, insofar as it remains resilient, is among the few cultural bastions that stands against the dual pressures of industrialization and capitalism. It is past time we revive an appreciation for it. As we begin to appreciate the products of sustainable farming, we can, too, begin to reassess the values that mold our society and perhaps envision a better one that is kinder to individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

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