

INTRODUCTION

Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice in the United States

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Afterwards they (as many as were able) began to plant their corn, in which service Squanto [Tisquantum] stood them in great stead, showing them both the manner how to set it, and after how to dress and tend it. Also he told them except they got fish and set with it (in these old grounds) it would come to nothing, and he showed them that in the middle of April they should have store enough come up the brook, by which they began to build, and taught them how to take it, and where to get other provisions necessary for them; all which they found true by trial and experience.

- Of Plymouth Plantation, 1604-1627 (Bradford 1621)

The Structural Roots of Land Justice

Tisquantum's¹ act of solidarity is an emblematic preface to 500 years of agrarian transformation in North America. How did a starving, inept band of pilgrims manage to introduce the explosive process of colonization and nation-building that would set the stage for the globe's most powerful food regime in history?

The short answer is: they didn't.

It wasn't the original colonists who transformed North America; it was *wave upon wave* of dispossessed British, Nordic, and European peasants.

¹ Tisquantum, aka "Squanto," was captured by explorers, taken to Europe, and held for 16 years. In his absence his tribe was decimated by disease. When he returned to his homeland, he worked as translator and mediator between settlers, and the Massasoit and Wampanoag peoples. Some historians suggest he was poisoned by the Wampanoag, who considered him a traitor.

The Old World’s “agrarian transition” privatized the rural commons, destroyed village life, and subsumed agriculture to the needs of industry. It also uprooted millions of peasants. This provided a cheap, reserve army of labor to fuel the Industrial Revolution. It also threw masses of desperate villagers—willing to risk all for a new life—into the colonial cauldron of the Americas. These pioneers were part of a western demographic shift that included a quarter million indentured servants and over ten million enslaved Africans. Millions of immigrants from other parts of the world would follow, as variations of this massive transition blazed a trail of dreams and fortune; of genocide and empire; and of destruction, trauma—and, also, resistance. Contemporary agrarian transitions continue to this day, fueling social movements for an alternative agrarian future.

Racial injustice and the stark inequities in property and wealth in the US countryside aren’t just a quirk of history, but a structural feature of capitalist agriculture. This means that in order to succeed in building an alternative agrarian future, today’s social movements will have to dismantle those structures. It is the relationships in the food system, and how we govern them, that really matter.

The rural landscape of the United States has been thousands of years in the making. The transformation of indigenously-managed gardens, woodlands, marshes, drylands and prairies into industrial farms of globally-traded commodity crops and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) has been dramatic. However, the forms of private land ownership at the core of our food and farming systems have changed surprisingly little since early colonization.

On one hand, this dichotomy reflects the amazing ability of people to remake farming as a response to capitalism’s need for constant growth, concentration, and standardization. In doing so, they develop what are called agriculture’s “forces of production,” i.e., the resources, technologies, tools, and skills used to produce our food. On the other hand, it also reflects the steady expansion of a dominant system of private ownership and market exchange. This constitutes the “relations of production,” or interactions between all the owners, workers, and consumers that make up our food system. The association between the forces and relations of production has been far from peaceful, but over the last few hundred years, they have evolved in tandem, turning the US into the global center of a powerful, multi-trillion dollar food regime.

The forces of production and the relations of production in our food system are not working together very well, anymore.

Even as the pressures of industrialization and financialization drive medium-sized farmers out of agriculture, there is a contingent of farmers

that are increasingly avoiding the destructive inputs pushed on them by the seed and chemical industries. Moreover, a growing number of consumers are rejecting the poisonous, processed food sold by the agrifoods industry; rural and indigenous communities are rising up to resist fracking, pipelines, and CAFOs; and farmworkers and foodworkers are organizing strikes and boycotts against starvation wages and inhumane working conditions. Across the entire country, there are instances of older and beginning farmers ushering in agroecology, permaculture, and organic and urban agriculture; they are working with consumers to get fresh, healthy food to the people who need it most. There are counter-movements for food justice and food sovereignty growing in rural and urban communities all over the US, and people from all walks of life are looking to return to farming. Historic forms of agrarian relations, like the commons (which was never a significant part of the relations of production in the US) are being revived and resituated to address the needs of communities in the present food system (Bollier 2014). It is an exciting time of innovation and solidarity as the food movement stretches its imagination across rural and urban areas, and from farm to fork. Paradigms, practices and politics are all changing, but facing resistance from the agencies and corporations of the existing food regime. Unlike the past, in which struggles for land and territory defined people's resistance, today the entire food system makes up the terrain of agrarian struggle.

But the farmers on the front lines of this new agrarian struggle are finding that efforts to build healthy, equitable food systems that provide jobs and keep the food dollar in the community are inevitably limited by the lack of access to one essential resource: land.

Good agricultural land—rural or urban—is unaffordable for all but the top one percent of our society. The new forces of production being advanced by food movements—like agroecology, permaculture, and agroforestry—are being held back by the old relations of production and ownership, which serve the interests of the corporate food regime (McMichael 2009). Historically, when the forces of production and the relations of production enter into contradiction, deep reforms—or revolutions—happen.

The politics of food is never far from the politics of land, water, or labor. Changing the food system without changing the systems of land access, land tenure, and land use is not only unlikely, it may well be impossible. But to change the politics of land is to change the politics of property—a historically daunting proposition in the US.

Changing the politics of property is precisely what the authors of this book propose. From the *acequias* of the greater Southwest, to the centers

of Black agrarianism in the Deep South, and to new farmers, women farmers, and urban farmers, communities on the front lines of food justice and food sovereignty are calling for *land justice*. At its core, the demands for equitable land access revive an age-old issue: the Agrarian Question.

The original Agrarian Question—the role of smallholder agriculture in the development of nineteenth century capitalism—was thought to have been resolved long ago in the United States. After all, agriculture had become highly industrialized, changing it from a way of life into a business. Over the last half century, corporate capital appeared to absorb all aspects of agriculture... until it didn't. To understand why the Agrarian Question is still relevant today, we need to take a walk down the furrows of our agrarian history.

A (Very) Short Agrarian History of the United States

When mercantile magnates and emerging industrialists forced Europe's excess agricultural population to colonize the Atlantic coast of North America, the first pilgrims perished by the hundreds until the indigenous inhabitants—who were farmers and lived in towns—taught them to farm, fish, and hunt. These Native Americans would come to regret this humanitarian gesture: they lost nearly 1.5 billion acres of land to white settlers (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). After the first wave of genocide and dispossession, enslaved African farmers were brought to work the tobacco and cotton plantations. The tremendous profits of slave agriculture filled bank coffers in London, Boston, and New York. Slavery became central to the construction of US capitalism:

“[It] was not the small farmers of the rough New England countryside who established the United States' economic position. It was the backbreaking labor of unremunerated American slaves in places like South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama... After the Civil War, a new kind of capitalism arose, in the United States and elsewhere. Yet that new capitalism... had been enabled by the profits, institutions, networks, technologies, and innovations that emerged from slavery, colonialism, and land expropriation.” (Beckert 2014)

Slavery, indentured servitude, and genocidal dispossession laid the foundation for the emergence of capitalist agriculture—a new form of production and consumption that emerged in the transition from agrarian to industrial society. Beginning with the enclosure of the commons in Britain and

the forced migration of the peasantry to urban factories and the colonies, from as early as the sixteenth century, the agrarian transition has always entailed a violent restructuring of environment, production, and society. This occurred sometimes through reforms and sometimes through markets, but always by coercion—a point usually missed in triumphal narratives of agrarian greatness.

The agrarian transition in the US mobilized poor peasants and former indentured servants westward to displace indigenous populations. The “agrarian reforms” that were implemented at the colonial frontiers drew hundreds of thousands of poor settlers, many of whom were quickly displaced by large landowners. The only agrarian reform that could be considered redistributive (rather than genocidal) was declared in 1865 at the end of the Civil War when General William Tecumseh Sherman distributed 400,000 acres to African-Americans who had fought for the Union. President Andrew Johnson rescinded the reform a year later. The South wanted cheap labor, not more independent, yeomen farmers. Freedmen and freedwomen became sharecroppers and tenant farmers, or were imprisoned and forced into chain gangs. This turned out to be more lucrative for plantation owners: now they did not have to bear the costs of reproducing the labor force.

But the North had other ideas. Even before the war, northern states sought to outflank big southern planters with smaller, yeomen farmers, by giving indigenous land away to settlers. The Homestead Acts, starting in 1862, opened up 270 million acres of land west of the Mississippi River to 1.6 million homesteaders. Settlers bust the sod of the Great Plains and established the mid-western breadbasket. Further west, they established rangelands and raised livestock. Over time, the massive expansion of agriculture led to a sustained boom in production, eventually saturating markets and dropping prices paid to farmers below the costs of production. This led to widespread bankruptcies in the early half of the twentieth century. The spread of agriculture to southwestern soils for dryland farming eventually destroyed the region’s fragile layers of topsoil, leading to the Dust Bowl (Holleman 2016). As homesteads failed, many farmers went to work for cattle and timber barons, or were forced out of farming altogether.

But the stolen dreams of Europe’s surplus labor led to resistance.² In the Midwest, farmers organized into strong agrarian populist movements that fought against banks and railroad monopolies. They organized the Farmers’ Alliance that in 1890 called for land reform and even formed a populist political party. Despite resistance, the US’s agrarian question

² Thanks to Annie Shattuck for this brilliant phrase.

was resolved in favor of the landed bourgeoisie, thanks to the power of the banks, the military, the railroad, and the steady mercantilization of agriculture. The new agrarian territories were structured by the logic of international capital over a century before today's so-called globalization.

Since World War I, the tendency of capitalist agriculture toward overproduction and concentration has steadily erased smallholders from the agrarian map of the United States. African-American farmers were the exception: despite racism and exploitation, by 1910 they had accumulated over 15 million acres of farmland—without benefitting from any land reform. Thanks to Jim Crow laws and discrimination by banks, traders, and the United States Department of Agriculture, over the next 100 years, they would lose most of this land (Mittal and Powell 2000).

With World War II, North American agriculture changed radically. While the US work force was enlisted in the military, thousands of Mexican peasants were brought in to work the fields. Without them, the US could not have fought the war. Mexican workers were so productive that after the war the US government implemented the Bracero Program to bring 4 million more. To this day, peasants and indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean pick our crops, process our meat, and cook and serve our food. They are also at the core of farm and food labor struggles.

After the war, US agricultural production experienced a boom, thanks to a combination of chemicals, hybrid seeds, heavy machinery, and the lack of European competition. Farmers quickly saturated the market with their products and prices dropped again. They cut back on buying new inputs. Grain and new tractors piled up, unsold. In an effort to resolve a crisis of overproduction, the US extended its new technologies to the “Third World” through credit in a campaign called the Green Revolution. It also implemented food assistance programs to off-load excess production and establish new markets overseas.³ This was called “development,” and it often included changes to established systems of land tenure.

Land reforms accompanying the US development project were conducted in countries where there were perceived threats of communism—which is to say, far from the United States. The US State Department and the US Agency for International Development applied a variety of models, including distributive reforms guided by the state, counter-insurgency

³ Public Law 480, which created the Office of Food for Peace, is usually thought of as a beneficent program to donate excess food to poor countries to end hunger. In reality, it was a market expansion program: “To increase the consumption of United States agricultural commodities in foreign countries, to improve the foreign relations of the United States, and for other purposes.” Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954.

reforms managed by the army, and regressive reforms led by the market. These reforms were tailored to reproduce Northern forms of production offered by the Green Revolution.

North American farmers were recruited into the development project under the pretext of saving the world from hunger. Farmers were lent easy money to buy more land and larger machinery, and to export more and more food. Given the possibility of high export profits, the price of agricultural land began to climb rapidly—faster than the rate of inflation. Banks offered big loans on inflated farmland values to buy more farmland and bigger machinery. This is precisely what Third World governments did with their development loans, as well. Industrial agriculture boomed in Asia and the Americas, concentrating production in fewer and fewer hands—and dropping prices paid to farmers. By the late '70s global overproduction and falling prices prevented Third World governments from repaying the foreign debt incurred for development. Third World governments signed austere structural adjustment programs with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to receive emergency loans from the World Bank—just so they could make their debt payments to Northern banks. Northern farmers just went bankrupt. The US lost *half* of its farm families in this crisis (Strange 1988). This was nothing more than a new iteration of the agrarian transition begun in the 1600s.

The US's agrarian transition has concentrated production in huge agro-industrial areas: the endless prairies of transgenic maize and gigantic hog farms in the Midwest and the Carolinas; the feudal model of poultry production in the Southeast; the massive CAFOs of the West... Slaughterhouses and processing plants are everywhere, worked mostly by peasants uprooted from Mexico and Central America. Agrarian capitalism has devastated rural life in the US, turning the countryside into a vast green desert of toxic monocultures crisscrossed by pipelines, trembling with fracking, and riddled with illegal methamphetamine labs. The middle-class family farmer is steadily being eliminated, gobbled up by mega-farms owned by corporations, banks, or insurance companies. The social breakdown in the countryside is palpable in the rural towns with boarded-up shops around empty town squares.

Throughout these transitions, resistance has also flourished. Those who are today demanding fair wages and humane working conditions, healthy food, sustainable agriculture, and access to farmland are part of a long tradition of this struggle.

An emblematic case is that of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. During the Great Depression, poor farmers violated entrenched segregation and formed the Union with Black and White tenant farmers joining forces. This movement spread west throughout the cotton territory,

reaching California for the Great Cotton Strike of 1933. Six-year-old Cesar Chavez participated in the strike. Thirty years later, following the unionizing work of Filipino farmworkers, he would organize the United Farm Workers union (UFW). In the 1960s, through boycotts and strikes, the UFW managed to paralyze the California vegetable industry, gaining the right to organize, better working conditions and better wages. Today, veterans of *La Unión* continue to organize against Driscoll's, the largest berry corporation in the world. They replicate and improve upon the strategies of the United Farm Workers, forging alliances with students and the church and extending their ties across borders with berry workers in Mexico.

There is a long tradition of agrarian populism among family farmers in the Midwest, starting with the Farmers Alliance (1890), and later The National Farmers Union (1902) and the National Farmers Organization (1955). The tradition was revived with the American Agriculture Movement, whose struggle against farm debt in 1979 brought thousands of farmers to Washington DC in “tractorcades” that closed off the offices of the Department of Agriculture. The current Rural Coalition (1978) and National Family Farm Coalition (1986) are a testament to more than a century of agrarian struggles.

In 2016, after centuries of genocide, dispossession and indignity, Indigenous peoples from across the US gathered by the thousands in Standing Rock, North Dakota to protect their burial and ceremonial sites from the Dakota Access Pipeline project. In doing so, they were also leading a national movement to protect our water from industrial contamination.

The US countryside has a long history of resistance movements that rise against each crisis and each structural adjustment. However, there has been a steady consolidation of agricultural land and loss of farmers, who now represent less than 1.5 percent of the national population. Today, the US has more people in prison than farmers working the land.

Today's Agrarian Question

Contrary to what many might think, most of the US farm industry—97 percent—is in family hands. Nearly 90 percent of these farms depend on family labor. But over 90 percent of all farm households depend on non-farm income. These statistics reflect deep inequities: farms with more than \$1 million in annual sales make up four percent of farms, while 80 percent of farms sell less than \$100,000 annually. Large farms have a yearly average of nearly \$600,000 in net income. Small farms average \$2000 per year in losses (USDA Economic Research Service 2014).

This differentiation has racial, age, and gender biases:

As of 2012, farmers numbered only 3.2 million people. Of these farmers, only eight percent are Indigenous or of Asian, Latino, or African descent (although the numbers are growing, particularly among Latinos). Women make up 14 percent of producers, but three quarters of them sold less than \$10,000 annually (USDA NASS 2013).

Between 2007 and 2012, 90,000 farmers left agriculture, while only 1,200 entered. The dominant trend is that of huge farms cultivated by a few older, white men, and a lot of small farms cultivated by minorities, women, and young farmers. The medium-sized family farmer is disappearing. The bad joke among farmers is that today the average age of farmers is 59 years old... In ten years the average “age” will be dead.

The contradictions of the capitalist food regime have exacerbated vulnerabilities and historical injustices. This country produces more food than any other, yet one in seven people are food insecure. There are epidemics of diabetes, hypertension, and other diseases related to unhealthy food. People of color, children, women, and those working in the food sector are most affected.

These injustices have given rise to a food movement promoting agroecology, food justice, food sovereignty, and land justice. Urban gardens have multiplied, as have consumer cooperatives, organic farms, food workers’ unions, organic restaurant chefs, consumer groups, and farmers markets. In the past 20 years agricultural land trusts have bought and preserved 6 million acres of farmland.

The food movement is gaining strength amongst young people and many conventional farmers tired of the corporate food regime. The media is full of positive stories about permaculture, organic agriculture, Slow Food, and also about the growing protests against mines and pipelines, fracking, and GMOs. While regulatory victories are few, there are those who speak of a “food revolution.”

But a revolution does not just stop pipelines or change production practices and consumer habits. A revolution also transforms power structures. A food revolution would have to reverse the corporate agrarian transition currently bearing down on us.

Meet the New Agrarian Transition

From seed to fork, the food system is being primed for further intensification. Nanotechnology and synthetic biology have surpassed the inefficient technologies of genetically modified seeds by light years, allowing direct manipulation of DNA without having to resort to inaccurate and expensive genetic transfer (Specter 2016). Now, you can download a “genetic map” from the Internet and directly manipulate DNA, changing its metabolic

pathway to express any phenotypic characteristic, not only to produce seeds, but also to make any kind of being. What we could only dream of doing with DNA, can now be realized with DNA (Mooney 2016). New technologies collapse and shorten the innovation time between conception and commercialization. And they are accessible to any molecular biologist. The big monopolies now have to resort to mass data and corporate concentration to ensure their dominance.

Corporations are investing in “digital agriculture,” in which massive amounts of information about the environment, climate, soil, and cultivars are carefully recorded by satellite, then analyzed and sold to farmers, supposedly to reduce their exposure to climate change and apply inputs with infinitesimal precision. All major corporations in the food chain, from Monsanto, John Deere, and Cargill, to Walmart and Amazon are using these big data information systems.

The integrated control of genetic and environmental information increases the tendency of land consolidation in every way: among the six monopolies that control 51 percent of seed and 72 percent of the pesticides in the international market there is strong pressure towards corporate mergers. Syngenta, ChemChina, Monsanto, Bayer, Dow and DuPont are all in frantic negotiations. When two merge, the others have no choice but to merge, as well. Vertical consolidation is also underway. Amazon, in open war with the Walmart model, is planning to sell food through huge supply centers to be delivered by food taxis and drones. Don’t doubt the seriousness of this for agriculture: Amazon today employs more agronomists than the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the scientific flagship of the Green Revolution.

All the financial and structural pressure of this multi-trillion dollar sector leads to even larger forms of production. Seeds, inputs, machinery, financing, insurance, and mass information are made to deliver larger and larger batches of uniform products to retailers—the monopolies that are even bigger and more concentrated. To participate in the new food value chains, producers will have to massively refinance. Where will they get the money?

The land.

Banks now hold workshops to advise producers about the sale and financialization of the land as a business measure to recapitalize its operation. Since the financial crisis of 2007-2008, speculative investments in agricultural land have risen substantially—now covering perhaps 25 percent of all acquisitions. The exchange value of agricultural land in the US is outpacing its use value, becoming “like gold with yield” (Fairbairn 2014). Institutional investors have bought about \$40 billion of agricultural land—which in a market of \$8.4 trillion still can’t be considered a bubble, but is

a growing form of “neo-rentism” (Edelman 2016). They would buy more if they could, but farmers are not selling. Even in the US—corporate territory par excellence—farmland is largely in the hands of family farmers who resist selling their land. In five years, however, 63 percent of agricultural land will likely be inherited or sold. The question is, “Who will take over”? Corporations or trusts? Banks or family farmers? Right now, the front line of resistance to the financialization of agricultural land in the United States is made up of aging, white family farmers, the producers of genetically modified corn and soybeans who are still stuck on the fertilizer and pesticide treadmill.

While it is not a radical or transformative struggle—yet—the US food movement is an expression of both everyday survival and resistance to business as usual. It has a social base of almost three million rural and urban producers, 800,000 agricultural workers and 46,000 workers in processing plants. If we add up all those working in the food industry—including immigrants working in restaurants—they approach 12 percent of the national workforce.

Why does this calculation matter?

It should be very clear that US farmers are a small social force that alone have no chance of advancing reforms. Without a broad convergence between producers, consumers, and related workers—with strategic alliances with other key social movements for climate justice, indigenous rights, immigrants, and other human rights movements—there will not be enough social force to influence the current agrarian transition to corporate-owned mega-farms. Capitalism will proceed to its liking, implementing its destructive forms of production, consumption, hoarding, and speculation.

The original agrarian question dealt with the role of the peasantry in a class struggle in which this same class would have to disappear with the industrial revolution—be it capitalist or socialist. But, peasants, indigenous people, and small farmers refused to disappear.

They live. Badly, perhaps, but they live. With 25 percent of the world’s agricultural land, they produce 70 percent of the food we eat, virtually with little or no government support (GRAIN 2014). The 2.5 billion peasants and small farmers make up a third of the world’s population. If rural communities are displaced, they will be pushed to the city slums. Samir Amin (2011) points out that the global economy would have to grow at a rate of seven percent over 50 years to absorb just a third all this labor. This is impossible. The current agrarian transition—and the American path projected for the rest of the world—not only condemns a third of humanity to dispossession, unemployment, and misery, but most likely means global chaos.

We must repopulate the countryside, not empty it. We have to invest to improve the quality of rural life, not just extract its wealth. We must break up and redistribute large plantations and implement agroecology on a small and medium scale in order to restore the environment, cool the planet, and ensure a decent income to rural people. We need to open up farming in the city, instead of paving over farmland. We must advance a transformative agenda of land sovereignty to block the capitalist agrarian transition. For this, we must implement social and structural changes beyond land reform, beyond farmers and beyond the countryside itself. Put simply, we have to change everything.

But how can this be achieved if the majority of small farmers are struggling for their own survival?

Land, a Vision and a Call

Karl Polanyi (1944) wrote, “The fate of classes is determined more by the needs of society than the needs of classes.” In the US, the future of the struggles for agrarian reform, food sovereignty, environmental justice, human rights, and racial and gender equity will be determined by the combination of these struggles, rather than by any single struggle. This position does not invalidate the importance of class, race, gender, climate, or land issues in and of themselves. It recognizes that alliances *between* these struggles are fundamental for social transformation.

This book is divided into six sections, although the themes in each are overlapping and interdependent. The first section, “Black Agrarianism,” deals with the deep roots of agrarianism in Black communities and liberation struggles in the US, using the Gullah Geechee people of South Carolina and Georgia as a central focus. It details the long and intentional history of dispossession, as well as the many visionary struggles to resist and regenerate by cooperatively building land access and sustainable farming traditions. The next section turns to women’s work on the land, highlighting both long-term discrimination against women in making decisions about land, and means through which women – in very different contexts – are building alternative pathways through their use of the land.

The third section considers how privilege shapes the creation and protection of land-use niches, as well as the rise of indigenous leadership to protect them. One chapter looks at the problems associated with renting for young farmers, and the challenges of creating systems of access that do not replicate structures of privilege. Another chapter tells the chilling story of how poor, mostly white, rural refugees of neoliberalism are threatening

the traditional *acequia* systems of water management and farming in Latino communities of Colorado. The final chapter addresses native identity and struggles to defend sovereignty and land.

The fourth section continues the theme of migration and transnational implications of food regimes and land use with a poignant life history interview with farmworker activist Rosalinda Guillen and then, an analysis of forces pushing some young farmers from the US to move to Brazil.

The fifth section turns to the urban context, examining histories of land-based racism and dispossession in both Oakland and Detroit. Both cases reveal how food access patterns can be cemented through urban land policy, and how communities are mobilizing to reshape them. Finally, the sixth section focuses on instances and opportunities for activism. Here, an analysis of Occupy the Farm (near Berkeley, California), a history of the National Land for the People movement of the 1970s, and a look at opportunities for convergence between Black and Indigenous land struggles point toward the need for collaboration between movements.

The authors of these accounts make it clear they are not just in an agrarian struggle, but in a struggle to remake society. For them, land justice, the premise of this book, is both a vision and a clarion call.

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