

# Agrarian Reform and the Radicalization of Food Politics



If you've seen any of the documentaries that are critical of U.S. agriculture, then you're most likely aware of the increase in some innovative and somewhat unconventional experiments in growing food—bee hives and gardens on hospital roof tops, abandoned warehouses turned into greenhouses, farms that double as a local community's source of fresh produce *and* the pizzeria.

Extreme changes are also taking place in other ways. In the Midwest, mega-factory farms, with thousands of animals in confinement, are rapidly replacing operations of fifty or a hundred cows. To profit off the ethanol boom, which has since gone bust, many indebted dairy and livestock farmers throughout the country ploughed up their pastures to plant, and then spray with the latest in chemical technology, genetically modified (GMO) soy and corn for biofuel, export, and cattle feed. Meanwhile, more than three million farmworkers, who live in subhuman conditions and receive next to nothing in pay—the average farmworker receives

approximately \$13,000 a year<sup>1</sup>—toil on massive plantation-like operations, whether for apples or strawberries on the West Coast, sugar beets in the Upper Midwest, or blueberries in the Northeast.

Land-poor, creative small farmers are growing food in the least likely of places, while thousands upon thousands of

acres are used to produce animal feed. Millions of farmworkers from rural areas in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America often have knowledge and experience growing food on small-scale farms using methods that in the United States are called sustainable or organic. Yet, instead of putting their small-farming skills to use, immigrant farmers become wage-laborers in field-factories. Incremental, piecemeal changes, such as periodic wage increases for farmworkers or small loans for farmers specializing in sustainable agriculture, may ameliorate some of the problems in agricultural production but miss the need for structural change. The potential for a more just, equitable, and sustainable agricultural system is readily available in the United States—the problem is that land and labor are distributed in the wrong way.

### **The Problems Are Not New**

Exploitative labor relations, unequal ownership patterns, and environmental degradation have long characterized the U.S. mode of agricultural production. Plantations for the production and export of cotton dominated the pre-Civil War southern slave system as well as the post-war tenant and share-cropping economies. In the West, Carey Williams' account of farm labor in California, *Factories in the Fields*, which was published in 1935, documents how various immigrant communities, first the Chinese, then later the Japanese, Philippine, and Mexican, toiled on plantations the size of small countries.

Neither slavery nor the plantations have disappeared. Reasons for the now monthslong, transnational boycott of Driscoll's—the corporation responsible for the sale of strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries harvested from Washington state to Baja California—are in part found in the denunciation of forced labor, in many cases involving children.<sup>2</sup> Figures on slavery in the southeastern United States have been collected by the Florida-based farmworkers

organization, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which has discovered over 1,200 cases since 2000.<sup>3</sup> Plantation-factory operations, instead of existing as aberrations, are becoming the norm. The average farm size has quadrupled since the 1930s, from around 150 acres to close to 500 currently. During that same period, the number of farmers has fallen from 7 million to 2 million. And that 2 million figure is deceptive: According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, half of farm households must work off the farm to remain in agriculture.<sup>4</sup> How many occupations, if one is to continue in that line of work, require employment elsewhere? Agribusiness elites tout this figure as proof of productivity gains and the successful adoption of technology. California's plantations now account for 99 percent of artichokes, 99 percent of walnuts, 97 percent of kiwis, 97 percent of plums, 95 percent of celery, 95 percent of garlic, 89 percent of cauliflower, 71 percent of spinach, 70 percent of lettuce, and 69 percent of carrots that are harvested in the United States.<sup>5</sup> In terms of a farmer-to-citizen ratio, one farmer is responsible for feeding approximately 320 people. What is concealed is how the United States' growing population of approximately 320 million people is increasingly dependent on fewer and fewer producers. Environmental costs are also hidden. Pesticide expenses have increased from \$2 billion to \$10 billion since 1960.<sup>6</sup> Chemical inputs are promoted to increase yields as well as to control crop production. Unintended results include pesticide-resistant super weeds and contamination of water and soil. What has contributed to the imperative to increase yields is price volatility in nearly every market. The Depression-era price policies that were governed by parity—the notion that producers are assured the cost of production through various public policies—were steadily dismantled in the 1970s and 1980s in the name of free markets. Freedom for markets has been a tyranny for farming—the thinly traded commodity markets at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, which determine prices for

virtually every agricultural commodity, are frequently under investigation for illegal maneuvers<sup>7</sup> that benefit agribusiness elites and corporate shareholders who have little to no real connection to labor and land.

## **Reconnecting People with Land**

U.S. food and farm activists have begun to recognize how the problems in agricultural production are integrally connected to land access. A recent entry on the Facebook page of the Wisconsin-based Family Farm Defenders reads, “And which nation needs land reform the most? Why the U.S., of course!” In 2013, activist-scholar Raj Patel, and Bob St. Peter of Maine’s small-producer organization, Food for Maine’s Future, wrote an article for the online magazine *Civil Eats*<sup>8</sup> calling for limitations on the size of land holdings in the United States, public policies to subsidize beginning farmers to receive land, and state-directed infrastructure projects aimed at creating new rural communities. After winning the 2015 U.S. Food Sovereignty Prize, Ben Burkett of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives remarked, “Our view is local production for local consumption. ... [This means] the right of every individual on earth to wholesome food, clean water, air, and land.”<sup>9</sup> Some rural producers in the United States are beginning to believe that land is a “right,” instead of a commodity. Others see the need to create conditions for the emergence of a new generation of farmers, directly challenging agribusiness’ praise for technological change emptying the countryside.

These voices are part of an actual, growing movement that is demanding agrarian reform. They are also members of the international social movement, *La Via Campesina* (The Peasant’s Way, or LVC). LVC includes around 164 local and national organizations in 73 countries of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, representing about 200 million people. In the United States, member organizations include the National Family Farm

Coalition, Rural Coalition, Border Farm Workers Project in Texas, and the Farmworkers Association of Florida. Active membership amongst these groups is well into the thousands. What unites these members is the concept of food sovereignty. Developed in opposition to the perceived conservatism of policies devoted to food security, food sovereignty is rooted more in redistributive projects that challenge multinational corporations, privatization, and strictly technological solutions to world hunger and rural poverty. The movement has broken down the concept of food sovereignty into seven separate principles, the second of which is the demand for agrarian reform.

Redistributing land is central to, but does not exhaust, an adequate definition of agrarian reform. Agrarian reform deals fundamentally with the reappropriation of land. It entails systematic changes to already-existing ownership and labor relations like individual proprietorship, share-cropping, tenant-farming, and wage labor, as well as redistribution and acquisition, which may be in the form of top-down, state action or through movement demands and seizures. In general, agrarian reform is a coordinated set of actions to reorganize land and labor for an alternative mode of food production or raw material extraction. In addition to the initial acquisition of land, it also includes ways to sustain rural populations in the countryside through price-support policies, technical assistance, and education initiatives. Just as important, agrarian reform involves ensuring land access via nonmarket mechanisms. Agrarian reform is often beyond the market, which means that farmworkers and dispossessed rural people acquire land without purchase.

There are many examples to show how this has taken place, especially in Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Twentieth-century efforts include the Mexican, Cuban, and Sandinista revolutions. In these cases, revolutionary processes divided large landholdings, secured land access to farm laborers, and

promoted the formation of cooperatives. The results of these experiences are mixed: The Mexican and Nicaraguan cases show a lack of continuity, dedication, and resources, while land redistribution in Cuba changed ownership drastically on the island but was also sheltered by generous subsidies from the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

More recent developments in Brazil, specifically the success of the Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST), show that agrarian reform is not confined to the past. At the end of 2014 there were more than 9,000 agrarian reform settlements<sup>12</sup> on over 88 million hectares of land (about 170 million acres).<sup>13</sup> The movement's membership comprises dispossessed small farmers, farmworkers, as well as poor, marginalized people from the Brazilian urban periphery.

One of the central causes of the Brazilian movement's success is its use of innovative direct-action tactics, namely land occupations. Far from indiscriminately or randomly deployed, the occupations are targeted at large landholdings and properties that are subject to expropriation due to certain productivity requirements. According to the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and the *Estatuto da Terra* (Rural Land Statute), land not serving its *função social* (social function) can be expropriated by the government for redistribution. The social-function clause sanctions expropriation in the event that an owner violates environmental or labor law or fails to productively use at least 80 percent of the area.

Redistribution also deals with irregular landholdings that have conflicting ownership claims by multiple individuals.<sup>14</sup> Such irregularities, the movement argues, can only be fixed by redistributing the particular property in question to certain people, that is, movement members, who will use it productively and responsibly.

While the MST draws on Latin America's revolutionary

traditions, the movement has also made amendments. Principal amongst LVC members, the MST advocates a new style of agrarian reform. According to the latest LVC statement from this past April,

Capitalism no longer requires classic land reform to increase production. No longer needed are past alliances in favor of agrarian reform among the landless and some state sectors representing productive capital. Now, agrarian reform is directly about class struggle. ... We must question, with the whole society and the working class, rural and urban, is capitalist production adequate?<sup>15</sup>

This reflection on past experiences concerning agrarian reform is critical. First, the LVC finds no way that agrarian reform can benefit capitalism. Second, it is the movement—not only transnational in nature, but primarily led by farmworkers, small farmers, and First Nations—that is presenting a radical new project for society.

### **Legal Maneuvers and Agrarian Reform in the United States**

Historically, actors in U.S. agricultural policy have only periodically flirted with radical redistributive programs. Late nineteenth-century policies such as the Homestead Act and efforts by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, usually referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau, in the post-Civil War South, do not qualify. In the case of the latter, while redistributive measures aimed at former slaves did result in many new homesteads, the programs abruptly ended once political rights trumped economic redistribution during Reconstruction. Concerning the Homestead Act, redistribution created more irregularities than were fixed. Vogeler, in his *The Myth of the Family Farm*, compiled congressional studies and secondary research on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century land acquisitions. He finds that 40 percent of the homesteads designated as "family farms" from 1862 to

1900 (about 130 million acres) were fraudulently obtained due to corrupt administrators and absentee landowners falsely (and illegally) claiming residency. Similar irregularities, Vogeler notes, characterize many of the 128 million acres that were granted to mining and railroad interests during the same time period. Undergirding these corrupt land-grabs was the dispossession of Native American nations, not only with the Homestead Act, but also with subsequent legislation such as the Dawes Act, which aided entrenched political and economic elites, relying systematically on widespread fraud and violence.

A string of relatively recent lawsuits against the United States government show a willingness on the part of the government to address rural poverty, but not through creating new farmers. In *Pigford v. Glickman*, Black farmers won a class-action lawsuit against the USDA for discriminating against African American landholders in the 1980s and 1990s. Approximately \$1 billion has been paid to African American farmers from this lawsuit. Similar cases include *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* (2010) and *Corbell v. Salazar* (2009), which awarded native farmers similar indemnities, and *Garcia v. Vilsack*, which is currently seeking redress for Latino farmers and ranchers. What these lawsuits reveal is systematic discrimination against farmers of color, which in many cases led small producers to leave rural areas. While the settlements are redistributive in nature, they do not alter property ownership, but instead grant cash awards.

So, is agrarian reform in the United States a utopian fantasy? Is it a demand made by a few, with no real potential to grow? Native American movements help us answer these questions in the negative. Increasingly in the second half of the twentieth century, movements used laws, particularly treaties, to claim space for alternative and radical initiatives. Two particular events are of particular relevance: the occupations of Alcatraz, briefly in 1964 and then for two years beginning in



1969, and at the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973. The Alcatraz occupation, especially the latter two-year attempt, referenced the broken Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 (also known as the Sioux Treaty of 1868) as the basis for their land claim. The treaty, between the [Oglala](#), [Miniconjou](#), and [Brulé](#) bands of the [Lakota people](#), the [Yanktonai Dakota](#), and the [Arapaho](#) Nation, and the federal government, guaranteed Lakota ownership of the Black Hills. Discovery of gold led white squatters onto the land claimed by the Lakota, in disregard of the treaty's provisions. At Pine Ridge, evoking the Sioux/Laramie Treaty of 1868 had greater symbolic and practical effect. First, the Pine Ridge Reservation was the place where the Wounded Knee Massacre took place in 1890. Second, the treaty provided Native American activists a concrete legal mechanism to legitimize their demands.

The use of the treaty at its intended site of application highlighted the legal system's own inconsistency and contradictions, similar to how the Brazilian MST organizes occupations on irregular land holdings. While the territorial claims made at Alcatraz and Pine Ridge quickly ended in violence, a more sustained effort took place in the Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) Nation in northern New York. In 1968, a dispute began over the legitimacy of paying tolls to use the bridge that connects Canada with the United States. To contest this, as well as make a claim to territory, the Kanienkehaka evoked the Jay Treaty of 1794 and gained the right to cross the border freely. Gaining momentum after this victory, their reservation has become a place where the *Akwesasne Notes*, a Native American-led newspaper, is issued, as well as a space where schools have developed to proliferate Indigenous language, values, and culture.

Disputed lands due to broken treaties between Native Americans and the U.S. government are not the only spaces subject to potential redistributive measures. African American farmers during the Great Migration of the post-Civil War period,

especially after 1920, abandoned millions of acres<sup>16</sup> due to legal and extralegal violence and usury loan arrangements with landlords and creditors. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives emerged on the heels of the civil rights movement to keep Black farmers on their land. To this day, it remains an open question who rightfully possesses much of the southern United States, as well as what are the legal means for repossession. The millions of acres involved in the fraudulent transfers for railroad concessions and homesteads in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries add to the vast system of irregular property holdings throughout the United States. U.S. society rests upon falsely documented territorial claims forcibly brought and held together. To alter the poor distribution of land and people that currently exists will require further exposing the country's complex web of broken treaties and fraudulent titles. Movements, many of whom are active within the LVC, are beginning to question this system.

Questioning territorial claims directly poses the question of how to develop radical change in the United States. The focus on space, in particular, provides a means for movements to initiate transformations in culture, politics, and economics. Native American leaders, more so than others, have engaged in tactics that show the contested nature of territory in the United States. The protests last year in North Dakota challenging the construction of a 1,200-mile-long oil pipeline evoke the contested territorial claims found in the Fort Laramie Treaty. Recognizing treaties calls attention to the fractured, incomplete, and contradictory land tenure system in the United States. Such a use of law to claim space and resist economic elites is one place where the struggle for agrarian reform in the United States is currently developing.

Not urban, but rural spaces are where we currently find radical change. Two opposing trends, with cross purposes, are unfolding. In one, farms-turned-massive-plantations, with hyperexploited workforces and governed by corporate

imperatives of efficiency and profit, continue a rural exodus. On the other, we find rural repopulation, new and innovative experiments in food production, and transnational movements beginning the revaluation of land and labor. Developments within both trajectories are taking place. Movements, such as the LVC, are posing the question, which side are you on?

## Footnotes

1. For figures on farmworkers, see [here](#).
2. Tom Philpott, "The People Who Pick Your Strawberries Have Had It with Rat-infested Camps," *Mother Jones*, March 25, 2015.
3. For more on the persistence of slavery in U.S. agriculture and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' ongoing campaign to contest it, see [here](#).
4. Figures from [USDA-ERS](#).
5. Brian Palmer, "The C-Free Diet: If We Didn't Have California, What Would We Eat?" Slate.com.
6. Fernandez-Cornejo, et al, "Pesticide Use in U.S. Agriculture: 21 Selected Crops, 1960-2008," USDA-ERS 2014.
7. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Market Oversight Has Increased, but Concerns Remain About Potential Manipulation," (Report to Congress, 2007).
8. Bob St. Peter and Raj Patel, "This Land Is Our Land?" *Civil Eats*, October 18, 2013.
9. [Full text](#) of the speech.
10. For more on the past and present of agrarian reform, especially in Latin America, see P. Rosset, R. Patel, and M. Courville, *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* (Food First Books, 2006).
11. For more on twentieth-century agrarian reform initiatives in Latin America, see W.C. Thiesenhausen, *Broken Promises: Agrarian Reform and the Latin American Campesino* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995).
12. For data on settlements, land redistributed, etc., see [here](#).

13. That only 67 sites—a fraction of a percent—existed before the MST's official emergence in 1984 shows how the movement's efforts are the primary catalyst for land redistribution. See Sérgio Pereira Leite, *Impactos dos assentamentos: Um estudo sobre o meio rural brasileiro* (São Paulo State University, 2004).

14. Large proprietors in Brazil historically acquired land through a process that became known as *grilhagem*. *Grilhagem*, derived from the word for cricket, *grilho*, took place when forged titles were placed in desk drawers with crickets that would nibble at the edges of documents, giving the semblance of deterioration that presumably would come with age. When asked to prove their claim, large landowners and speculators would brandish these titles.

15. Text translated from [here](#).

16. Bruce Reynolds, *Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000: The Pursuit of Independent Farming and the Role of Cooperatives* (USDA, 2000).