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## Place, Nature, and Political Economy: The Submerged Politics of Alternative Agri-Food Movements

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**PLACE, NATURE, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE SUBMERGED POLITICS OF  
ALTERNATIVE AGRI-FOOD MOVEMENTS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

MATTHEW A. LEPORI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Department of Political Science

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For Neni and my great, big, oddball family

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PLACE, NATURE, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY: THE SUBMERGED POLITICS OF ALTERNATIVE AGRI-FOOD MOVEMENTS**

**MAY 2015**

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I aim to speak to those studying environmentalism, food politics, and contemporary political theory, as well as provide a new way to consider the question of political economic order. I investigate three “alternative” political discourses in the United States, study their effect upon the political economic vision of the American alternative agri-food movement, and relate these effects to the stability of the American political economy. Scholars working in several disciplines attribute this stability—achieved despite economic crises and growing inequality—to the hegemony of neoliberalism. I suggest a different route: the status quo is also maintained when discourses (anterior and ulterior to neoliberalism) that represent alternatives fail to challenge political economic structures. Three discourses common to alternative American politics today—localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism—do just this. By advocating economic relocalization, attunement to local nature, and rural living, actors building these discourses hope to harness the powers of place and nature against the social alienation and environmental degradation of globalism, productivism, and anthropocentrism. What

these discourses do not consider is the manner in which market forces work within place and cut across space, mediating the socio-economic structures and ecologies of local places. For instance, the combination of private property and competitive markets fosters microeconomic logics and effects wherein *within* localities we find not “community” but a diverse array of actors, disparate interests and eco-social relations, asymmetries of power and material outcomes. Not only do these discourses elide such forces from their critical vision, they *foreclose* analysis into them through their idealizations of place and nature. This enables activists to replicate these structures in their own movement practice—witness the reliance of the agri-food movement on market institutions and consumerism. This neoliberal outcome is not, I argue, determined by neoliberalism but instead by the qualities of the discourses constituting the movement. I suggest that scholars ought to look to the ideas working at the margin if they wish to understand the politics of the center.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This research project takes the shape of a matryoshka. On the surface, it is a study of the alternative agri-food movement in the US, which has sought to address and remedy the social and ecological ills produced by the industrial, corporate, and global food system. Second, given that I study this movement through the *ideas* that constitute and catalyze it—its “ideological infrastructure”—the project is also a study in political theory. Third, and perhaps surprisingly, at the core of the project is an interest in understanding the sources of political economic stability. What links the second and third layers? The idea that the political economy—neoliberal capitalism—is in part made and unmade through the ideas circulating in civil society, and that its stability relies upon the absence of critique. If the ideas constituting popular movements—such as the agri-food movement—lack a systematic critique of the political economy, or better, *foreclose* such a critique, I reason that this absence indirectly preserves the status quo.

Therefore, I wish to speak to three somewhat distinct groups: first, those interested in eco-social politics, second, those working in contemporary political theory, and third, those interested in political economy. Toward the first and second groups, I hope to contribute a new way to examine eco-social movements—as movements constituted by and disseminating political, social, and ecological thought. That is to say, to treat movements as informants in our attempts to make sense of the ideas swirling around us. Secondly, I hope to convince political theorists

to account for the diversity of political theories circulating in civil society, as well as their impact upon contemporary politics, with the agri-food movement as my case in point. Third, I aim to add to the literature on the sources of political economic stability, one that broadly divides into accounts that emphasize institutions and accounts that emphasize ideas.<sup>1</sup> Many attribute the tenacious grip of neoliberalism over the political economy to its hegemony within the world of ideas—having done battle with and vanquished the Keynesians and socialists, neoliberalism stands alone, able to coopt neophyte challengers that may occasionally surface. In a somewhat tautological arrangement, neoliberalism persists because neoliberals have made it commonsensical, and have diverted movement energies in neoliberal directions. Millions may gather on the street demanding change; the result is the commodification of pollution.

But what if we pursue this outcome from a different direction: do the ideas constituting eco-social movements themselves play a role in solidifying neoliberal capitalism? To what extent do these ideas shape the political imagination of activists in ways that obscure or elide the structures that underpin it? Through an analysis of the American alternative agri-food movement, I offer a four-fold answer to this question. First, I argue that the movement is comprised of a certain ideological infrastructure, with political localism, place-based political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism forming its pillars. Second, I argue that these three discourses are not

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Dani Rodrik, "Participatory Politics, Social Cooperation, and Economic Stability," *American Economic Review* 90, no. 2 (2000); Dennis P. Quinn and John T. Woolley, "Democracy and National Economic Performance: The Preference for Stability," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 3 (2001); Mark Blyth, "Paradigms and Paradox: The Politics of Economic Ideas in Two Moments of Crisis," *Governance* 26, no. 2 (2013).

determined by neoliberalism, but stand to some extent independent of it (i.e., in historical and ideational terms they are anterior and ulterior discourses). Hence, if the movement fails to identify and exert pressure upon the bases of neoliberal capitalism, then we must not necessarily ascribe that failure to the co-optive power of neoliberalism but should also consider the qualities of the ideas of the movement itself. Third, I argue that these discourses do not identify nor target for critique the structures of capitalism nor the neoliberal project itself. That they are considered “oppositional” to “business-as-usual” results from the fact that *aspects* of neoliberal capitalism are criticized, including industrialism, productivism, globalization, and corporations, but not their underlying drivers. The movement bears this out: for instance, we find stinging critiques of globalization but not of the doctrine of free trade. Fourth, and most significant, I argue that the idealization of place and nature prevalent in these three discourses forecloses a critique of the political economy. Because these discourses idealize place as the site of immediate relationships between man-man and man-nature, because they systematically conflate locality with community, because they treat nature as an autonomous power, and because they treat farmers as social and ecological but not economic agents, those buildings and deploying these discourses do not have to account for the ways in which the political economy creates divisions within localities, works across localities to shape local society and ecology, nor the way in which farmers—actors at the center of the imaginary of the agri-food movement—are subjectified by and subjected to these forces.

To which forces do I refer? First, the structural bases of capitalism—private property and the competitive market with its microeconomic profit imperative—, which have three principle effects: (1) the division of localities and society at large into groups that own or have access to capital (e.g. arable land) and those who must work the land and capital of others (e.g. agri-food workers), (2) the division of localities and society at large into those who produce for the market and those who consume what is produced, and (3) the requirement that firms produce profits, a one that may, in light of competition and/or insufficient consumer demand, require the externalization of ecological and social costs of production. Meaning, to the extent that communities are embedded within these structures, they are divided by class and by roles in the exchange nexus. Additionally, to the extent that producers are market actors, the market will shape and constrain their relationship with workers and the ecology. Finally, to the extent that *movements work through and do not challenge these structures*—e.g. market-based, consumerist movements—they replicate these divisions. In other words, the local farmers’ market does not so much rebuild community—as localists and agri-food activists suggest—but reproduce divisions and logics endemic to capitalism. Discourses that idealize place will divert attention from the ways in which capitalist structures divide places and grant different actors (within place) particular, distinct sets of practical reason.

The second force—the neoliberal political project—has sought to increasingly “spatialize” (e.g. make transnational) politics and economic flows. That is to say, neoliberals have attempted to displace decision-making into increasingly distant bodies (e.g. into central banks, international financial institutions, or

multilateral trade agreements) or diffuse bodies (e.g. the market). Indeed, with the neoliberal push to globalize production and consumption through free trade the market has become an even more diffuse or spatial force. Hence, those concerned with local outcomes must confront the ways in which spatial flows constitute localities, as well as how neoliberals attempt to shape these flows. For instance, the manner in which the state's ability to regulate the economy for the sake of green environmental outcomes becomes impeded by international bodies, trade agreements, or the pressures of global market competition. Importantly, discourses that emphasize the social and ecological "concreteness" and "immediacy" of localities exclude from the discussion the spatial forces that mediate localities. Even the local ecology cannot be considered pristine and immediate, given its embeddedness within a global ecology shaped by anthropogenic climate change. By (implicitly) denying the permeability of place, those constructing ideal accounts of place (and the activists who deploy them) do not have to account for such spatial forces. Indeed, the idealization of place forecloses such analysis.

Over twenty years ago, writing in the context of identity politics and the way in which class had dropped from the political imaginary of the left, Wendy Brown put forward a challenge: "we might ask to what extent a critique of capitalism is foreclosed by the current configuration of oppositional politics and not simply by the 'loss of the socialist alternative' or the ostensible 'triumph of liberalism' in the global order."<sup>2</sup> I hope to demonstrate through my analysis that this question and criticism is still very much relevant today. And perhaps, given the twin nature of the

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 395.

eco-social challenge confronting us, the question is even more pressing. We need knowledge of how the political economy, which mediates our relationship with the land as well as with one another, shapes social and ecological outcomes. And while a great deal of thought (critical theory) has been spent upon the former, those engaged in eco-social politics have largely failed to utilize a political economy lens. As such, neoliberal capitalism drops out of the critical and positive vision. My task here is to explain why this has occurred, and attempt to identify the ramifications.

Why investigate the question through the agri-food movement? I select this movement as an object of study for the fact that food and agriculture have become very active fields of political debate, and, secondly, that the ideas constituting the alternatives—localism, place-based political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism—are not unique to food politics but in fact color a great deal of eco-social activism. In other words, while the movement is particular the ideas constituting it are diffuse and influential among those seeking alternatives to the (social, ecological) status quo. Third, through my analysis of the food movement, *I hope to convince the reader that the stability of the political economy is in part the result of the limits of the critical vision of these three discourses.* Beyond the critical-theoretical analysis of the limitations and foreclosures of these discourses, I use the movement to demonstrate the concrete effects these discourses have upon the vision and practice of movement activists. Furthermore, I show that even though some actors clearly stand to gain from the political economic silences/foreclosures within these discourses (e.g. small farmers seeking to valorize their products in a marketplace dominated by better capitalized competitors), there are many actors working through these ideas that do



not possess an immediate material interest in their dissemination/implementation. For instance, academics using localist and pastoral agrarian discourse to push the idea of “food justice.” The ubiquity and power of these discourses seems not entirely a product of actors materially interested in their propagation.

Finally, given that my primary interest lies in the *ideas* composing the political vision of activists, I work primarily upon texts that enable me to extract and analyze these ideas. In other words, I examine the discourse of activists: who do they claim to represent? what do they problematize? what prescriptions do they propose—what is their positive vision? I largely select for investigation the writings of those I term “scholar-activists”: academics whose research pairs with an overt eco-social political agenda, a politics oftentimes reflected in their private participation in the same arena of politics which they study. Thus, for instance, Thomas Lyson was not only a distinguished professor of sociology at Cornell University, his writings (including *Civic Agriculture*) sought to reshape the American food system. I do, however, seek to demonstrate that the ideas expressed by this particular class of activists are in fact found across the popular agri-food movement, both in its literature and projects. In other words, that they are representative of the broader movement. Secondly, academic discourse can and does influence popular movements, therefore it is a discursive terrain of interest to those pursuing the study of alternative thought and practice.

In the next chapter, I address the field of critical food studies, wherein scholars from a variety of disciplines have depicted the agri-food movement as demonstrably

neoliberal. While on one hand I recognize that neoliberalism is indeed a powerful political project, I hope to impress upon food scholars the need to account for other ideological channels working independently to produce presumably neoliberal outcomes. In other words, while the market-basis of the agri-food movement is redolent of neoliberal approaches to social and ecological problems, we must account for ideological equifinality: the possibility that multiple discursive pathways may lead to the same outcome. Through my research, I identify three lines of discourse worth considering with regards to the agri-food movement's negative and positive political vision: localism, place-based political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism.

The interim chapters (three, four, five) are devoted to the study of the origins, contours, and effects of these three discourses. In analyzing localism (chapter three) I have set out to achieve an understanding of how the idea of the local could take such a strongly positive valence—why are so many diverse actors placing their hopes in the local place? How could the locality go from a contingent artifact of forces temporarily imbricating to form “local place” to something settled, carrying certain characteristics considered vital for these political projects? What precisely are those supposed characteristics, and what effect do these ideas have on the political economic vision of localists? I argue that localists depict the local as the site of (a) immediate, authentic social and ecological connections, (b) as the bearer of unique qualities vis-à-vis the broader social and ecological landscape, and (c) as the site of community, transparency, and heritage. Erected as such, the local carries a positive valence, promising to be the site of refuge and/or resistance to broader

forces. Guided by these ideas, localists omit or struggle with the idea that localities are possibly sites of division as well as sites mediated by broader forces.

In the fourth chapter, I attempt to understand the importance that political ecologists assign to place. Indeed, place-based political ecology seems oxymoronic, given that the defining characteristic of ecology is the study of interconnection and systems. Yet the dominant trend within political ecology is to promote place-based projects, from deep green calls for bioregionalism to the pragmatic politics of Transition Towns. Why? I argue that three forces have pushed political ecologists into place: first, the longstanding green emphasis on decentralization, smallness, and what today we would call 'localist' projects; second, the way in which the philosophers of "ecocentrism" came to identify the local place as the site wherein individuals and communities can come to form intimate, immediate relationships with nature, wherein nature becomes a protagonist in teaching us how to live harmoniously within our ecosystem(s); and third, the American tradition of nature writing, which has since Thoreau emphasized the close study and appreciation of immediately proximate nature. Long before the idea of food miles, writers, philosophers, and other intellectuals had identified going local with going green. In so doing, they have turned nature and place into protagonists, virtuous forces waiting to be unleashed by their combination, one that would promise positive eco-social outcomes. Conversely, as with localists writ large, they constrict their political economic vision by eliding the spatial forces of the market, state, and international institutions vis-à-vis the composition and contours of localities. For instance, the effects of spatial forces upon the global ecology and thereby the local ecology.

In the fifth chapter, I attempt to understand why a movement largely driven by non-farmers and urbanites leans so heavily on the idea of rural community and the family farm. I argue that this is a result of the power of pastoral agrarianism, a discourse that combines sentimental attachment to the countryside with the Jeffersonian belief in the moral virtue of independent farmers, and the moral contribution made by this class to society as a whole. I argue that this discourse persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the ways in which small farm activists and ecologists came to problematize the economic forces emanating into the countryside, which altered not only its social composition but also its agronomy, turning farms into factories. I aim to show how Wendell Berry managed to combine these concerns over traditional rural community and agronomy into an effective critique of modern, economistic, urban society. Berry, perhaps the leading intellectual in the agri-food movement, has imbued the movement with this pastoral agrarian vision and thereby contributed to the movement an ideational identity between farmer and virtue, family farm and ecology. By being emplaced, in close contact with a deeply familiar land, family farmers not only come to know the ecological requirements of the land but also come to care for it—they become its stewards. In this discourse, not only are workers absent, but farmers are represented as moral and ecological actors rather than economic ones. In so doing, the discourse shunts aside discussion over market forces and the social divisions of the countryside.

Finally, in the sixth chapter I return to the agri-food movement. First, I seek to make clear the presence of these discourses in the movement, that they do in fact

constitute the critical and positive political vision of activists. Second, I use the figure of the agri-food worker to demonstrate the ways in which these discourses shape and delimit the political economic vision of activists. Notably, workers typically fail to appear in the movement literature—how do we explain this outcome, considering the centrality of workers to food production? First, pastoral agrarianism depicts a pacific countryside populated by virtuous farmers; in this discourse, workers are absent. Second, through the idealization of place in localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism, activists do not need to approach place problematically—rather, it is self-evidently the site of community and ecology. It is where individuals have immediate links to each other, forming community and tradition, as well as to nature, which can only tutor us in place. To the extent that practices “connect” members of the locality, and constrict the production and movement of goods and people to that locality—e.g. farmers’ markets and CSAs—they are considered productive of community and ecology.

Given that these are the twin goals of the movement, staunching the losses induced by industrialized, corporatized, and globalized agriculture, analysis stops here. Activists neither proceed to examine whether localities are divided (e.g. by the structures of capitalism) nor whether their market-based strategies reinforce these divisions (e.g. between worker and owner, or between producer and consumer). It follows that these same activists do not consider the ways in which a market basis restricts the ability of the public to participate, as participation is limited to those who can produce for and purchase within such markets. It also obscures the vulnerability of local projects to broader political, economic, and ecological forces.

For instance, a stagnating national economy may dry up effective demand and render impotent schemes that rely upon local consumers to bear the extra costs of ecological and/or local production.

Again, we have what appears to be a neoliberal outcome—the purposing of the market to achieve social and ecological ends that otherwise could be pursued in policymaking arenas—but from sources anterior and ulterior to neoliberalism. I argue that these discourses block even the few within the movement that seek to recognize and include workers, including scholar-activists pursuing “food justice” and organizations advocating domestic fair trade, from recognizing the way in which the structures of capitalism work to divide and lend different interests to owners, workers, and consumers. From this conclusion I return to the argument at the heart of the project: that political economic stability is in part an outcome predicated by the ideas circulating in society, and that neoliberal capitalism has not solely been maintained by its management of these ideas (i.e. hegemony) but by the fact that discourses informing alternative movements elide and foreclose analysis into the structures and structural effects of the political economy. Such elisions allow the movement to work through neoliberal channels without suffering dissonance between their goals—personal, participatory, independent, and ecological food systems—and their methods.

## CHAPTER 2

### BEYOND NEOLIBERALISM

It is difficult to know what something outside of neoliberalism might look like when all is seen as neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in a review of Colin Crouch's *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, Kevin Young notes that "it's difficult to imagine a system of political economy that has concentrated wealth so effectively, and with so little popular resistance."<sup>4</sup> How does one explain this curious situation? As Crouch's title alludes, scholars point to neoliberalism as the catalyst of the contemporary political economy and, today, as the set of structures and ideas that maintain the status quo. Having achieved hegemony over civil society, such as academia and the media, neoliberalism determines not only policy but also generates neoliberal subjects. In sum, neoliberalism begets neoliberalism. While these are important claims (ones I investigate below), and while there has not been "popular resistance" of the extent or strength of the labor, suffragette, or civil rights movements, there are in fact a number of popular discourses and projects circulating in contemporary politics that claim to oppose the contemporary political economy and present alternatives to business as usual. I suggest that we look beyond neoliberalism to examine these

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California," *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008): 1181.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Young, "The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism," *Times Higher Education*, September, 29 2011; Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-Liberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

ulterior discourses and projects and make an attempt to understand their ramifications for politics.

Sparked by contemporary food politics, I examine three such discourses, localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism, in order to elucidate the origins of these discourses, their allure, and the manner in which they represent politics. I suggest that these three discourses center their political vision upon, and achieve their allure through, idealized conceptions of place and nature. That is to say, in these discourses place and nature are powerful symbols through which proponents seek to shape our political thought. Yet rather than reveal the manner in which the political economy mediates place and nature, I argue that advocates of localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism frequently fetishize both, turning place and nature into ideals and political actors. Meaning, place and nature do not become problems but rather solutions, and sometimes even become active players themselves in the narrative. The politics of place, including inequalities, power asymmetries, particular interests and identities, not to mention place's porosity to "outside" forces, these qualities tend to be elided by those pursuing place-based politics. Furthermore, those who seek to integrate our polity into nature frequently fail to take into account the politics behind our visions of nature as well as the political economic inequalities that make realizing political ecology so difficult.

I suggest that the solidity of the contemporary political economic order is not strictly due to the hegemony of neoliberalism but is in part a reflection of the state of these alternative discourses. That is to say, in response to Young above, that the lack of "popular resistance" to the contemporary political economy can be



explained, in part, by the fact that alternative visions shy away from questioning and re-thinking the basic structures of the political economy (e.g. property ownership, trade, profit) and the social relations that result. Power asymmetries inhere not only in the social relations between (on one hand) the spatial forces of government, capital, and international institutions, and (on the other) the common citizen and quotidian place, rather these asymmetries also inhere *within* quotidian places and local, familiar economies and landscapes. To the extent that those pursuing alternative visions do not represent these politics but instead idealize or fetishize place and nature, they may come to replicate existing power relations.

These alternative discourses have manifested themselves in American politics above all in arguments over food production, trade, and consumption. Indeed, they form the intellectual infrastructure of the new food politics. Bellicose farmers and indignant eaters have allied to challenge the industrial, globalized agri-food system and have made food an everyday topic in newspapers and online media. Proponents of the vision of localized, community-oriented food systems featuring small farms and “natural” methods of food production have taken the ideas of localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism and disseminated them across American society. These ideas have become concretized in economic initiatives and enterprises, such as farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, farm-to-table restaurants, “buy local” campaigns, and organic, biodynamic, and permaculture farming. They have, furthermore, effected public

policy changes and pushed the US Department of Agriculture to extend (modest) support for these new actors and practices.<sup>5</sup>

While proponents of local and organic foods declare these projects to be alternative and oppositional to the contemporary agri-food system, several scholars have criticized this posture for being politically naïve. In effect, they argue that the alternative agri-food movement not only fails to challenge the dominant agri-food system but that its activists participate within and replicate neoliberalism. They note that these projects advance private forms of governance centered in the market and argue that activists masquerade these markets as communities. As such, food activists have become neoliberal citizens, replicating neoliberalism within civil society by turning social problems away from traditional modes of political citizenship and toward market-based, consumerist solutions. The political imaginary of alternative agri-food is thus bounded by neoliberalism and neoliberal hegemony wins out again.

While these arguments produce useful insights, the fixation upon neoliberalism induces us to overlook the presence of concurrent intellectual currents premised in place and nature, or misattribute these as epiphenomena of neoliberalism. In doing so, we construct a distorted, limited picture of contemporary politics and fail to attend to the independent intellectual currents whose presence suggests, contra the hermetically sealed neoliberal box, the possibility of multiple possible futures. If we wish to know the political visions that constitute and delimit

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Organic Food Production Act that codified the organic food industry, attempts to reform school lunches and promote farm-to-school programs, and new federal resources allocated for marketing assistance for small farmers.

our understanding of the political economy, we cannot begin and end with neoliberalism but have to cast our net wider. Toward that end, I investigate localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism (in chapters two, three, and four) not only to understand their origins, scope, and allure, but also to read them back into contemporary politics and see what effect they have on the political vision of those who take these ideas seriously. The ramifications of these discourses are felt not only in food politics but also in the surge of interest in localist projects, in the shaping of environmentalism, and in the revalorization of rural living.

Ultimately, however, in this project I investigate these discourses through their effect upon food politics. In the final chapter, I hope to demonstrate, through an analysis of the way farm labor is represented in the alternative agri-food discourse, that the convergence of these three discourses within alternative agri-food has the effect of obscuring the power relations of the food economy from the view of those who work to reform it. In the activist literature, in which organic, local, and agrarian food systems are depicted, the farm laborer either (a) does not appear in the narrative or (b) appears as a negative trope and instrument for the sake of advancing the alternative project. That is to say, activists represent the deplorable state of farm labor in order to legitimize and valorize ecological farming, family farms, and returning to the local. This is problematic for two reasons: first, it makes these workers discursive means to environmental and economic ends which are not their own. Migrant workers do not typically qualify as “local” nor is the local ecology theirs in which to dwell. Second, when treating the well being of workers as an end, eco-local advocates tend to lump their interests together with those of

farmers and consumers, forming an undifferentiated mass of persons who presumably would be aided by the growth of the new food economy. This fails to capture the oftentimes antagonistic positions that farmers, consumers, and laborers occupy in the political economy, as well as the power asymmetries between these groups, particularly between farmer and laborer.

I suggest that this omission originates not in the hegemony of neoliberalism, but in the discourses that constitute the ideological infrastructure of alternative agri-food. I suggest that these discourses restrict the ability of adherents and participants to envision political economic difference, or the manner in which the structures of the economy generate social, economic, and political inequalities. Furthermore, I propose that the limited political economic vision of alternative agri-food activists, demonstrated through their own narration of labor, can serve as a partial answer to the question of the solidity of the general economy. In other words, we can use this example to help make sense of the lack of popular opposition to the structural factors that produce inequalities across the polity. The sources of continuity do not necessarily emanate solely from the center (e.g. neoliberal institutions and systems) but may also come from the margin.

In sum, my interest here lies in the forces that shape our vision of the political economy, though this project is by necessity a limited and partial enterprise (for instance, I do not attend to the struggles of Keynesians or social democrats to shift thought and policymaking). I focus on the food economy, particularly the discourses that constitute the ideas and practices of its “alternatives,” in order to make a claim

about their contribution to the persistence of system-wide inequalities and asymmetries of power. Toward that end, in *this* chapter I set out three objectives. First, I seek to summarize existing analyses of the discursive-political project of neoliberalism. To go “beyond” neoliberalism and seek other political discourses of note one must (initially) account for neoliberalism itself. Doing so enables one to (a) lay a basis by which to compare the thought of these purported alternatives, and (b) to understand the critics who consider alternative agri-food projects to be neoliberal. Secondly, I wish to shift the terrain *away* from neoliberalism in order to examine these ulterior discourses. In this chapter I claim that neoliberalism is a scholarly concept inasmuch as it is a set of actual politics, and that the constant construction/reconstruction of neoliberalism amongst academics distracts from ulterior ideologies/projects that operate concomitantly and historically, and which offer a constitutive/restrictive vision of politics and economics. Third, I demonstrate the importance of the latter argument through an analysis of the criticisms levied on alternative food economies. Critics, I argue, are preponderantly focused on neoliberalism and insufficiently attend to the localist, ecological, and pastoral agrarian political imaginaries at play, which themselves bring in a host of myopic political economic visions, especially regarding labor relations, questions of property, representation, and participation. Through this argument I aim to set up the investigations of these three discourses in chapters two, three, and four, respectively.

### ***Neoliberalism: hegemonic, ubiquitous, problematic***

Neoliberalism has been the most important catalyst restructuring political economic thought and practice over the past four decades. As such, this is where I will begin. Yet treading this path is dangerous for neoliberalism is not a coherent program, a discrete object to poke, and there are few to no state leaders or intellectuals who declare themselves neoliberals. Rather, those pursuing neoliberalism are *scholars* who assemble a variety of ideas, projects, and policies within this single concept. Neoliberalism, as I will discuss it, is both a set of actually-existing politics and concept constructed by scholars. The risk neoliberalism poses to academics is that we may collectively stretch the concept to the point that it no longer resembles the political reality it presumably encapsulates. This risk has been noted for some time now, particularly with relation to easy depictions of a hegemonic neoliberal regime. For these reasons, Jamie Peck has described neoliberalism as a “rascal concept ... increasingly promiscuous in its application ... a bloated, jumbo concept.”<sup>6</sup> James Ferguson warns against treating neoliberalism as “an all-encompassing entity ... a kind of gigantic, all-powerful first cause.”<sup>7</sup> Or put more simply by Stephen Collier, turning neoliberalism into Leviathan.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the fear is that academics on the left from anthropology to political theory may be deploying a misassembled and all-encompassing concept. We should, it seems, be attentive to the different facets and unfoldings of neoliberalism, looking

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<sup>6</sup> Jamie Peck, "Explaining (with) Neoliberalism," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1, no. 2 (2013): 133.

<sup>7</sup> James Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism," *Antipode* 41, no. s1 (2010): 171.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Collier, "Neoliberalism as Big Leviathan, or...? A Response to Wacquant and Hilgers," *Social Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2012).

for what Peck and Adam Tickell call “actually-existing neoliberalism.”<sup>9</sup> Peck, for instance, warns that “neoliberalization cannot be reduced to a unidirectional process of enacting a master plan cooked up by Hayek and friends at their mountain resort in Mont Pelerin.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, analysts must be careful to note its “uneven spatial development.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, the unevenness of neoliberalism raises the very question as to whether something unfolding unevenly can be usefully wrapped into a single concept. Ferguson’s comparison of the neoliberal project in North America and Europe to the set of policies extended into developing countries by international economic institutions grants credence to this concern, noting that neoliberalism in the former works to remake the state and individual in the image of the firm/enterprise, making them efficient, competitive, and entrepreneurial, while in the latter case neoliberalism is a neo-imperial project of structural adjustment policies better resembling classic laissez-faire economics. “The result is that ‘neoliberalism’ in Africa refers to a quite fundamentally different situation than it does in Western Europe and North America.”<sup>12</sup> Ferguson is therefore tempted to leave the concept behind:

When the term ‘neoliberalism’ is used as imprecisely as it is in many texts, one is tempted to pencil one’s objection in the margins as one might in reading a student essay: “What do you mean by ‘neoliberalism’ here? Do you

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<sup>9</sup> Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 383.

<sup>10</sup> Peck, “Explaining (with) Neoliberalism,” 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-47.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, “The Uses of Neoliberalism,” 171-72. With that said, Ferguson notes the push for a Basic Income Grant in S. Africa fulfills neoliberal functions. Tania Li also builds a case for a Foucauldian neoliberalism in Indonesia, via the World Bank, in Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Duke University Press, 2007). Also see Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

mean the liberalization of trade policies? Then say so! Do you mean techniques of government that work through the creation of responsabilized citizen-subjects? Then say *that!* ... Don't presume that they are all united in some giant package called 'neoliberalism'."<sup>13</sup>

And yet, despite Ferguson's concern over neoliberalism's ubiquity and the divergent paths this supposedly unified project takes, from refashioning subjects to imperial dominion, he wishes to maintain the concept, pushing us to identify commonalities amongst its facets. He usefully suggests that we confront neoliberalism not as "something to hate, nor something to love, but rather something to ponder."<sup>14</sup> We ought to be wary of its charms, but not shy from its pursuit.

But therein lies another risk: what if we ponder neoliberalism too much? What if, by focusing upon the political projects and ideologies pursued by institutions like the World Bank, the speeches of Thatcher, Reagan and Cameron, the policies of Clinton, Blair and Obama, or attempts to undermine the remnants of European social democracy through bond markets and EU interventions, indeed all phenomena connected to this thing called neoliberalism, what if we fail to attend to ulterior, concurrent ideologies informing political visions? Ones that carry their own understanding of the political economy, their own productive power? In this project, I investigate ideologies of place and nature – perhaps once marginal concerns that have today sparked alternative economies, new forms of politics, and have, furthermore, been integrated into neoliberal politics through notions like sustainable development. In part, this project is motivated by the suspicion that the

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<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, "The Uses of Neoliberalism," 171-72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 178.



neoliberal lens overly narrows our political vision. In other words, that its “promiscuity” as a concept (i.e. how frequently we encounter it) is as much of an issue as its “jumbo” size (i.e. whether it coherently captures social phenomena). As such, the bulk of the project focuses on these “other” ideologies and tries to trace their effects into and through politics. If neoliberalism is indeed hegemonic, not only shaping policies and regulating governmental logics but also a governmentality instrumentalizing and monetizing social relations, generating a social common sense, what about those ideas and practices which pre-date neoliberalism and which ostensibly operate in opposition to some of its facets? How do they define what is oppositional, what causes are pursued, what ideals are preached, who is represented, or what is to be left behind?

In some ways, these questions get ahead of the narrative. First, I would like to do justice to Ferguson’s call to ponder neoliberalism. “Going beyond” neoliberalism first requires accounting for it, as it falls within the scope of my research question. Secondly, scholars working to understand (build) neoliberalism have generated a host of extremely valuable insights into contemporary politics. With that said, few have attempted to make sense of the array of investigations into neoliberalism, or tried to apply a schema to sort and valorize the different approaches one encounters. There are, I suggest, two broad approaches to the study and conceptualization of neoliberalism, Marxian and Foucauldian. Scholars tend not to operate outside these camps, though some like Ferguson and Tania Li have produced analyses blurring this boundary.<sup>15</sup> Existing summations of neoliberalism

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<sup>15</sup> Li, *Will to Improve*.

tend to replicate a division between geographers and sociologists pursuing Marxian lines of inquiry from social and political theorists who engage in Foucauldian analyses. Many geographers do not at all deal in or mention ideas like neoliberal governmentality—central to Foucauldian analyses—and while the latter do recognize the economic basis of neoliberal projects, they often treat this angle as “banal.”<sup>16</sup>

In short, what insights do these two approaches offer, what are their strengths, and how might we combine them to push towards the question of how neoliberalism affects our political economic vision?

Chronologically speaking, Michel Foucault’s 1978-79 lectures on neoliberalism represent a watershed moment in scholarship on contemporary political economy.<sup>17</sup> In these lectures, Foucault wishes to impress upon the audience two points: (1) that neoliberalism was *not* the revival of classical, laissez faire economics and liberal politics, and (2) that neoliberalism is defined by the expansion of economic rationality, both as a disciplinary and productive force, affecting the state, society, and individual alike. Pursuant to the first point, Foucault seeks to differentiate neoliberalism from its predecessor. In his rough sketch, he argues that liberal government proceeds by “political right,” which operates independently of the economy. In other words, the economy stands “lateral” to the state with each operating according to separate logics. Neoliberalism, in effect,

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France, 1978-1979* (New York: Picador, 2010), 216; Wendy Brown, “Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003): §2.

<sup>17</sup> While not available in English until decades later, Foucauldians including Graham Burchell and Thomas Lemke accessed the lecture tapes and disseminated their ideas to the English-speaking world through synthetic essays.

collapses the distinction between state and economy, prompting the state to govern according to economic reason.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, within neoliberal economic thought markets are not treated as natural occurrences nor do they function according to natural laws (ideas attributed to liberal economists) – instead they must be produced, which becomes the responsibility of the state.<sup>19</sup> Rather than be a semi-passive spectator tasked with enforcing property rights and contracts, the state must become actively involved in producing market-like arrangements all over society.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault's second point is perhaps more important, the claim that neoliberalism is the expansion of economic reason into *all* areas of society.<sup>21</sup> Not only does the state now face a "permanent economic tribunal," treating issues like criminality in terms of cost-benefit, but social relations are constituted and made sense by economic reason, including parent-child relationships and education.<sup>22</sup> Children and education become investments designed to generate what neoliberals call "human capital;" therein lies perhaps the most radical shift under neoliberalism, that one's relationship with oneself becomes altered – one must become an "enterprise of himself," a builder of one's own human capital through educational investments, a rational planner of one's own enterprise and future.<sup>23</sup> But what sort of politics brings about this fundamental shift? Foucault notes that just as

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 274-76, 286, 311-13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 118-20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 118, 148.

<sup>21</sup> This argument is unique in naming this a feature of "neo-liberalism," though in content it is not wholly different from arguments of prior thinkers, such as Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Antonio Gramsci, who in different ways emphasize the manner in which the social relations of the economy reconfigure social relations at large.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 247, 248-60, 219-32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 226.

neoliberals do not see the market itself as natural, they neither see the entrepreneurial subject as such. The state is responsible for instituting policies that guide persons into adopting this position: of considering the market their source and space of freedom, of taking responsibility for everything that transpires in one's life, and for treating oneself as an investment and form of capital.<sup>24</sup> But this transformation of society happens not solely through education and the threat of force, rather the government indirectly shapes the conduct of the individual citizen through programs and policies that incentivize certain behaviors and leverage the coercive power of the market. This indirect shaping and formation of political economic subjects Foucault termed governmentality.

It is this latter insight that has most interested Foucauldian scholars, who have attempted to ground Foucault's idea of governmentality in the neoliberal restructuring of the state in the 1980s and 90s (particularly in the UK and US).<sup>25</sup> If Foucault supplied the conceptual apparatus by which to read and understand contemporary politics, scholars like Nikolas Rose have attempted to connect these ideas to concrete political policies, notably the manner in which the state has sought to generate the "responsible" and accountable individual. To reach this outcome, the state must "restructure the provision of security to remove as many as possible of the incitements to passivity and dependency; make the residual social support conditional, wherever possible, upon demonstration of the attitudes and aspirations

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 252-53, 270-71.

<sup>25</sup> Graham Burchell, "Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self," *Economy and Society* 22, no. 3 (1993); Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the College De France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001); Brown, "Neo-Liberalism."

necessary to become an entrepreneur of oneself.”<sup>26</sup> As “entrepreneurs of oneself,” each individual is responsible for one’s own education and training, each must sustain one’s own health, plan and oversee one’s own finances (e.g. retirement), and, were one to require state support, one must prove and demonstrate one’s will and commitment toward the priors to “earn” it (e.g. workfare).<sup>27</sup> To create a space for entrepreneurial subjects to operate, to fashion their own lives according to choices that they must own, public programs and monies must be restricted. Where markets do not exist, they must be created. Hence the United States’ healthcare reform includes “exchanges” but only limited extension of public programs, specifically Medicaid, the expansion of which has been heavily stunted by the fact that states can decline expansion of the program.

In short, neoliberalism recreates state-society relations by turning every member of society into economic agents, who must fashion their lives according to market logics, and must make wise choices since they are solely responsible for ensuring their success and failure, future or demise. Furthermore, they must consider this predicament their freedom. At the end of this process one finds the “viral” dissemination of messages like the following:

Everything you do is based on the choices you make. It’s not your parents, your past relationships, your job, the economy, the weather, an argument or your age that is to blame. You and only you are responsible for every decision and choice you make.

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<sup>26</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 159-62.

Period.<sup>28</sup>

Masquerading as self-help and empowerment, Foucauldian scholars would deem this a near perfect crystallization of the neoliberal worldview.<sup>29</sup> Choice and responsibility are twinned—with the selective, strategic withdrawal of the state, the individual is given “choice” over her future, can plan according to her interests, and, ultimately, can invent her own self. Success and failure are hers to own alone. This, in the neoliberal world, represents power and freedom. What is crucial to note, with regards to Foucauldian scholarship, is that neoliberalism in this guise is not merely disciplinary power but *productive* power – neoliberal governmentality produces “subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social.”<sup>30</sup> It produces new ways to think about oneself, one’s relationship with one’s peers and society, and how the state and political economy ought to function. Even economic crises are valorized as promoting entrepreneurial energies. Dislocated, the unemployed must reinvent themselves and find new niches within the market.

Do Marxian accounts of neoliberalism significantly differ from Foucauldian narratives? In many ways, they do not. David Harvey’s oft-cited definition contains several crossovers with the picture of neoliberalism outlined by Foucault:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and

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<sup>28</sup> See <http://instagram.com/p/oyfX9zMwSn/>

<sup>29</sup> For instance, Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Brown, “Neo-Liberalism,” §2. See also Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 144-46.

free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also ... secure private property rights ... Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture.<sup>31</sup>

Most notably, by arguing that markets are not natural but need state assistance to come into being, Harvey and Foucault come together. In this regard, Harvey (along with other geographers, such as Peck and Tickell) stand apart from those who associate neoliberalism with the obsolescence of the state.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Harvey and Foucault stress the importance of entrepreneurialism to neoliberalism. There are, however, some notable contrasts to be found. By using the word “liberate” with regard to entrepreneurialism, Harvey implies that the entrepreneurial subject happens to lie dormant in each individual. Foucault distinguishes neoliberalism from liberalism precisely on the point that the entrepreneurial subject is not natural. *Homo economicus* is not embedded in each of us, rather that it must be produced, and its production requires a deep restructuring of the state. Secondly, Harvey’s language implies a firm limitation set upon the state: the state is to produce and guarantee markets, but no more. By contrast, Foucauldian accounts assert that the withdrawal of the state from social provisioning is not a diminution

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<sup>31</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000).

of the state but rather a transformation of government into a different form – governmentality. As Thomas Lemke puts it, “by means of the notion of governmentality the neo-liberal agenda for the ‘withdrawal of the state’ can be deciphered as a technique for government.”<sup>33</sup> The lack of social assistance does not mean the state has become less relevant, rather the tactical removal of state is a “technique” intended to produce new types of citizens. In other words, the state still acts even in its supposed absence. In many ways, state power as such is more profound, even radical, than in its disciplinary or “nanny” manifestations.

On the other hand, I would argue that there exists a synergy between Marxian depictions of neoliberalism in terms of hegemony and the Foucauldian account of governmentality. For instance, Stuart Hall concludes that neoliberalism has become hegemonic due to its radical “...impact on common sense and shift in social architecture ... Today, popular thinking and systems of calculation in daily life offer very little friction to the passage of its ideas.”<sup>34</sup> Noted both by Foucault and Harvey, the idea of freedom has become central to this ideational shift – a commonsensical ideal adapted to neoliberal purposes by being redefined as choice within the market. This notion of freedom melds with the neoliberal project and can be leveraged to win consent for neoliberal projects.<sup>35</sup> Hegemony as the continual construction of consent, controlling the battle of ideology by redefining potentially oppositional concepts and disseminating these instrumentalized concepts through the academy and media, has much in common with governmentality as such. Both

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<sup>33</sup> Lemke, “Birth of Biopolitics,” 201.

<sup>34</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Neo-Liberal Revolution,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 728.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 39-42.



concepts emphasize the manner in which power does not solely manifest as repression or discipline but also as a social space conducive to inculcating the values of the elite.<sup>36</sup>

Where, then, does the Marxian account add its own value? I suggest that narratives of neoliberalism, particularly those that seek to conceptualize the term rather than investigate its particular facets (as in the aforementioned studies of “actually existing” neoliberalism), tend to displace the political subject from the picture. Marxians, on the other hand, explicitly name neoliberalism as a *class project*.<sup>37</sup> Mark Blyth, Gerard Duménil and Eugene Levy, and David Harvey have argued that business groups in the US began to organize as a class in the 1970s to halt the declining rate of profit and the growing threat posed by organized labor.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the character of the business elite changed as finance capital grew and domestic industry diminished at the hands of foreign competitors and outsourcing. In this transformation, financiers and CEOs became more important,<sup>39</sup> with the latter effectively becoming financiers themselves thanks to the importance of stock options to their compensation packages.<sup>40</sup> What is important here, for my purposes, is that these accounts give us actors to point at and study. On the other hand, consider the following passage from Rose, wherein he outlines “three facets” of neoliberalism:

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<sup>36</sup> Lemke makes this point in his review of governmentality for the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, an attempt to bridge the Foucauldian-Marxian gap I am reviewing here. Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 14-19.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Gerald F. Davis, "After the Corporation," *Politics & Society* 41, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Duménil and Lévy, *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution*, 31-33.

This would not be a ‘return’ to the liberalism of the nineteenth century, or, finally, government by *laissez faire*. It was not a matter of ‘freeing’ an existing set of market relations from their social shackles, but [1] of organizing all features of one’s natural policy to enable a market to exist, and to provide what it needs to function. [2] Social government must be restructured in the name of an economic logic, and economic government must create and sustain the central elements of economic well-being such as the enterprise form and competition. As [3] this advanced liberal diagram develops, the relation of the social and the economic is rethought. All aspects of *social* behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice.<sup>41</sup>

Notable here is the persistence of the passive voice: who does the rethinking? The freeing, organizing, and restructuring? Under whose aegis does this “diagram” develop? Sketches of neoliberalism often leave the impression of that cadre of historical economists, a select group of state leaders, and “the state” are responsible for neoliberal projects. Marxian analyses that highlight the centrality of class politics help to fill in these gaps. Rose’s three facets of neoliberalism – (1) producing markets where none previously operated, (2) restructuring government and governmental decision-making according to economic logics, particularly those pertaining to the finance industry, and (3) remaking citizens of right into economic, entrepreneurial subjects – can each be explained, and sutured together, through class interests. For instance, the generation of new financial markets (e.g., carbon

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<sup>41</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 141.

trading) promises financiers new sources of profit, the stabilization of the money supply (i.e., making inflation reduction the top economic priority) guarantees the value of current investments, and the legitimization of income inequality protects the new elite from populist politics. More concretely, we have economic histories like Mark Blyth's *Great Transformations* that detail the manner in which capital in the 1970s began to organize as a class, spawning new organizations, shifting the focus of existing ones, attracting greater and greater numbers, to become an organized force capable of steering the state and society. Familiar names today, the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, National Bureau of Economic Research, Business Roundtable, National Association of Manufacturers, and American Chamber of Commerce either were formed in the 1970s or experienced sharp growth in membership over this decade.<sup>42</sup> These groups would go on to challenge Keynesian economics both in theory and practice, in the academy and in Washington, premising their rhetoric in supply-side economics, the Laffer curve and critiques of taxation, monetarism, and a stinging critique of unions and the federal government.

The Foucauldian and Marxian approaches to neoliberalism are useful for those seeking to understand the forces shaping our contemporary political economic imaginary. Marxian analyses highlight the manner in which business groups and associated think tanks produce and disseminate neoliberal ideology, as well as a specific history of state capture, wherein logics intimate to the (finance) economy

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<sup>42</sup> Blyth, *Great Transformations*, 152-61.

and its elite came to dictate what is commonsensical and therefore possible within government. Foucauldian analyses highlight the manner in which the neoliberal state disseminates the entrepreneurial form across society, not solely through the media and education but also through strategic pull-backs in its applications, affecting how individuals think of themselves and the society and state around them. Scholarly analysis of neoliberalism has thus been valuable, helping scholars and the broader public understand the origins and ramifications of the contemporary political economy.

But is the ubiquity of neoliberalism within critical analyses on the left entirely a product of its hegemony, that is to say, the way neoliberals have succeeded in ordering society? And is this ubiquity problematic? I suggest that *part* of the attraction of neoliberalism stems from the function neoliberalism serves *for the left*—that in a postmodern world of identity politics it has shifted critical analyses “back” toward the political economy. And in a globalized world wherein local, regional, national and international politics appear wrapped into common processes and subjected to common forces, it provides the left a single signifier by which to represent and make sense of these phenomena. Neoliberalism, in short, is an idea developed by the left that functions to cohere the left. Wendy Brown’s analysis of neoliberalism presages this claim. She argues that neoliberalism has eroded liberal democracy and thereby deprived the left of the antagonist through which the left had derived much of its identity and force.<sup>43</sup> Today, “oppositional

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<sup>43</sup> Contra the idea that neoliberalism has undercut liberalism, see Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, “Liberal Democracy and Neoliberalism: A Critical Juxtaposition,” *New Political Science* 30, no. 2 (2008).

consciousness cannot be generated from liberal democracy's false promises and hypocrisies" as "liberal democracy is no longer the most salient discourse of political legitimacy and the good life."<sup>44</sup> Instead, "both freedom and equality have been redefined by neo-liberalism." I suggest taking Brown's argument one step further, and reflect on the manner in which those on the political left, across disciplines and in popular politics, have made neoliberalism the new target to investigate, discuss, and ultimately negate. Today, neoliberalism is the signifier through which many on the left articulate an identity and discover a motive.

This is, I suggest, problematic for the focus upon neoliberalism narrows scholarly attention and provides easy answers to the persistence of inequality, the lack of popular mobilization contra neoliberal politics (at least, in the US), the popularity of self-help and voluntary simplicity doctrines, etc. Not only does neoliberalism not exhaust the political ideology of today, but by inscribing it everywhere we erect a totalizing force that seems unshakeable. For instance, when Brown mourns the death of liberalism for the manner in which it provided "an alternative vision of humanity and alternative social and moral referents to those of the capitalist order," noting that "while liberal democracy encodes, reflects, and legitimates capitalist social relations, it simultaneously resists, counters, and tempers them," she leaves us wondering what might fulfill this function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alarmed, she asks, what else might provide a "modest ethical gap between economy and polity"?<sup>45</sup> This is precisely where a pivot to the political visions of nature and place becomes important. There are in contemporary politics political

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, "Neo-Liberalism," §40.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., §21-22.

imaginaries with distinct ideas about political economics that are in fact offering persuasive narratives to average citizens, seeking new ethical systems, polities, and economies. In the hunt for neoliberalism, these alternative politics go missing. I am not suggesting these politics are possibly emancipatory, rather the opposite: like with the manner in which liberal democracy both functions as a critique of capitalism and as a reflection of it, so too do these politics of nature and place. Scholars fail to notice the manner in which these ulterior ideologies constitute and delimit political vision both on the left and in the broader population, working both independently of and in conjunction with neoliberal politics. In the following section, analyzing the critiques made by scholars of the alternative food movement, I hope to defend this argument.

### ***Food politics, neoliberalism, and critique***

I would like to push these claims forward by examining them within the context of food politics, specifically the debates over the “alternative agri-food movement.” I put this in scare quotes initially to suggest that the term is not settled, that there’s no agreement whether recent shifts in American discourse and practice vis-à-vis food production and consumption represent something cohesive enough to be considered a movement. With that said, farmers, activists, and pundits have moved food to the center of debates over health, the environment, rural life and community, urban life and community, globalization, public policy orientations—the list could become quite extensive. Ideas such as the organic, local and food security have become commonplace and (in some parts of the country) nearly

commonsensical as ideals. A plethora of initiatives and organizations have sprung up or cohered around these new values, pushing projects ranging from urban gardens to White House gardens, farm-to-school programs and edible schoolyards, food security programs, community-supported agriculture, and domestic fair trade.<sup>46</sup> While some of these civil society initiatives see the state as a problem and lost cause, not all do so.<sup>47</sup> Some within alternative food have sought to lobby lawmakers to build or amend programs to push in local, organic, or otherwise “healthy,” community-oriented food directions. This includes attempts to promote better school lunches; reorient the farm subsidy regime to help small, organic growers of fruits and vegetables; shift state advice regarding diet (e.g., away from the “food pyramid”); and to label foods that contain genetically modified organisms. Hence, the notion of a movement albeit one that lacks centralizing tendencies.

For my purposes, food is of interest as field by which to understand the nexus of contemporary politics, political ideologies, and political economy. And given the battle done daily over food, farming, and diets in the US, it is a particularly active field, containing a variety of competing political economic perspectives, a rich mix that I suggest will help us see inside and outside the neoliberal box.

Narratives of nature and place are central to these new food projects. Chad Lavin usefully suggests that “two distinct alienations” spark the alternative food movement, specifically with regards to the moves towards organic and local agri-

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<sup>46</sup> Patricia Allen et al., “Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape: The Tectonics of Alternative Agrifood Initiatives in California,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>47</sup> Sandy Brown and Christy Getz, “Privatizing Farm Worker Justice: Regulating Labor through Voluntary Certification and Labeling,” *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008).

food.<sup>48</sup> Organic foods promise to erase that distance we feel from nature, connecting us to a wholesome land through clean foods. Through a pastoral narrative and promises of strictly “natural” methods of production, organic agriculture wishes to erase the anxieties of eating. Organic food is simply good food—for our bodies and for the landscape. For its part, eating local treats the symptoms of social alienation and the dislocation wrought by sharpened urban-rural divides and unimaginable commodity chains. Ideally, it reconnects consumers to the producers operating in their immediate vicinity. Furthermore, it recasts one’s diet within the traditional eating patterns found in one’s place. Together, organic and local foods promise reconciliation with the neighbors we lost in the broader market society, and the land from which we have grown detached as the political economy has ramified into globalization.

To demonstrate that this is not a caricature of the alternative agriculture literature, we can consult the words of its proponents. Reporting on the development of organic agriculture, Timothy Vos depicts organic as the wholesale rejection of industrial, “productionist” agriculture, with its invisible farms, faceless and rootless foods, and destructive chemicals. Organic offers a “radical gesture of reconciliation with nature, an embodied attempt to change the way we actually live in the (social/natural) world.”<sup>49</sup> This reconciliation works through a “new vision of society-nature” that “focuses especially on the socio-ecological relations of

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<sup>48</sup> This is a useful characterization of the broader movement, which does sometimes does put its critique in the specific language of alienation. See, Allen et al., “Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape,” 70; Timothy Vos, “Visions of the Middle Landscape: Organic Farming and the Politics of Nature,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 17, no. 3 (2000): 246; Patricia Allen and Martin Kovach, “The Capitalist Composition of Organic: The Potential of Markets in Fulfilling the Promise of Organic Agriculture,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 17, no. 3 (2000).

<sup>49</sup> Vos, “Visions of the Middle Landscape,” 246.



production, which are rooted in the specificity of place.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the one-size-fits-all approach to agriculture necessitated by industrial methods are rejected by organic agriculture in favor of practices that reconnect with the particular landscape. Vos argues, using David Harvey’s phrase, that organic agriculture “is a quintessential example of the dialectic of ‘militant particularism and global ambition.’” Militant against conventional, industrial agriculture, particular in its attention to the immediate ecological place, and global in its attempt to disseminate its ideas and practices. In a similar vein, in *Organic Manifesto* Maria Rodale (of the famed Rodale Institute) writes a good versus evil story between “chemical” and organic agriculture. Whereas the former spews carbon into the air, fouls our watersheds, and mines the soil, organic agriculture sequesters carbon, restores watersheds, and maintains soil vitality. The former, furthermore, respects neither geographical boundary nor any particular place. Organic agriculture promises to teach us how “to *stay*...how to grow our foods in ways that regenerate the land, rather than destroy it.”<sup>51</sup>

Given this emphasis on place, there is not a firm dividing line between organic and local agriculture, though locavores, for their part, are less likely to find their roots in nature. Instead, they seek to respond to the destruction of local communities by large-scale economic forces. For example, Ken Meter argues that rebuilding local food economies is necessary for America’s communities to recover from the Great Recession. “Building clusters of ‘local’ foods businesses will be

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>51</sup> Maria Rodale, *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep Us Safe* (New York: Rodale, 2010), 16.

critical to economic recovery in the US. Without taking this step, we cannot put our national economy back on its feet.”<sup>52</sup> We have the potential to transform our “extractive” food economy, featuring faceless middlemen operating across unknown distances, into one that develops local economies, keeping capital in place. Furthermore, local food economies promise to regenerate the social connections severed by the extractive, corporate economy. Today, “people identify their food with corporate logos rather than with family, ethnic heritage, or sense of place.”<sup>53</sup> This will change, he suggests, as we come together in a new economy premised in heritage, interdependence, familiarity, and respect. Local food economies, it seems, are the first step in rebuilding the lost American community.

Working to reconstruct and rethink localities is empowering. As Philip Ackerman-Leist puts it, “the good news in the renaissance of more localized food systems is that hope and appropriate scale tend to be close allies. Individuals and communities discover empowerment through the promise of even the smallest of intentions, and small successes pave the way to even bigger dreams.”<sup>54</sup> Is this a naïve position to take? “Naïve? I don’t think so. The rapid rise of environmental constraints that challenge a safe and reliable food supply requires that we intensify the quest for sustainable food production.” Furthermore, “the social inequities and health problems so evident in the United States force us to reexamine the links between our national food system and the problematic aspects of our individual

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<sup>52</sup> Ken Meter, “Local Foods Are Key to Economic Recovery,” in *Food Movements Unite!*, ed. Eric Holt-Giménez (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2013), 201.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Ackerman-Leist, *Rebuilding the Foodshed: How to Create Local, Sustainable, and Secure Food Systems* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2013), xxvi.

diets.” Finally, “the economy is like the weather, volatile and unpredictable, requiring us to seek and create shelter in the security of the familiar—our local communities.” In other words, localization is not naïve because it responds with good sense to a trio of problems, environmental, social, and economic.

How do we get started? Brian Halweil’s *Eat Here* echoes many voices in the alternative agri-food movement by championing consumer-led politics. “The food consumer,” he argues, “may hold the key to the rebirth of local foodsheds.”<sup>55</sup> Were enough persons to coalesce around eating local foods the effect would be transform the food system and reinvigorate local food economies. Indeed, in the appendix to *Eat Here*, Halweil gives eaters nine things they can do to rebuild local food economies, and almost all center on reshaping how one consumes. Coming it at number 9 is a wholly disparate recommendation, “speak to your local politician about forming a local food policy council.”<sup>56</sup>

It is into this discursive terrain that critics—albeit of the benevolent “inside the church” variety—enter. Working across a variety of disciplines, academics including Lavin, Julie Guthman, Patricia Allen, Sandy Brown, Melanie DuPuis, Christie Getz, David Goodman, Michael Goodman, and Aimee Shreck analyze and critique alternative agri-food discourses and projects for the manner in which emphases upon the market and consumer-based politics stems from, and feeds back into, neoliberalism. Their valuable criticisms congeal around a conclusion: that alternative agri-food is by-and-large *apolitical* rather than oppositional, failing to

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<sup>55</sup> Brian Halweil, *Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 158.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

challenge the structural socio-economic conditions that produce toxic foods and landscapes, social alienation, unintelligible political economies, and marginalized workers. What's left is a movement for those of sufficient means and of certain socio-economic backgrounds to escape the anxieties of eating. While these are very valuable insights and a necessary corrective for the excesses of foodie rhetoric, I suggest that these critics remain in the neoliberal box, not fully appreciating the contribution that place- and nature-based ideologies make to the "post-political" (Lavin's term) condition affecting alternative food politics.

By way of example, Lavin considers alternative agri-food to be a neoliberal reaction to the neoliberal condition.<sup>57</sup> In organic and local foods, market exchange and consumerism often masquerade as community. Locavores, for instance, lionize farmers' markets and community supported agriculture arrangements, typically describing them as creating spaces wherein people can meet face-to-face and diners encounter farmers. Along the way, social alienation is purportedly eliminated. What does not change, as Lavin points out, is the market basis of the arrangement. Localist market institutions instead produce "*the market as the solution* to political problems."<sup>58</sup> Worse, localists cloak market exchange in discourses of community. Can community be generated at the site of exchange? Are all those who make market exchange possible equal participants in these markets? As Lavin rightly notes, "what is at stake in local foods is...the very idea of community itself."<sup>59</sup> Having

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<sup>57</sup> Exemplifying the following, see Mary K. Hendrickson and William D. Heffernan, "Opening Spaces through Relocalization: Locating Potential Weaknesses of the Global Food System," *Sociologia Ruralis* 42, no. 4 (2002).

<sup>58</sup> Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 109, italics in original.

<sup>59</sup> Chad Lavin, "The Year of Eating Politically," *Theory & Event* 12, no. 2 (2009).

ingested the neoliberal ideology, perhaps it is only through the market that we can imagine community.

Corresponding to this market orientation, many working in organic and local agriculture reject pursuing overtly “political” (that is, state-based) solutions. For instance, Lavin attributes the interest in locavorism to the Organic Foods Production Act. Organic, to Lavin, was doomed the moment it went from alternative counterculture to something institutionalized under the state. Indeed, as Timothy Vos and others note, in light of the history of the USDA and its capture by large agribusinesses, many organic farmers resisted the Act, arguing that state could not be trusted to maintain its spirit.<sup>60</sup> Organic farmers feared the death of true organic agriculture and the dawn of its industrialization and corporatization.<sup>61</sup> Prompted by this cynicism toward the state, the idea that “government intrusion kills...authentic movements,” food activists began to promote going local.<sup>62</sup> As Lavin puts it, “the specific appeal to locavores to eat foods grown within 100 miles of their homes might be less important than the literature’s appeal to a widespread skepticism toward the terms and institutions of democratic governance.”<sup>63</sup> Believing the state

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<sup>60</sup> Aaron Bobrow-Strain, in his “social history” of bread, argues that the turn to locavorism has been “prompted by the very real failings of a scientific regulatory system effectively controlled by powerful corporations.” Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store Bought Loaf* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 48.

<sup>61</sup> In support of Lavin’s argument, see Julie Guthman, “Regulating Meaning, Appropriating Nature: The Codification of California Organic Agriculture,” *Antipode* 30, no. 2 (1998); Vos, “Visions of the Middle Landscape.”; Laura B. DeLind, “Transforming Organic Agriculture into Industrial Organic Products: Reconsidering National Organic Standards,” *Human Organization* 59, no. 2 (2000); Christian R. Vogl, Lukas Kilcher, and Hanspeter Schmidt, “Are Standards and Regulations of Organic Farming Moving Away from Small Farmers’ Knowledge?” *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 26, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>62</sup> Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 107.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

to be captured, and thus the futility of political citizenship and collective action, alternative agri-food turned to private initiatives.

On the whole, Lavin argues, localism has furthered the rolling-back of the state, the privatization of previously public questions and the commodification of solutions.<sup>64</sup> If within neoliberalism the solution for social problems must be found privately through a form of consumerism, then organic and local foods no doubt qualify.<sup>65</sup> Echoing Brown, Lavin states, “most crucially, the literature reflects a political condition in which it is only in their role as consumers that Americans can imagine political power, and in which the privatization of food corresponds to a broader privatization of politics.”<sup>66</sup>

But neoliberalism extends beyond privatization and marketization in political economic terms: it also privatizes responsibility.<sup>67</sup> The public interest in public health does not generate a public response, such as tighter regulations of industry and control over the food supply.<sup>68</sup> Rather, it calls individuals to a self-reckoning. This, Lavin notes, is particularly notable in the rhetoric on obesity and dieting, which makes obesity an individual moral failing.<sup>69</sup> Within a liberal universe of individualism, autonomy and self-reliance, those who’ve succumbed to obesity

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 704-05.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.; Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 103-106.

<sup>68</sup> With some notable exceptions, note recent efforts to eliminate sugary drinks from schools, the reformation of nutrition information on product packaging, the requirement for chain restaurants to post calorie content on menus, Bloomberg’s various escapades over soda and salt, the politicization of school lunches, etc. In addition, websites like Civil Eats, Grist, and Nestle’s Food Politics site frequently call into question public policy.

<sup>69</sup> Guthman makes similar points in *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

must take the blame and plot their own course out of the predicament.<sup>70</sup> This narrative extends deep into the alternative agri-food movement. Michael Pollan and Marion Nestle have published didactic books on diet; Barbara Kingsolver's popular *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* narrates a year spent self-provisioning off her family's (ample) rural property; and, similar in intent, Pollan culminates *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by making "perfect meal" from ingredients which he himself had grown and hunted.

Rather than representing innocuous diet and lifestyle advice, Lavin interprets these publications as exemplars of the shift towards the neoliberal responsibilization of individuals. Pollan and Nestle's diet advice slots neatly into the self-help genre. Lavin names Pollan the "high priest of responsible foods" for his emphasis on consumer solutions and self-sufficiency, exhorting us to buy the right food, and if possible, to grow it ourselves. By eliding any question of (the inequitable) access to land, Kingsolver suggests that leading a life connected to one's land is simply a matter of leaving behind the alienated world of the city.<sup>71</sup> Reorientation of one's life only requires inspiration, choice, and dedication. Furthermore, pushing against public, traditional politicking are representations of an inept or captured regulatory state—a body not to be relied upon.<sup>72</sup> It thus falls upon civil society to spread the right knowledge, and upon the individual to educate herself and practice self-care. Under neoliberalism, biopolitics becomes a call to self-governance of the body.

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<sup>70</sup> Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 78-82.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>72</sup> Lavin bases this argument on Nestle's *Food Politics* and Brian Halweil's *Eat Here*. Ibid., xxv, 88-89, 106.

In some regards, Lavin recognizes that these neoliberal tendencies are not total—for example, Nestle and Pollan have both engaged in traditional politicking over public policy. Nonetheless, rather than take ahold of the moment of vulnerability wherein the liberal narrative of individual autonomy is pierced by material reality—eating food of opaque provenance and questionable standard—major figures in the alternative agri-food movement have instead perpetuated the responsabilization of individuals. By emphasizing self-education and choice in provisioning and diet, they have made individuals responsible for a systemic failure. As Julie Guthman puts it, “the idea that the food system can be transformed by selling and buying good food (through informed choice) is a huge concession to the neoliberal idolatry of the market.”<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps more than any other scholar/activist, Guthman has consistently criticized alternative agri-food for its neoliberal orientation.<sup>74</sup> She has particular scorn for the turn to private governance, evidenced by the ubiquity and growth of labeling schemes (e.g., organic, fair trade, or terroir-based labels).<sup>75</sup> On the surface, she argues, these initiatives *appear* to be reactions against the self-regulating market, an attempt to re-embed production within broader social logics. Presumably, organic agriculture inputs the societal concern for clean environments and bodies, fair trade the concern over equitable trade relations, and terroir the desire to maintain traditional practices and communities. Instead, by relying on

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<sup>73</sup> Guthman, *Weighing In*, 148.

<sup>74</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism.”; Julie Guthman, “The Polanyian Way? Voluntary Food Labels as Neoliberal Governance,” *Antipode* 39, no. 3 (2007); Julie Guthman, “Commentary on Teaching Food: Why I Am Fed up with Michael Pollan et al.,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 24, no. 2 (2007); Guthman, *Weighing In*.

<sup>75</sup> Guthman, “Neoliberalism,” 1172.



voluntarism and consumerism, they further the neoliberal project of autonomizing the market from state regulation. Thus, Guthman concludes that while some groups were “definitely anticorporate” the strategies pursued by alternative agri-food activists are recognizably neoliberal.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, label schemes generate private rents by creating barriers to entry and a resulting market niche. For instance, growers wishing to shift from conventional to organic foods must wait three years prior to planting and certification, presumably to allow any banned substances in the soil to dissipate. Farmers who cannot afford, for one reason or another, to go organic (without benefit of the label) or fallow their fields for the duration are effectively kept out of the market.<sup>77</sup> By their very nature, these initiatives are limited in terms of extension. A criticism found across her various publications, Guthman argues that while organic foods can benefit the fields and farmworkers of farmers who have the capital necessary to transition from conventional production, as well as eaters capable of paying higher prices; and that local foods can benefit those fortunate enough to live in fertile regions as well as farmers who live in areas where locavorism proves popular, these voluntary, private forms of governance pale in terms of the impact and equity that state regulation and assistance could supply. In sum, private governance not only sidelines the state, voluntarizes participation, and privatizes gains, it is also less effective. Neoliberalism is in part a suspect ideology because market-based politics enable only a segment of the population.

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<sup>76</sup> Guthman, *Weighing In*, 142.

<sup>77</sup> Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Lavin and Guthman advance valuable criticisms. The problem, though, is that the neoliberal lens causes one to reduce and oversimplify what is a complex politics. This becomes evident in the exchange over farm-to-school programs between, on one side, Guthman and co-author Patricia Allen, and on the other, Jack Kloppenberg and Neva Hassanein.<sup>78</sup> Kloppenberg has been especially influential in disseminating localism; in “Coming into the Foodshed,” he lashes out against the globalization of food and gives a stirring defense of local food systems.<sup>79</sup> Working with the concept of the “foodshed,” Kloppenberg advocates (re)constructing food systems as “proximately” as possible and within the confines of natural (given) ecosystems.<sup>80</sup> Towards this end, Kloppenberg and Hassanein have built programs that reconnect children and school lunches with farms in their vicinity, intending to distribute knowledge and good food. Here begins the conflict: where these figures see oppositional politics laying the ground for “real utopias,” Allen and Guthman see neoliberalism.<sup>81</sup> How so?

Allen and Guthman level four charges against farm-to-school programs. First, they note that these programs often operate through private funding and, as such, they stand outside of recognizable welfare state agri-food platforms (e.g. the school lunch program). Divergent outcomes result as some schools manage to attract money and build programs—particularly those in affluent areas with environmentally conscious populations—while others (the majority) cannot get

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<sup>78</sup> Patricia Allen and Julie Guthman, “From ‘Old School’ to ‘Farm-to-School’: Neoliberalization from the Ground Up,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 23, no. 4 (2006); Jack Kloppenburg Jr. and Neva Hassanein, “From Old School to Reform School?,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 23, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>79</sup> Jack Kloppenberg Jr., John Hendrickson, and G.W. Stevenson, “Coming in to the Foodshed,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 13, no. 3 (1996).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>81</sup> Kloppenburg Jr. and Hassanein, “From Old School to Reform School?,” 420.

access to funding. The broad public benefit that the state could provision goes missing. We have, therefore, a neoliberal brew of private funding provisioned by the affluent to their own children, creating zones of healthy food economies amidst a general population that goes lacking, with the state standing on the sidelines. Furthermore, Allen and Guthman critique the localist, small farmer emphasis of FTS programs. The authors correspond the turn to the local with neoliberal devolution, again emphasizing the retreat of the state. Third, they argue that FTS activists sell their programs by linking good food to academic success and lean bodies. This, they say, overlaps with the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility for individual success. Parents seeking to build the human capital of their youth ought to clamor for the nutrition that FTS programs can provide. Lastly, they argue that FTS programs operate through the discourse of consumer choice—children should be able to choose between nutritious, clean foods and the fast food slop found in today's schools.

In response, Kloppenberg and Hassanein target the neoliberal lens: “given their preoccupation with neoliberalism, Allen and Guthman find it everywhere they look.”<sup>82</sup> First, the authors admit the limitations of private funding and highlight the efforts made by FTS advocates to secure state dollars for new programs. Despite the localist emphasis, the authors argue that their politicking extends across multiple scales, including local, state, and federal governments. Second, they question the linkage made between emphasizing nutrition/academic performance and neoliberalism: “it is hard to understand why simple reference to the well established

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

relationship between nutrition and academic performance...or obesity is ipso facto to participate in or consent to an exclusively neoliberal frame of reference.”<sup>83</sup> Third, they argue that FTS advocates typically work to *restrict* the choice of children, limiting the availability of junk and fast food from national chains and substituting healthy, clean foods from local farmers. They conclude, “we believe that those who are engaged in the over 400 FTS programs nation-wide are now undertaking, however imperfectly, resistance and critical thinking and political action and that they are endeavoring to achieve equity, public funding, and state support for their proposed reforms.”<sup>84</sup> Where critics see complicity with neoliberalism, the authors see oppositional political action.

I suggest that this exchange reveals a tendency amongst critics to overlook ulterior political lineaments or, worse, to revert them to neoliberalism. Take, for instance, the following passage from Allen and Guthman: “although alternative agri-food activists, including FTS advocates, largely reject the notion of governance by private international bodies such as the WTO, the populist localism they do embrace happens to resonate with the neoliberal devolution of responsibility and accountability to the local.”<sup>85</sup> The ambiguity of the “happens to” construction enables the narrative to slide into the neoliberal (black) box. The explicit connection between the “populist localism” of FTS activism and neoliberalism goes unstated, yet the connection is preserved. This move is typical: critics of alternative agri-food nearly always dissolve localism into neoliberalism. In DuPuis and Goodman’s

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Allen and Guthman, “Farm-to-School,” 409.

powerful critique of localist rhetoric, "Should We Go Home to Eat?" we encounter another example of this tendency. For these authors, the political myopia of localism originates in machinations of neoliberalism. "It is arguable that localization most recently has been deployed to further a neoliberal form of global logic, a refashioning of agricultural governance that plays on both left ideals of political participation and right ideals of non-interference in markets."<sup>86</sup> While the authors are careful to note that it would be "presumptuous, of course, to argue that all localism is the handmaiden of neoliberalism," this impression is left upon the readers since the authors do not delve into the political ideological components that comprise localism nor who does the "deploying."<sup>87</sup> Localism, in this critique, comes out of and travels back into the neoliberal project. It is merely a technique of neoliberal governmentality, a rhetoric and political economic form that abets the creation of neoliberal subjects and spaces.

But what of ulterior traditions that appeal to localism? For instance, when Lavin argues that "the point is *not* that locavores alibi capitalism, but that the locavore literature has wide appeal because it speaks to an actual lack of opportunities for political action," I agree with him, but argue that *Eating Anxiety* and other critical pieces miss the *positive* inducements to localism found within, for instance, four decades of green thought that associates ecology with place and the local.<sup>88</sup> Or the manner in which the local itself is theorized, by a variety of subjects

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<sup>86</sup> Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman, "Should We Go 'Home' to Eat?: Toward a Reflexive Politics of Localism," *Journal of Rural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2005): 368.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Similarly, see Patricia Allen and Clare Hinrichs, "Buying into Buying Local: Engagements of United States Local Food Initiatives," in *Alternative Food Geographies*, ed. Damian Maye et al. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007).

<sup>88</sup> Lavin, "The Year of Eating Politically," 110.

(neoliberal and not), as providing values like immediacy and difference. While Allen and Guthman correlate with neoliberalism the push made by FTS advocates to support small farmers and develop new markets, we could just as easily state that these politics “happen to” resonate with agrarianism. Agrarianism—the valorization of farmers and agriculture—features heavily in alternative agri-food discourse, and its historical roots in the United States extend far beyond the neoliberal horizon. FTS programs’ emphasis on small farmers has a great deal to do with the 80-year effort to defend and preserve small farmers from the inequities of a market dominated by large agribusinesses (a thread that will be continued in chapter four). The importance of this discourse, which I will argue has been historically pervasive and continues to operate in the contemporary discourses of place and nature, cannot be understated. For just as Allen and Guthman miss the spell of agrarianism in their hunt for neoliberals, Kloppenberg and Hassanein fail to problematize the agrarian basis of FTS programs. Operating in the romantic agrarian mode, they declare FTS programs potentially “emancipatory.”<sup>89</sup>

To guard against the risk of overselling the argument, I should note that critics of alternative agri-food movements have noted the importance of agrarianism and the limitations it places on the political vision of alternative agri-food.<sup>90</sup> But I suggest that agrarianism tends to be nested within and led back to discussions of neoliberalism. In *Eating Anxiety*, for example, key figures in the American agrarian tradition, such as Wendell Berry and Thomas Jefferson, are

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<sup>89</sup> Kloppenburg Jr. and Hassanein, “From Old School to Reform School?,” 420.

<sup>90</sup> Allen et al., “Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape.”; Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*; Brown and Getz, “Privatizing Farm Worker Justice.”

present only insofar as they assist in developing the story of (neo)liberalism.<sup>91</sup>

Jefferson is briefly mentioned as the inspiration for the “postpolitical fantasies” of locavorism, but as with Berry no attempt is made to explain why this is so. As another example, Brown and Getz dismiss civil society attempts to ameliorate labor conditions through voluntary certification programs. Specifically, they investigate and critique civil society projects that “certify” farms for fairly treating and compensating their wage laborers. Analogous to how organic farms are certified for their method of production, these projects seek to develop a code of principles, an auditing system, and a recognizable label for product packaging. To the authors, these projects fail on two counts. First, social certification schemes represent a “voluntary, privatized mode of governance that largely accepts neoliberal imperatives for a flexible, decentralized, and market-driven regulatory framework.”<sup>92</sup> This criticism is by now familiar. Second, these initiatives deploy agrarian discourse to conflate farmer and farm worker interests. By lumping together farmers and farm workers, these programs demonstrate an “inability (or refusal) to either acknowledge or address structural differences between farmers and farm workers.”<sup>93</sup> Because agrarianism depicts a pacific countryside of small farmers it enables initiatives to pursue justice as if farm laborers were indistinct from farmers, or as if farmers alone were in need of assistance from outside market pressures. Agrarianism therefore “functions to further a key neoliberal conceit by

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<sup>91</sup> Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>92</sup> Brown and Getz, “Privatizing Farm Worker Justice,” 1185.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

eliding class distinctions.”<sup>94</sup> While this is no doubt a very useful insight, agrarianism becomes merely an instrument for neoliberalism. Is agrarianism simply a discursive technique maintaining neoliberal hegemony?

Without question, there are imbrications between agrarianism and neoliberalism. The problem is the thin manner in which agrarianism is treated in the literature, and the fact that it only becomes important insofar as it alibis neoliberalism. What goes largely unexplored is the manner in which Jefferson or Berry continue to have influence over contemporary politics and the discourse of alternative agri-food. Lacking is an account of the positive inducements to agrarianism, that is to say, what agrarianism has historically claimed to offer citizens and country. This is a story that exceeds the neoliberal horizon. We might ask, how did Jeffersonian thought manage to persevere into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does it solely combine with neoliberalism, or have other projects and ideologies carried it into the present? These types of questions are important, for they illuminate ideological paths distinct from that of neoliberalism, which may (or may not) combine with it in contemporary politics.

### ***In and out of the neoliberal box***

In this project, I argue that the neoliberal paradigm is flanked by political visions premised in place and nature, which ostensibly resist neoliberalism but in fact neither represent nor challenge the basic structures underlying the neoliberal economy. This includes legal structures like private property as well as ideological

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 1190.



missives of personal responsibility and choice. For instance, Kingsolver's admonishment to leave the city, return to the farm, and begin self-provisioning gives no thought to the property relations that undergird our political economy. Going back to the land is not an expression of the individual will, or an educated person acting upon the right values, but relies above all on whether one has access to arable land. It is therefore a "choice" open only to a few. In contrast to existing criticism, I do not see Kingsolver's shortcomings as purely a matter of neoliberal hegemony, the internalization of narratives of education, responsibility, and choice. Consider the American agrarian tradition, which depicts a pacific countryside of property owners mixing their labor into a generous nature. In this discourse property ownership is simply taken for granted.

I suggest that these ulterior ideologies are underappreciated by both critical scholars and the general public, with regard to the limitations they place on our ability to critically assess the state of the political economy today. Those seeking to escape the general economy often do so in ways that are ostensibly local, ecological, and agrarian, pursuing "alternative" projects and visions of politics and economics. These become the ideological others through which many today imagine and practice opposition to neoliberalism. In the neoliberal era we have not, per Brown, lost our ability to imagine an ethical (or political economic) "gap" between capitalism and society because these ideologies of place and nature have managed to fulfill the function liberalism presumably once performed. It is therefore important to understand the political vision of these discourses and how they may bear upon the political economy.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THE ROMANCE OF THE LOCAL**

The local has become commonplace in US politics, the most popular concretion of the turn to “place” against the “spatial” powers of capital, finance, globalization, science, and the state. Most obviously so with food, but food politics are emblematic of larger turn toward reviving and defending proximate economies and communities from greater forces of change. If the global food system is the problem, local food is the solution. If big financial firms are deceitful and destructive, the local bank is the solution. If corporations are exporting jobs, the solution is local entrepreneurialism. Characteristic of this localism are Buy Local campaigns, the celebration of artisanal and small producers, symbols like the “family business,” and, conversely, efforts to shield localities from major retailers. But localism goes beyond retrenchment. Localism—specifically political decentralization—features heavily in neoliberal thought and practice as well. Seen as a means to render governance more efficient, stripping power from the central state, neoliberals see local communities as the proper site of governance. And yet the local holds an allure for many critics of neoliberalism, including academics working in postcolonial and/or environmental studies. Personal political convictions spur these academics to the local, whether it be a commitment to the environment, marginal communities, radical democracy, or heterodox epistemologies and economies. Finally, we find localism among conservative thinkers seeking to protect traditions from the forces of anarchical change, such as those unleashed in globalization.

All of these localisms must do something specific: take what is in reality a contingent artifact of complicated spatial politics, eliminate such contingency, and grant the local definite qualities of its own. All localist visions are conceptualizations of the local – the granting of attributes. Arjun Appadurai's essay "The Production of Locality" illuminates the broader problem: just how does the local go from a contingency to a basis for politics? And what types of politics does the local imaginary enable (or obscure)? In Appadurai's opening page, we are confronted by the problem:

I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts ... I use the term *neighborhood* to refer to the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized.<sup>95</sup>

Localities are not fixed upon a geographic scale, as the 100-mile diet might suggest, instead a locality (neighborhood) is something *made*, a "social achievement" specific to its context. They are contingent upon these specific social processes. Yet, the idea that locality is relational and contextual uneasily sits alongside the idea that locality is a "dimension" or "value," the former suggesting some co-production of locality, implying a certain sense of *becoming* through social relations, and the latter suggesting something more settled, a state of being. Another source of tension, one common to the literature, is the idea that locality is constituted by phenomenal

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<sup>95</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178.

linkages between persons, generating a sense of social immediacy. This quality of immediacy itself does not sit tidily next to the idea that locality is relational and contextual, which implies again a certain level of mediation and mutability.

Appadurai recognizes this problem, stating “the central dilemma is that neighborhoods both are contexts and at the same time require and produce contexts.”<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, if there is “the local” – that is, if there is a set of qualities that makes it a thing-in-itself, according to Appadurai it’s precisely this unsettling state of becoming/being, wherein the local is continually made and remade by a mixture of forces from inside and out. If there is a border, it is unreliable and open to question. And despite the fact that locality has always been a “fragile social achievement,” today it suffers even greater challenges: the attempt of the nation-state to homogenize its internal space, the “growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity, and collective social movement,” and the growth of “virtual neighborhoods” in electronic media.<sup>97</sup> In short, the national, global, and technological conspire to make the production of locality a challenge. The nation-state attempts to produce national citizens, overriding the formation of “local subjects” through its “disciplinary” technologies.<sup>98</sup> The global circulation of people, both in physical form as migrants and in virtual form as Internet denizens, creates “translocalities” defined by immigrant neighborhoods and “virtual neighborhoods” that may congeal physically distant, but otherwise quite homogeneous bodies of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 179, 189.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 190-91.

people.<sup>99</sup> It is thus that Appadurai concludes that “the production of locality—always, as I have argued, a fragile and difficult achievement—is more than ever shot through with contradictions, destabilized by human motion, and displaced by the formation of new kinds of virtual neighborhoods.”<sup>100</sup> Missing in his assessment is capital, specifically the investment flows that challenge the sovereignty of smaller economies (e.g. Thailand, 1997), the machinations of finance capital that reach across space *within* economies to render destitute towns and cities (e.g. San Bernardino, California, 2007-present), as well as the flow of cheap commodities through free trade that dislocate noncompetitive producers (e.g. Mexican maize farmers, post-NAFTA, who then became the US’ illegal immigrants). Once added, these facts only confirm Appadurai’s argument.

By contrast to Appadurai’s approach that treats locality and specific neighborhoods as contingencies, an open container, localists like Gary Snyder call us to “*be actually local.*” In the wonderfully evocative and thoughtful essays of *The Practice of the Wild*, we come across this enigmatic statement, one which illustrates the problem I wish to address in this chapter:

Since about 1960 the situation has turned again: the agencies that were once charged with conservation are increasingly perceived as accomplices of the extractive industries, and local people—who are beginning to be actually local—seek help from environmental organizations and join in defense of the public lands.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 192-96.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>101</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 34.

In the sense Snyder uses it, “local” is not some contextual, contingent production of competing forces, rather, “local” becomes something like “the local,” a thing unto itself. Furthermore, this is something that people can *become*. By “beginning” to be local, the local becomes a promise or condition waiting to be grasped, and by “being” local, it is also a constitutive condition, one that remakes us. Specific to Snyder, the locality is traditionally defined by its bioregion and by the vernacular community that lives according to the contours of “place” (more on this in chapter three). Today, this mode of living has been upended by extra-local, institutional power; as such, Snyder exhorts us to return to place-based living.<sup>102</sup>

This contrast between Appadurai and Snyder suggests two approaches to the idea of the local. First, there are approaches that empty the local by revealing its contingency and permeability. Rather than settle the local Appadurai prompts us to investigate locality(-building) for the specific processes that operate in/across space. Second, we have approaches like Snyder’s that attempt to fill the local from *within* by particular qualities, often in contrast with foreign properties. This approach, I argue, is necessary for the local to do political work – the locality must solidify around certain ideas and representations. Those pursuing localist politics give definitive answers to the “what is the local” question, narratives premised on the speakers’ politics.

The task of understanding political localism therefore requires identifying the attributes assigned to it in its various representations: how do advocates of the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 34, 41, 64.

local construct the concept in discourse?<sup>103</sup> In my analysis of localists texts, I identify three “registers”—collections of signifiers—in which localists build the concept and strip it of contingency. The local is typically associated with the *phenomenal*, as being physical, immediate, tangible and sensible; as being *singular*, unique and particular in the individual instance, as well as multiple and diverse in the aggregate; and finally, described in terms we might call *hermeneutic*, wherein the local is the site of community, history, transparency, and legibility. Through these registers, the local becomes settled, something that can be known, discussed, and represented in our political visions.

By just taking a few of these cognates, we can begin to see the allure of the local. By being immediate and tangible, it becomes concrete, the site of practice and possibility. The local is where we can turn to get things done and make a difference. By being unique and representing diversity, it becomes the antidote to the homogenizing forces of mass culture and the market. By being the natural site of community, it is where we ought to work to rekindle lost social relationships. Furthermore, and important to understand the strength of localism, we must consider the ways in which these registers overlap and reinforce one another. For

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<sup>103</sup> Scholars studying localism have yet to perform a systematic analysis along these lines. Often, those who investigate space/place, globalization, development, and science treat the local in simple contrast with the global. Some scholars try to overcome this simple binary, pressing the idea of hybridization, treating the local as a co-production of global/local forces. See Ulf Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 7, no. 2 (1990); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995); Kevin R. Cox, “Spaces of Dependence, Spaces of Engagement and the Politics of Scale, Or: Looking for Local Politics,” *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (1998); Arif Dirlik, “Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 22, no. 2 (1999); Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20, no. 2 (2001); Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, “Preface: From the ‘New Localism’ to the Spaces of Neoliberalism,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002).

instance, the immediacy and contact promised by the local makes community possible—it is where we interact “face-to-face,” implying legibility or transparency. How those in the locality come to know themselves and their environment is represented as an internal development, an irruption, rather than one historically mediated by “outside” forces. Most important, in an time when many trace social alienation, homogenization, and environmental degradation back to globalization and its constituents, the proverbial “outside forces,” localism seems the solution. In the local, we find the necessary ingredients to rebuild communities that will support us in our battle to defend our ways of life and our land. Correspondingly, the local itself is emptied of its own potential for internal division, social distance, disruption and flux. That is to say, it is emptied of politics. The local becomes the site of authentic community and therein a refuge; something to defend and therefore the site of resistance.

In sum, I investigate the discourse of localist accounts for the ways in which the local becomes as a substantial noun rather than one shot through with contingencies, founding these apolitical visions. By discourse, I mean the manner in which scholars build the concept of the local through speech/text, shaping how others come to think of the concept, its significance, and its possibilities. With an eye towards capturing the full variety of what it means to be local, I sought to read disparate sources. This is eminently possible with the local, for a wide variety of politics converges upon the concept. The question inevitably then arises, “what criteria would make certain texts more relevant than others?”<sup>104</sup> In other words, by

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<sup>104</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 14.



what method do I determine which texts matter, and just which voices should be included? First, I have attempted to isolate and study the scholars who've had a significant impact on how we see the local and represent it in our work. Second, I select scholars who demonstrate a political vocation, in Sheldon Wolin's sense of the term. These scholars work to represent and theorize politics but also possess and pursue a public, political mission.<sup>105</sup> These persons are of particular interest for their ability to draw nuanced, complex visions of the local but also for the fact that their scholarship originates in a political project. Arturo Escobar, James Scott, David Hess, and Roger Scruton are emblematic of this practice. Lastly, I study this academic discourse not to privilege it over the popular narratives of locality and localism, but to have it serve a comparative function vis-à-vis those narratives. This comparison I undertake within the domain of food politics in chapter five.

### ***All roads to the local***

In this section, I seek to introduce and analyze the varied literatures and political subject-matter in which the local appears and takes discursive shape. In part, I wish to impress upon the reader the importance of the local and localism to contemporary political discourse, as well as its heterogeneous origins which include but exceed neoliberalism. Furthermore, I seek to outline the two shapes in which localist discourse takes—the locality as refuge and as site of resistance. This outline will then be fleshed out in the following section, wherein I examine more closely the

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<sup>105</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1969).

discourse of the local to understand how the local can be conceived in such terms, and to identify the corresponding effects on our vision of politics.

Neoliberal actors have since the 1990s considered the local as a site to be known and groomed for service provisioning once overseen by the state. The World Bank, for instance, made a “local turn” following the failure of economic privatization and deregulation to steer economies towards development goals in the 1980s.<sup>106</sup> What development needed was not simply privatization but the decentralization of state responsibilities to localities rich in social capital. Following Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work*, the theory held that social capital was crucial for the efficient and effective workings of government. Thus the local and social capital entered the constellation comprising the development program, with the Bank commissioning a series of studies on each.<sup>107</sup> In these studies, the local becomes defined and known in contrast to the state:

the relationship between state and local institutions can be one of substitution, in which case a greater capacity and role of the state in local service delivery tends to reduce the role local institutions play in delivering services. However, a complementary relationship is also possible, whereby an administratively competent state increases the effectiveness of local

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Goldman, *Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), see chapters 1 and 6; Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke, “Participatory Development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism,” *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2000): 251; Richard Peet and Michael Watts, “Liberation Ecology: Development, Sustainability, and Environment in an Age of Market Triumphalism,” in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements*, ed. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (London: Routledge, 2002), 26-27.

<sup>107</sup> World Bank, “The Local Level Institutions Study: Overview and Program Description.” Working paper, Local Level Institutions Series, The World Bank, 1998, 4. See also the Bank’s “Social Capital Initiative,” founded in 1996, which produced a series of working papers: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/0,,contentMDK:20502531~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:244363,00.html>.

institutions by transferring resources to them and encouraging their development.<sup>108</sup>

States and local institutions can have a relationship that is either adversarial, wherein the state assumes “service-delivery” responsibilities that the local institution could or ought to provide, or an ameliorative relationship in which the state transfers power and resources to the local level. The state is the solution to the degree that it transfers its resources to localities and promotes the flourishing of local institutions like civil society groups. This, presumably, would develop the social capital necessary to unlock the political potential of local governance, which in turn would enhance the effectiveness of Bank development programs.

In addition to political decentralization, through “financial systems development” the World Bank has come to talk about and know the local.<sup>109</sup> As an excellent example of the spread and deepening of the finance industries under neoliberalism, “financial inclusion” has become a concept and motive in the development industry.<sup>110</sup> Microfinance and microinsurance have emerged as the means to weave the global poor into the financial markets.<sup>111</sup> In agriculture, these new industries seek to overcome the “isolation from wider financial systems

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 7. On the connection between social capital and development effectiveness, see Paul Collier, “Social Capital and Poverty.” Working paper, Social Capital Initiative Series, The World Bank, 1998.

<sup>109</sup> The World Bank, *Agricultural Investment Sourcebook*, “Module 8: Investments in Rural Finance for Agriculture,” May 2006, 3.

<sup>110</sup> The World Bank, for example, operates a “Global Financial Inclusion” database. See <http://tinyurl.com/krxwup4> (link shortened due to excessive length). Website navigation from <http://econ.worldbank.org>: Research > Programs > Finance & Private Sector Research > Global Financial Inclusion Database. See also Robert Cull, et al., “Financial Inclusion and Development: Recent Impact Evidence,” *Focus Note* 92, Consultative Group to Assist the Poor, April 2014. The Consultative Group to Assist the Poor is an umbrella group, composed of the World Bank and several national development agencies (e.g. USAID), dedicated to microfinance activities.

<sup>111</sup> On microinsurance, see Marc Maleika and Anne T. Kuriakose, “Microinsurance: Extending Pro-Poor Risk Management through the Social Fund Platform” *The World Bank Social Funds Innovations Notes* 5, no. 3 (2008).

development” characteristic of prior financing for agricultural projects (i.e., they worked through state bureaucracy).<sup>112</sup> Microfinance reaps the reward of having decision-making power in the hands of “institutions adhering to commercial principles” rather than government bureaucracies like ministries of agriculture or state banks.<sup>113</sup> Microfinance has the additional benefit of displacing power from the state into civil society organizations, e.g. NGOs that oversee microfinance or microinsurance schemes, or producer associations that group together smallholders into an effective socio-economic partner for investment bodies.

But structural adjustment foisted upon developing countries does not exhaust the neoliberal turn to the local. From the transformation of cities into entrepreneurial entities<sup>114</sup>, to “regulatory dumping” or the devolution of regulatory chores onto municipalities or state governments, with or without concomitant funding<sup>115</sup>, to the diffusion of market rationalities into the social fabric and the creation of “neoliberal citizens,”<sup>116</sup> the neoliberal project has radically altered American and British life. In the face of these developments, the local has emerged as the almost commonsensical and thus neutral site of society, economy, and politics. This is in no small part to the efforts made by neoliberals to naturalize the local. Gerry Stoker’s analysis of the Labour Party’s “new localism” exemplifies this

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<sup>112</sup> The World Bank, *Agricultural Investment Sourcebook*, “Module 8: Investments in Rural Finance for Agriculture,” May 2006, 3, 28-29.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 30. In regards to state banks, on page 20 the report notes “the shortcomings of state banks are well known, however, and their vulnerability to political influence, associated with a tendency toward subsidized and/or directed credit, has rightly made working with such banks unattractive for the World Bank and most donor agencies.”

<sup>114</sup> David Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B. Human Geography* 71, no. 1 (1989).

<sup>115</sup> Peck and Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space.”

<sup>116</sup> Brown, “Neo-Liberalism.”

discourse. To Stoker, the local is the “front-line” in the battle for governance, but it is also the site of empathy, trust, and an identity shared amongst persons united as a community.<sup>117</sup> These qualities of the local engender a “social capital” that produces a well-functioning system of governance. The local is thus the site of “solutions.”<sup>118</sup> The new localism would devolve policymaking and oversight to the local level in order to tap into this well of social resources marginalized by centralized government. Indeed, here Stoker borrows from Putnam. There, however, is an important difference in the two approaches. Whereas Putnam differentiates amongst regions in regards to their stock of social capital, Stoker makes a blanket statement blessing all localities with these desirable social qualities. Stoker’s new localism is the conflation of locality with the positive affect of community.

Jamie Gough and Aram Eisenschitz’s study of local economic initiatives in Britain does not, as scholarly inquiry, quite so much champion localism as much as represent and validate it as the expression of political centrism. “The great majority of local initiatives are politically Centrist, using *mild* forms of intervention *pragmatically* directed at perceived market malfunctions.”<sup>119</sup> The “agencies” created in such initiatives “seek a local political *consensus* and a *nondoctrinaire*, empirical response to an area’s problems. The most common policies informed by this Centrist approach are politically *noncontroversial*: advice, services, and funding for small firms; property provision; comprehensive mixed-use renewal; training in ‘real

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<sup>117</sup> Gerry Stoker, “New Localism, Progressive Politics and Democracy,” *The Political Quarterly* 75, no. 51 (2004): 117-118, 125.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>119</sup> Jamie Gough and Aram Eisenschitz, “The Construction of Mainstream Local Economic Initiatives: Mobility, Socialization, and Class Relations,” *Economic Geography* 72, no. 2 (1996): 178 (italics added).

skills'; stimulation of enterprise; education-industry links; and policies for technological innovation, transfer, and diffusion."<sup>120</sup> For example, initiatives seek to put the unemployed back to work through retraining and the development of local enterprise.<sup>121</sup> They focus on "...densely populated inner cities, *balancing* commercial property development with the social infrastructure necessary to *sustain* and renew disadvantaged communities."<sup>122</sup> I quote at length here to represent the consistent manner in which the authors themselves represent the local level and localist politics as mild, noncontroversial, balanced, and the product of a political consensus. Indeed, we might even note the ambiguity of their formulation "sustain and renew disadvantaged communities"—does this mean maintain their disadvantage? Or rebuild such communities, creating them anew?

This style of discourse is not limited to the UK's new localism; as David Hess' study of local economic initiatives in the US points out, "to some degree, localism reveals the doxa, or the 'peace in the feud,' that occurs between advocates of mainstream policies and the radical alternatives."<sup>123</sup> By this, he refers to the fact that the "bluest of Democrats may find themselves agreeing with the reddest of Republicans, at least on the strategy of local economic control as a means for improving the environment, health, and quality of life of their shared, place-based communities."<sup>124</sup> The local, then, is what stands between the mainstream and the radical, a central position that can gather a coalition of otherwise warring partners.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>123</sup> David J. Hess, *Localist Movements in a Global Economy: Sustainability, Justice, and Urban Development in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 51.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Hess uses the fact that this localism has articulated a diverse and unlikely group of bedfellows to warn against oversimplifying localism to any particular ideology or political position. Rather than being a simple expression of the neoliberal condition, market-based localism belongs in a long tradition of American “middle class radicalism,” dating back to the Progressive Era.<sup>125</sup> Though today’s localism is decidedly not about class, being proudly led by the petit bourgeoisie and middle class shoppers, it is nevertheless a “counter-movement that challenges the assumptions of the ‘Washington consensus.’”<sup>126</sup> It fights the major corporation like Wal-Mart by “refram[ing] consumption as a civic and political act.”<sup>127</sup> By shopping at small, local businesses, shoppers support owners who tend to be better stewards of the economy, more munificent towards their workers, and more responsible when dealing with the local environment. The fact that the local can operate as apolitically here depends on this particular (yet common) depiction of the local marketplace and local business owners.

With these examples in mind, it is thus understandable that some critics of contemporary localist projects (e.g. Julie Guthman) would be quick to associate localism with neoliberalism. But, I argue here that this is nevertheless a mistake—a diverse group of protagonists have pushed localism as a solution to political problems. Alongside neoliberal turns to the local, developments in “post-Marxism” have pointed the left in that direction as well.<sup>128</sup> Building on Ernesto Laclau and

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 18, 50.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>128</sup> The strange confluence upon the local by neoliberals and post-Marxists has been noted before, see Mohan and Stokke, “Participatory Development,” 247.

Chantal Mouffe's displacement of the proletariat from the center of leftist politics, the new left sought to broaden the scope of oppositional politics, shifting the emphasis from the national economy and socialist internationalism to emphasize the multiple subalterns repressed by both capital and disciplinary society.<sup>129</sup> "For post-Marxists, empowerment is a matter of collective mobilisation of marginalised groups against the disempowering activities of both the state and the market ... the focus then shifts to local political actors and a celebration of their difference and diversity rather than their common relationship to the means of production."<sup>130</sup> The local place promises to provide that missing ingredient—difference—which Left universals of class and capital threatened to erase.<sup>131</sup> As Arif Dirlik puts it, "the questioning of hegemony that place makes possible is not an alternative to, but an additional moment...in the questioning of the hegemony of homogenizing abstractions, this time directed at the very antihegemonic categories themselves."<sup>132</sup> That is to say, "antihegemonic" politics that relied on homogenizing notions like class were upended by the assertion that "classes and class relations are best understood in their place-based manifestations."<sup>133</sup> In short, an anti-hegemonic politics would represent and defend the heterogeneity of persons existing in the world's diverse localities even while attempting to articulate cohesion amongst such differences.

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<sup>129</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001 [1985]).

<sup>130</sup> Mohan and Stokke, "Participatory Development," 248.

<sup>131</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xi, also see chapter 2.

<sup>132</sup> Dirlik, "Place-Based Imagination," 168.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.



Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's writings on empire and the multitude follow in this tradition. Empire, "the new global form of sovereignty," is formed by a "network power" that has nation-states, international institutions, and corporations as its nodes.<sup>134</sup> Sovereignty has been displaced from the state and diffused into a "global order." The authors welcome this shift, for it does away with "any nostalgia for power structures that preceded it," such as the state, and refuses "any political strategy that involves returning to that old arrangement."<sup>135</sup> Prior strategies were premised on homogenizing notions like "the people, the masses, and the working class."<sup>136</sup> Within the post-Marxian tradition, such terms are to be discarded for they dissolve difference through assimilation or marginalize it through identity. In the place of these previous ideals, Hardt and Negri introduce the concept of the multitude.

The multitude continues the internationalist tradition that had defined socialism, but does so in a way that emphasizes difference and "singularity." "The multitude," they say, "is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity," such as the proletarian. It incorporates "different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of these singular differences"<sup>137</sup> But the multitude does, as an international force, seek to cohere. The authors seek the

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), xii.

<sup>135</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>136</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xiv.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

“possibility that, while remaining different, we discover the commonality that enables us to communicate and act together.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, there must be something in common that can articulate, to use Laclau and Mouffe’s term, this disparate non-group into something that holds together.

The authors seem to be of two minds regarding the place of the local within this push towards achieving “multitude.” In *Empire*, they unequivocally reject the idea of that we should put our hope in the “localization of struggles” or in “place-based movements.” In their estimation, a localist leftist strategy “seems to be entirely reactive ... although we admire and respect the spirit of some of its proponents, [it] is both false and damaging.”<sup>139</sup> First, they argue that the local is built on a false dichotomy with the global, that local identities are not formed nor can stand apart from global forces. Second, they argue that localities cannot successfully “go it alone” in their resistance to Empire. They conclude that “it is false...to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense *outside* and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire.”<sup>140</sup> Third, their broader message is that Empire, while projecting power globally, also provides the milieu for a globalized response by the “multitude.” Detached localized struggles would not tap into this potential.

On the other hand, in *Multitude* their discussion of the potentiality and workings of the multitude depicts the local in terms similar to those they condemn

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>139</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 44.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 45.

in *Empire*.<sup>141</sup> The multitude, they say, is a process of “becoming common” out of “the singularity of local human contexts ... This commonality and singularity defines what we called the flesh of the multitude.”<sup>142</sup> Localities are constitutive of the multitude for they provide the “singularity” (difference) that lies at its base. Furthermore, it is through local struggle against exploitation and expropriation that commonalities are formed in place and across space.<sup>143</sup>

Revolts mobilize the common in two respects, increasing the intensity of each struggle and extending the struggle to other struggles. Intensively, internal to each local struggle, the common antagonism and common wealth of the exploited and expropriated are translated into common conduct, habits, and performativity ... Extensively, the common is mobilized in communication from one local struggle to another.<sup>144</sup>

The assumption here is that localities are discrete sites that bear/are constituted by social commonalities and rebellions. Better, individual place-based rebellions form the basis for multitude, and thus the basis of resistance to Empire. In *Empire*, they follow Appadurai’s reading of the local to reject localist movements in part for essentializing the local, for not admitting its contingencies nor its permeability to broader power structures. In *Multitude*, they privilege the local as the site of “singularity,” commonality, and resistance. I suggest that the tension between these two texts reflects the difficulty scholars have, including those who critically reflect

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<sup>141</sup> As a caveat, it is clear that the authors in *Multitude* do not endorse movements circumscribed by place, given that they expect each singular locality to link across space with other localities to form a common force.

<sup>142</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 211-12.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 212-13.

on localism, as Hardt and Negri do in *Empire*, in envisioning a political future without being local(ist).

In the context of development and post-colonialism, the pursuit of difference has shifted some scholars' attention to the local and indigenous, precisely the "place-based" politics critiqued in *Empire*. For instance, scholars and activists have built the concept of "local knowledge" in order to valorize different ways of knowing/being-in-the-world against the incursions of hegemonic discourses such as science and development.<sup>145</sup> Arturo Escobar's work in Colombia is a good representation of the genre. In *Territories of Difference*, Escobar highlights the efforts of local, indigenous Colombians to build and protect their own sense of "territory," including local systems of knowledge and material reproduction.<sup>146</sup> The concern common to this area of inquiry is to represent and maintain difference in the face of totalizing national and international forces, including the state, international capital, and Western ways of knowing the world (science). As Escobar puts it, "the defense of local knowledge proposed here is both political and epistemological, arising out of the commitment to an anti-essentialist discourse of difference."<sup>147</sup> The local stands for difference: different knowledge and therefore different way of being. Around that difference, locals cohere their resistance to impositions from the state and international actors.

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<sup>145</sup> Raymond L. Bryant, "Power, Knowledge and Political Ecology in the Third World: A Review," *Progress in Physical Geography* 22, no. 1 (1998).

<sup>146</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>147</sup> Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places," 157.

Similarly, in *Seeing Like a State* James Scott depicts a centuries-long battle between forces of centralization and localities seeking to defend local knowledge and practice (*metis*). In *metis* Scott refers to the various knowledges born out of the “art of locality”—or the specific, practical knowledge necessary to live in a place. Across space, *metis* translates into patchwork quilt of different local practices and knowledges unintelligible to larger bodies like the state. For the state, this hodgepodge is an impediment to central governance, thus the state seeks “the destruction of *metis* and its replacement by standardized formulas legible only from the center.”<sup>148</sup> The result of this process is friction between the state and localities who resist outside impositions. Scott illustrates this tendency with two historical examples, first the long effort of the French monarchy to standardize measures across its territory (notably, each was fended off until Napoleon succeeded in imposing the metric system. Even then, thanks to the attachment subjects had toward their particular systems of measures, Scott tells us that the metric system remained “more a part of *le pays légal* than of *le pays réel*.”)<sup>149</sup> In another example, Scott narrates the friction between “modernist” urban planners and residents, the former whom wish to erect a rigid, rational city and the latter who undermine these agendas in a variety of ways. By comparing the Brasilia of the urban planners to the “unplanned” Brasilia of actual reality, those zones wherein residents escaped the

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<sup>148</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 335.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, also 47-49.

planned guidelines of the city to erect their own spaces and modes of living, Scott makes the case of the inevitable nature of local resistance to central planning.<sup>150</sup>

Through these texts we come to know the local as a site of resistance to extra-local powers like the state, bureaucracy, capital, etc. That said, these simplifications of the local are not representative of all those who advocate for localist politics and projects. What I term *ambiguous localism* recognizes that the local is not a static place in the geographical register with a common set of characteristics, whether positive, negative, or neutral, rather that it is a problematic space that can harbor many types of politics. For example, the World Bank's study of social capital subtly alludes to this possibility. The pursuit of social capital (in research and practice) is an admission that such stocks of capital may vary—some localities may be better suited for local governance than others. The Bank's intelligentsia have not treated the local itself as an unproblematic terrain, rather than one to be known and molded. On the other side, eco-localists like Timothy Luke warn that “loyalties to community, ecoregion or place could become, but should not become, lines of cultural conflict or group warfare,” including “racism, provincialism, xenophobia, sexism and class hatreds.”<sup>151</sup> Similarly, Escobar points out that:

... “place” and “local knowledge” are no panaceas that will solve the world's problems. Local knowledge is not pure or free of domination; places might have their own forms of oppression and even terror; they are historical and connected to the wider world through relations of power, and in many ways

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>151</sup> Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 205.

determined by them. The defense of local knowledge proposed here is both political and epistemological, arising out of the commitment to an anti-essentialist discourse of difference.

Indeed, we have persuasive studies connecting social and environmental dislocations produced within the free market to the genesis of conservative or “defensive” political localisms. For example, David Harvey notes the connection between the disintegration of American cities in the 1970s and 80s and the securitization of affluent neighborhoods.<sup>152</sup> NIMBYism is another useful example, especially in cases wherein affluent communities can redistribute or distance environmental ills onto marginal communities.<sup>153</sup> These are conservative reactions in that they attempt to shore up borders that maintain and represent historical inequalities (“clean, safe neighborhoods”).

What is notable about ambiguous localism is that in spite of a general awareness of the sometimes reactionary, conservative quality of localities, one returns to extoll the virtues of the local. Note the manner in which the quotation from Escobar above proceeds rather swiftly from warning us over the ambiguities of the local to an assertion that localism is a legitimate political commitment. Localities may be ambiguous, but at the end of the day localists seeks to validate the local in some way. The political commitments held by these scholar-activists only seem to

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<sup>152</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 320-24.

<sup>153</sup> Thomas Princen, “Distancing: Consumption and the Severing of Feedback,” in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

be realizable in the locality, which necessitates emptying, in the last instance, the locality of potentially problematic characteristics.

I propose we can learn from these examples that the local has become important to the contemporary political imaginary, across a variety of politics, and, that it has heterogeneous origins, not being merely an artifact of neoliberalism.

Advocates of neoliberal policies like Stoker represent the local as the commonsensical, obvious place for governance, given its attributes of community and immediacy. In this sense, the local is the calm in the storm, simply waiting to be set free from the state. Similar to Stoker, Scott represents the local vis-à-vis the state, indeed the same central, bureaucratic, overbearing body that neoliberals deride. But Scott's localities are sites of history, difference, and resistance—attributes that would be foreign to Stoker's analysis. Furthermore, both Scott and Escobar place the state in the context of development. This enables Escobar to contrast the local with not just the national state, but also the entire neocolonial cocktail of science, corporations, states, and international institutions. In pursuit of a post-colonial politics, Escobar zeroes in on place-based movements. The local then becomes a ground, akin to Hardt and Negri's analysis in *Multitude*, for resistance to imperial powers. Since many of these powerful forces, including the state, science and development, predate the neoliberal project and continue, to some degree, to stand outside of it, it would be an error to reduce localism to a reaction against neoliberalism. The local is more than a neoliberal response to the neoliberal condition, but a product of a complex set of heterogeneous historical forces.



More important is the manner in which localism constricts one's ability to see politics. As calm in the storm, the locality admits no inner politics, power relations and corresponding struggles. As site of resistance to outside power, the locality becomes a space of bonding, of common identity and epistemology. A variety of political projects turn to the local precisely because it brooks no political questions. As Wendy Brown puts it, "one sure sign of a depoliticizing trope or discourse is the easy and politically crosscutting embrace of a political project bearing its name."<sup>154</sup> Within localist politics, at best we get what I have called ambiguous localism, wherein scholars admit to the political contingency of the local and yet return to the concept, asking it to fulfill some political purpose. What remains to be explained is the origin of the apolitical character of the local, or to put it another way, what precisely is so enchanting about the concept. In the next section, I seek to read localist literature for a grammar that abets the production of the local as an apolitical space.

### ***A grammar of the local***

By a "grammar" of the local I refer to the politically derived, social discursive structures that guide our use of the term. First, and most obviously, by arguing that these structures are social I reject the idea that the local can be defined asocially, such as through geography or ecology.<sup>155</sup> Second, by discursive structures I mean

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<sup>154</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>155</sup> Scholars have long cautioned against geographical determinism. For instance, Harvey warns us that we must treat place as a social construction else we risk fetishizing localities, regions, states, etc. See Harvey, *Justice*, 320.

the modifiers, descriptors, and contexts that lend it meaning. The signifier local in-and-of-itself contains no information but only becomes known and potent through these ulterior terms. We can approach the local “negatively” or through juxtaposition to other concepts that inform us what it is *not* (e.g. the global).<sup>156</sup> Indeed, juxtaposition to the global frequently informs localist literature. Furthermore, we can read for the “supplements” that lend the local “positive” content, in other words, qualities that purport to define it from within.<sup>157</sup> Here I will investigate localist literatures for both the negative and positive construction of the local. Lastly, I argue that political commitments rather than neutral qualities of the local direct its negative definition and discursive supplementation. For example, the common conflation of the local with community has nothing to do with the qualities of either but rather the politics of the speaker. We could ask the speaker certain rhetorical questions to pursue the point: why need community be local?<sup>158</sup> Why should we think of individual localities in terms of community rather than difference?<sup>159</sup>

Sketching a grammar of the local requires investigating the specific usage of the term in the various contexts in which it arises. Towards this end, I select and investigate texts written by scholar-activists working on the local. I have attempted to sample widely so as to represent and reflect upon the various registers in which the local operates. In investigating these various contexts in which scholars invoke

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<sup>156</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959), 116-17.

<sup>157</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 144-45.

<sup>158</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 1.

<sup>159</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapter 8.

the local—literatures on the state, globalization, development, neoliberalism, urban politics, environmentalism and ecology—I have identified three “registers” in which the term operates: the phenomenal, singular, and hermeneutic. This is a loose but useful schema, intended to (a) indicate the core and diverse connotations carried by the local in discourse, (b) connect these connotations to their political origins, and (c) indicate the manner in which they abet the anti-politics of the local.

### *Local as the phenomenal*

One of the most common registers—or collection of signifiers—that helps us make sense of the local is the “phenomenal.” In this register, the local is that which is direct, immediate, and perceived; it is also the site of embodiment, materiality, and (through sense perception) affect. This register of the local is common to a great variety of applications.

Ethnography is a key source for this understanding of the local. As Escobar notes, the aim of “...ethnographers is to underscore the cultural processes through which places are rendered meaningful by looking at local knowledge, localized expressions, language, poetics and performance. How do people encounter places, perceive them, and endow them with significance?”<sup>160</sup> In ethnographic study, the local is where one interacts physically with the social and material environment, and such interactions generate the artifacts (knowledge, language, action) that make a culture. Similarly, Arjun Appadurai’s study of the co-production of globalization

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<sup>160</sup> Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places,” 151.

and locality emphasizes the phenomenal character of the local. For convenience, I'll restate the aforementioned quote here.

I see [locality] as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts. This phenomenological quality, which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality, and reproducibility, is the main predicate of locality as a category (or subject) that I seek to explore.<sup>161</sup>

The social qualities of the local are phenomenal in origin, specifically the *immediate*, face-to-face relationships found in the local place. Immediacy implies that nothing serves to mediate social interaction at this level aside from the “technologies” of social interaction that had been previously developed in this place. Social immediacy produces certain kinds of “agency” and “sociality” that define the place as local and make it distinct to other localities, generating the “relativity of contexts” of which Appadurai speaks.<sup>162</sup>

The immediacy of the local enables contrasts with the national and global. For instance, Manuel Castells in his panoramic *The Power of Identity* argues that local politics have arisen as a result of the failure of national politics to counteract the negative effects of globalization. He states, “...the failure of proactive movements and politics (for example, the labor movement, political parties) to counter

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<sup>161</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 178.

<sup>162</sup> Similarly, Ulf Hannerz argues that “the underlying assumption...is that culture flows mostly in face-to-face relationships, and that people do not move around much. Such an assumption serves us well enough in delineating the local as an ideal type.” Hannerz, “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,” 238-39.

economic exploitation, cultural domination, and political oppression had left people with no other choice but either to surrender or to react on the basis of the most immediate source of self-recognition and autonomous organization: their locality.”<sup>163</sup> Being ‘in place’ enables or engenders identity (“self-recognition”) and the pursuit self-governance (“autonomous organization”). In other words, identity and resistance are made possible through the social immediacy of the locality. This line of thinking is central, for instance, to food locavorism.

If scholars working within the context of globalization investigate the local as the site of social immediacy, so too do scholars working within political ecology associate the local with ecological immediacy. Upon this assumption rests the idea of “local knowledge,” which has become a key element constituting our conception of the local. The locality is where humans have physical, intimate, and immediate interactions with nature, stimulating an episteme and praxis unique to that place, which then becomes traditional and self-referential as it passes from one generation to the next. In other words, it generates particular kinds of knowledge that translate directly into how local denizens interact with the land, especially as it pertains to their own material reproduction, as well as how these persons understand themselves (as, say, a distinct people or culture). As Ursula Heise puts it:

More broadly, a fundamental investment in a particular kind of ‘situated knowledge,’ the intimate acquaintance with local nature and history that develops with sustained interest in one’s immediate surroundings, recurs across otherwise quite different discourses. This type of knowledge is often

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<sup>163</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 65.

portrayed as arising out of sensory perception and physical immersion, the bodily experience and manipulation of nature, rather than out of more abstract or mediated kinds of knowledge acquisition.<sup>164</sup>

The phenomenal qualities of the local—the site of sense perception, embodiment, immersion—thus translate into a particular way of knowing and being in the world. This is central to Scott's concept of *metis*, the power of which “depends on an exceptionally close and astute observation of the environment.”<sup>165</sup> The locality, as a place experienced phenomenally, promises precisely this opportunity to have intimate familiarity with the environment. To postcolonial scholars like Escobar, the value of such embodied knowledge is twofold—it generates social diversity and builds “cultural ecology,” or knowledge specific to a culture that enables it to interact with the ecosystem in a sustainable manner.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, J.K Gibson-Graham's localism likens “being-in-place” with care for one's surroundings. In the locality the individual is “embodied,” is physically immediate, and merges with the environment. Such embodiment and connection, the authors argue, enables the person to be “affected” by their surroundings, stimulating a sense of belonging and stewardship. In the local space one can “listen to [the] country” and learn new ways to care for themselves, the land and community.<sup>167</sup>

More prosaically, many connect local knowledge to environmental management. “A recurring theme in political ecology is the potential importance of

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<sup>164</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 30.

<sup>165</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 324.

<sup>166</sup> Roger M. Keesing, “Theories of Culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1974): 75; Peet and Watts, “Liberation Ecology,” 4.

<sup>167</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene,” *Antipode* 41, no. s1 (2010): 324, 330.

‘indigenous knowledge’ to environmental management issues. The general argument is that such knowledge is usually based on intimate and prolonged interaction with a given set of biophysical conditions, and that, as a result, local people in possession of that knowledge are often best placed to understand and regulate those conditions.”<sup>168</sup> This argument is most often applied to the Third World though it need not be exclusive to this terrain. For instance, in his polemic against American industrial agriculture, Wendell Berry defends the virtues of local knowledge. “To treat every field, or every part of every field, with the same consideration is not farming but industry. Kindly use depends upon intimate knowledge, the most sensitive responsiveness and responsibility.”<sup>169</sup> Local knowledge depends upon being sensitive—perceptive—to the land, a facility which once developed leads to stewardship, or the right caring for the land. Caring for the earth thus requires us to be impacted by it physically, to be intimate with its processes, which requires a level of immediacy that can only be attained by being “local.”

To these authors—particularly Scott, Escobar, and Gibson-Graham—the local may engender particular ways of being and knowledge that act in defense of threatened peoples and places. But the phenomenal local works just as fluently within the projects of powerful extra-local actors, including the state, international institutions, and corporations. Neoliberal decentralization projects operate under the assumption that the local is, as Merilee Grindle puts it, the “front-line” in the

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<sup>168</sup> Bryant, “Power, Knowledge and Political Ecology,” 89.

<sup>169</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (Berkeley: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 31.

battle for efficient, lean governance.<sup>170</sup> As neoliberalism reforms citizens into consumers whose interaction with the state takes the form of service consumption, the local becomes the site where provisioning is immediate. Understanding how to build and maintain social capital so as to make the most of this immediacy is the neoliberal's task. State and internationally-led conservation and biodiversity projects increasingly integrate local knowledge into their planning, perhaps equally driven by the utility of local immediacy as much as by the threat of it.

Indeed, the first installment of the World Bank "IK Notes" on indigenous knowledge notes the manner in which local knowledge enables self-reliance on the part of communities who fall back upon it when external projects threaten to marginalize them.<sup>171</sup> Premised in the results from the trials and errors of daily life, local knowledge becomes routinized, taken for granted, and parochial.<sup>172</sup> It can be a strong adversary against natural resource conservation projects that attempt to impose foreign models and modes.<sup>173</sup> The call for "participatory development" is thus in part premised on the idea that the immediate knowledge of local life grants the indigenous a mode of resistance that must be overcome through cooptation. What is celebrated by Escobar or Scott is problematized by development planners. Local knowledge and culture becomes an instrument to be internalized into the

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<sup>170</sup> Merilee S. Grindle, *Going Local: Decentralization, Democratization, and the Promise of Good Governance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 9; Stoker, "New Localism," 117.

<sup>171</sup> Paula Donnelly Roark and Jeri Larson, "Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview," *World Bank IK Notes* no. 1 (October 1998), <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/iknt1.pdf>.

<sup>172</sup> Hareya Fassil, "A Qualitative Understanding of Local Traditional Knowledge and Medicinal Plant Use," *World Bank IK Notes* no. 52 (January 2003): 2, <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/iknt52.pdf>.

<sup>173</sup> Roark and Larson, "Indigenous Knowledge Systems," 1.



sustainable development project.<sup>174</sup> Towards that end, the World Bank has made efforts to “standardize these resources, collecting and disseminating local knowledges through centralized databases.”<sup>175</sup> The *IK Notes* series is one example of this effort. Interestingly, the World Bank stands out as an actor that treats the local as a political problem—how to organize potentially unwilling subjects into effective tools for development.

In sum, what defines the local in this register is the idea that the phenomena of interaction—social and ecological—are immediately produced and perceived by those participating. Upon this basis, scholars build the argument that the locality is the site of identity or community, unique knowledge and *metis*. Furthermore, these qualities enable the locality to be a site of resistance against outside incursions, whether the state, science, development institutions, or “globalization.” To some groups, such as the World Bank, this may be problematic; to others, such as those envisioning alternative or post-capitalist economies, they may be attractive. Either way, these ideas are formed out of certain historical-political conjunctures and are only sensible within them. For instance, the global epistemic field devoted to knowing and representing “local knowledge” emerges at a particular point in history and originates within certain political fields, namely, industrialization, development, conservationism, and post-colonialism. Knowing the local as such is made possible through, for example, the resistance of farmers to development

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<sup>174</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Constructing Nature: Elements for a Poststructural Political Ecology,” in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements*, ed. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (London: Routledge, 1996), 57-59.

<sup>175</sup> Marybeth Long Martello and Sheila Jasanoff, “Introduction: Globalization and Environmental Governance,” in *Earthly Politics: Local and Global in Environmental Governance*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff and Marybeth Long Martello (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 9.

planners, which can either be studied and celebrated for its emancipatory potential (Scott) or for being a roadblock to development goals (World Bank). The local can be filled negatively through the depiction of international or state institutions or positively through ethnographic accounts emphasizing the local as the subaltern space. Knowing the local as the site of phenomena and phenomenology—i.e., local knowledge—originates in the politics and scholarship of these actors. I suggest that the scope of these politics includes but exceeds that of neoliberalism.

By attributing immediacy to the local one denies the possibility that phenomena produced and perceived in place are mediated by historical and spatial (extra-local) forces. By omitting these specific histories of mixture and mediation, the local can become monolithic in ways that others ascribe to the state, capital, or science. This simplification lends itself well to creating local visions of calm and resistance. It makes the local the “easy” place to turn for those seeking community, heterodoxy, and resistance to the “spatial” or imperial powers like capital or science. Furthermore, the local becomes the refuge or site of repair for those damaged by these spatial powers. The necessary contingency of the local, as depicted by Appadurai, goes missing in these accounts. These same problems, specifically the omission of mediation, power, and politics, characterize the following two registers.

### *Local as singular*

Another key register in which the local operates is what I term the “singular,” in the sense that the local is presumed to be particular or unique. In aggregate the local stands for multiplicity or diversity, and is opposed to homogenizing forces like

science, the state, or globalization. In this discourse, the local is a unique articulation of particular features, both natural and social, building a considerable complexity. As Fred Curtis puts it in his presentation of eco-localism, “the local place—the specific geography of life—defines and is defined by its particular natural environment, culture, community, history and economy—none of which are replicable in a different location.”<sup>176</sup> Scott makes the case for *metis* in similar terms. *Metis* is the “art of the locality,” wherein practitioners practice their craft based on specific knowledge of the locality.<sup>177</sup> Given that each place is different, *metis* promises idiosyncratic knowledge. “Metis has no doctrine or centralized training; each practitioner has his or her own angle.”<sup>178</sup>

By stressing the uniqueness of the local place, one conveys the opposite qualities to the juxtaposed signifier. When Escobar seeks local models offering “alternative ways of organizing social life,” one may ask: “alternative to *what*?” The implication is that against the diverse localities of the world stands a uniform other. Escobar asks,

can we elevate place-based imaginaries — including local models of nature — to the language of social theory, and project their potential onto novel types of glocality so that they can appear as alternative ways of organizing social life? In sum, to what extent can we reinvent both thought and the world according to the logic of a multiplicity of place-based cultures?<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Fred Curtis, “Eco-Localism and Sustainability,” *Ecological Economics* 46, no. 1 (2003): 85.

<sup>177</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 316-17.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>179</sup> Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places,” 142.

The plurals here—imaginaries, models, novel types of glocality—all denote the manner in which the local in the aggregate forms a “multiplicity” that presents numerous alternative modes of being-in and knowing the world. Concern for this multiplicity stems in part from the political convictions of post-colonial scholars, including or especially those engaged at the intersection of colonialism, science, and the environment, such as Escobar, Scott and Michael Watts.<sup>180</sup> Intending to upend the asymmetrical power relations that characterize development and environmentalism, Richard Peet and Watts advance the notion of “liberation ecology,” which requires making Western science “particular” and valorizing heterodox and indigenous knowledges.

We find particularly suggestive the *hierarchical* relations between centralized power articulated through hegemonic, rational, ‘truthful’ discourses and the ‘mythological’ discourses of peripheralized and dominated peoples. By criticizing the modern belief in rational humans speaking objective science, poststructural theory opens a space in which a wide range of beliefs, logics, and discourses can be newly valorized.<sup>181</sup>

Here we find a near identical juxtaposition as that which Scott advances between *metis* and modernism/science. On one hand, a monolithic force acting across space, on the other a particular set of ideas and practices that can or do resist assimilation, a source of alternatives. *Metis* thus represents an open epistemological terrain populated by difference. Frank Fischer marries this open terrain with democracy,

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<sup>180</sup> Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>181</sup> Peet and Watts, “Liberation Ecology,” 16 (emphasis added).

arguing that the varied knowledges of ordinary citizens legitimizes participatory democracy. “Challenging the scientific expert’s methodological emphasis on ‘generalizable knowledge,’ postpositivist theory underscores the importance of bringing in the local contextual knowledge of the ordinary citizen. In this sense, the case for participation is seen to be as much grounded in epistemology as in democratic politics.”<sup>182</sup> If science privileges its experts and doctrines, invalidating heterodox ideas and its proponents, overriding democratic demands for equal participation, then the difference intrinsic to the concept of local knowledge fulfills the opposite role, validating the participation of everyone.

The “post-” aspect of these arguments denotes the manner in which these projects are reactions against extant political and epistemological marginalization, however broadly or sharply defined. The move to reimagine “ecosystem people” is one manifestation of this political-epistemological shift, wherein those who had been previously derided and marginalized as “backwards” due to their deep physical immersion in the ecosystem are reimagined and reintegrated politically as knowledgeable dwellers.<sup>183</sup> The epistemological argument asserts that those who have the most intimate contact with their ecological surroundings have a correspondingly deep and unique knowledge of it. The valorization of this particular and unique knowledge legitimizes demands made by local knowers for political

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<sup>182</sup> Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), xii.

<sup>183</sup> Kamaljit S. Bawa and Madhav Gadgil, “Ecosystem Services in Subsistence Economies and Conservation of Biodiversity,” in *Nature’s Services: Societal Dependence on Natural Ecosystems*, ed. Gretchen C. Daily (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 298. Cf. the Brundtland Report’s attribution of environmental damage to poverty.

inclusion and participation.<sup>184</sup> These visions of the local site are useful tools for those seeking to resist the incursions of an imperial force (science, state, etc).

While we may build the discourse of local positively by linking it to social movements and ecological practice, the local is also built in a negative manner, that is by denunciation of extra-local thought and practice. Scott's analysis of the "systematic failures" of Western agricultural programs in the Third World provides a good example. He argues that such failures stem from the

...historical origin and institutional nexus of high-modernist agriculture.

First, given their discipline's origin in the temperate, industrializing West, the bearers of modernism in agricultural planning inherited a series of unexamined assumptions about cropping and field preparation that turned out to work badly in other contexts. Second...the actual schemes were continually bent to serve the power and status of officials and of the state organs they controlled.<sup>185</sup>

Scott notes that the epistemological decision made by Western scientists to focus on single causal factors blinds them to the complexities inevitably found in place, particularly in tropical environments. Generalized techniques overlook the particular place in which farmers farm, including "its microclimates, its moisture and water movement, its microrelief, and its local biotic history."<sup>186</sup> As noted by James Boyce, the complexities of these places are reflected in the traditional

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<sup>184</sup> Tim Forsyth, "Social Movements and Environmental Democratization in Thailand," in *Earthly Politics: Local and Global in Environmental Governance*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff and Marybeth Long Martello (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 206.

<sup>185</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 263-64.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

polycultures of local farmers.<sup>187</sup> Replacing such systems with industrial food production—namely, monocultures—produces unintended consequences, including soil malnutrition, pest outbreaks, and disease epidemics, which have led to the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides.<sup>188</sup> The financial and ecological costs of these inputs make meeting development goals all the more unlikely.

By critiquing Western science in such a way—as uniform, simplistic, disconnected, politically coopted, and myopic—Scott conveys the antonyms upon the local modes of knowing and growing. These antonyms need not be explicitly stated to function as a negative device for filling the local. Nor must it be the author’s intention to perform this trick. For example, Scott claims that local knowledge is plastic, that farmers are “pragmatic” and seek knowledge from any quarter provided it assists their practice (contrary to the enclosed Western scientist).<sup>189</sup> He details the practices of traditional polycultures in an attempt to revalorize them. He does not, however, make any argument about the political neutrality of local modes of knowledge or the local site itself. But he need not do so for the West to function as a negative trope and fill the local with these converse meanings. The structure of our language fulfills that task for us.

In these texts, the politicized body or force stands outside the local. It is the negative other that grants the local its apolitical calm and positive affect as well as potential for rebellion. To the degree that the local becomes politicized, it is as a

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<sup>187</sup> James K. Boyce, "A Future for Small Farms? Biodiversity and Sustainable Agriculture." Working paper, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2004.

<sup>188</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 268-270.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 264, 331.

body of resistance to the imperial adversary. The particularity/difference of the local gives it a basis by which to resist the homogenizing foreign force.

### *The local as hermeneutic*

The idea of the hermeneutic not only connotes a manner of reading and interpreting, it also calls upon the idea of historical boundaries/tradition that constitute a stable social order.<sup>190</sup> Order ensures social legibility which makes possible identity, belonging, and empathy. Hence, I collect within this register those texts that treat the local as the site of stability, habitus, reproduction, and tradition; as well as community and its cognates: belonging, attachment, empathy, and transparency. This conception of locality is premised on a "...view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity."<sup>191</sup> Texts working in the hermeneutic register interface well with the singular and phenomenal, for understanding and community are made possible by the immediate, particular relationships found in the place.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> I am loosely following Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom hermeneutics is not simply a method of reading a text, but rather of experiencing and making sense of the world. This process of sense-making is steeped in history and the language-ideas-interpretations carried over by one's forbearers (prejudices). In other words, our discursive map is not the product of subjective thought or neutral analytical rules but is constituted by the historical context into which we are born. This history passes to us a hermeneutic "horizon," dividing the readily-intelligible world from that which we struggle to interpret. From this basis, I interpret Gadamer's hermeneutic experience, with its historically-grounded and specific horizon and practical reason, to specify distinct communities of interpretation and practice that reproduce themselves over generations and struggle to integrate or come to terms with ideas and language that come from without.

<sup>191</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 5.

<sup>192</sup> Similarly, Hannerz's reads the local as a particular culture born from the face-to-face relationships formed by persons rooted in a particular territory. Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," 238-39.



Dirlik's notion of "groundedness from below" helps encapsulate the general mood of these types of representation.<sup>193</sup> History and ecology anchor the persons who live in particular places to particular social structures, ways of being and ways of material reproduction. Appadurai frames these multiple senses of the hermeneutic in this passage:

Neighborhoods are contexts in the sense that they provide the frame or setting within which various kinds of human action (productive, reproductive, interpretive, performative) can be initiated and conducted meaningfully. Because meaningful life-worlds require legible and reproducible patterns of action, they are text-like and thus require one or many contexts.<sup>194</sup>

The "text-like" notion of the locality speaks directly to the idea of the hermeneutic, namely that the historical social and ecological relations of a locality make contemporary thought and action legible. To put it another way, the local is where we "*learn* to become social beings."<sup>195</sup> Those who belong to that place are steeped in this knowledge, it is their habitus, and such reproduction of place defines their community. Thus not only does local knowledge derive from local phenomena, as noted above, but from the historical basis upon which these phenomena are interpreted. These handed-down ideas and practices are routinized and taken for granted. But Appadurai calls to our attention to the unstable hermeneutic horizon, predicated on the presence of an "outside" that inevitably acts upon and challenges

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<sup>193</sup> Dirlik, "Place-Based Imagination," 155.

<sup>194</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 184.

<sup>195</sup> Robyn Eckersley, "Communitarianism," in *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, ed. Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103.

the border of the locality. "As local subjects carry on the continuing task of reproducing their neighborhood, the contingencies of history, environment, and imagination contain the potential for new contexts."<sup>196</sup> While the locality is the context in which action can take meaning, in which communities know themselves, and in which communities translate that knowledge into material reproduction, the locality is also embedded in a broader social space that may provide new stimuli, challenging historical modes of thinking and acting.

These interactions do not take place in a power vacuum. Deep inside the debate over globalization is the notion that global forces push through the hermeneutic horizon and upend local systems of knowledge and material reproduction. Defensive localism relies on the hermeneutic to define itself and cohere a resistance. From his ethnography of Afro-Colombian groups in Pacific Colombia, Escobar asserts:

...that people mobilize against the destructive aspects of globalization from the perspective of what they have been and what they are at present: historical subjects of particular cultures, economies, and ecologies; particular knowledge producers; individuals and collectivities engaged in the play of living in landscapes and with each other in distinctive ways.<sup>197</sup>

The historical roots of the locality form the ground upon which a defense of place becomes possible. This notion is shared by conservative thinkers, such as Roger Scruton, who have watched global forces erode the organic (local) community. He goes so far as to define conservatism through the local: "while socialism and

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<sup>196</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 185.

<sup>197</sup> Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, 6.

liberalism are inherently global in their aims, conservatism is inherently local: a defence of some pocket of social capital against the forces of anarchic change.”<sup>198</sup> We find here the same global-local dichotomy as in Escobar; additionally, Scruton contrasts the local with the anarchical, connoting the local with order and “home.” In Scruton’s locality, there is no ambiguity of belonging for the “shared love of our home ... is a motive in ordinary people.”<sup>199</sup> The trouble is “modernity,” which has eliminated legible bonds and reduced us to a “society of strangers.”<sup>200</sup> In light of contemporary social anonymity, we must redevelop the ties of affection that bind people across generations.<sup>201</sup> Perhaps we can interpret this tension within Scruton’s text—between the natural love of home of the ordinary person and the unnatural absence of hermeneutic bonds in modern society—as indicative of the broader problem identified by defensive localists. Localist politics seeks to stanch the loss of home by recreating the hermeneutic through the phenomenal setting. As Robyn Eckersley puts it, if we can return to “embodied, face-to-face” social relations, perhaps we can rekindle the loyalty and fellow feeling lost to cosmopolitan forces.<sup>202</sup>

From a very different perspective, Michel de Certeau conceives the local in a similar manner. Traditional communities ordered social relations, circumscribing the possible “tactics” we might use to produce individual autonomy. But there has been a historical break: universal forces have broken these local orders.

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<sup>198</sup> Roger Scruton, “Conservatism,” in *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, ed. Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Eckersley, “Communitarianism,” 103.

...the generalization and expansion of technocratic rationality have created, between the links of the system, a fragmentation and explosive growth of these practices which were formerly regulated by stable local units. Tactics are more and more frequently going off their tracks. Cut loose from the traditional communities that circumscribed their functioning, they have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogeneous and more extensive. Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere.<sup>203</sup>

Unlike Scruton's depiction, here the "outside" space does not represent anarchy but rather a universal technocracy—market as well as disciplinary-institutional forces that act at a distance to dissolve the boundaries of local communities.<sup>204</sup> The differential qualities of these communities aggregate to a heterogeneity that technological rationality erases. Thus for de Certeau, the opposite of the stable hermeneutic locality is not flux but homogeneity and order. Conversely, locality becomes the interstitial space wherein a defense may be mounted: it is the site of micro-resistance as individuals escape, even in the most seemingly mundane practices, the rationalities imposed from above.<sup>205</sup> Despite their different ways of conceiving social activity in the local—while Scruton sees the local in terms of social capital, de Certeau's locality is the interstitial space wherein individuals have

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<sup>203</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 40.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., chapter 7, "Walking in the City".

freedom to invent their own daily routines—both conceive “the local” in similar terms, as embodied by stable communities that internally structure social relations and practice. Furthermore, they are connected by a sense of loss—that universal-global forces are eliminating local communities and the sense of security and order that they provided.

This register also combats the notion that the local is somehow defined in terms of geography rather than historico-social relations. For instance, Scruton’s localism has no overlap with David Hess’ commonplace geographical definition: “in this book, ‘local’ will designate a geographic scale that is generally larger than a small city or a neighborhood and smaller than most American states.”<sup>206</sup> This conception of the local, asserted based on an ad hoc delimitation of territorial space, bigger than a city but smaller than a state, is sufficiently pervasive such that when we arrive Scruton’s formulation of the local as *national* (that is, formed by and for the nation), it is something of a surprise. As Scruton himself puts it:

...environmentalists and conservatives can and should make common cause.

And that common cause is local—specifically national—loyalty. Many environmentalists on the left will acknowledge that local loyalties and local concerns must be given a proper place in our decision-making if we are to counter the adverse effects of the global economy. But they will tend to balk at the suggestion that local loyalty should be seen in national, rather than communitarian, terms.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Hess, *Localist Movements*, 11.

<sup>207</sup> Scruton, “Conservatism,” 15.

Furthermore, as Scruton notes, “radical environmentalists are heirs to the leftist suspicion of nations and nationhood.”<sup>208</sup> Such skepticism of abstract, homogenizing forces has driven political ecology into an imagination of the local as one comprised by concrete, unique physical and social attachments. Eckersley summarizes this sensibility:

One of the driving forces of such local activism is a strong ‘sense of place’ – a deep psychological attachment to a particular place or locale, which encompasses all that dwells within it. It is the deep and intimate knowledge of, and attachment to, particular places (rather than abstract knowledge of abstract spaces) that provides one of the strongest motivations to act to defend threatened historical buildings, neighbourhoods, parks, waterways and other local ‘heritage’ buildings or ecosystems. Threats to transform the locality are tantamount to an invasion of self and community.<sup>209</sup>

I do not think it a stretch to interpret this passage as an expression of the desire for hermeneutic closure. Relatedly, reading this passage in the midst of tales of loss—of community, attachment, and history at the hands of anti-social, global forces—the question of eco-localism’s romanticism comes to the fore.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>209</sup> Eckersley, “Communitarianism,” 96.

<sup>210</sup> Eckersley, for her part, theorizes a green state due to her concern for the “many different layers of social and ecological community that cohere *beyond* the level of the local community.” But she may be an outlier in the midst of ecological thinking that emphasizes the local and explains and justifies such a decision through the hermeneutical register—see chapter 3. We might even begin to think about the idea of the “organic” in these terms, that is, making a connection between the today’s popular understanding of the concept as the natural/ecological (organic food), and the political understanding of the term as the historically-rooted (e.g. the organic society). Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 182; see also Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).

Equally important, this passage implies that the local is the site of care. Due to our historical and phenomenal attachments to place, it becomes personal, meaningful, and existential to us in a way that the not-local cannot.<sup>211</sup> The nurturer operates through a praxis grounded in the place she inhabits, unable to separate the health of herself, her family, and the land.<sup>212</sup> Such care cannot be practiced by those disconnected from the land and community, the care-giver must be produced from within this internal space in order to know its workings and needs.<sup>213</sup> Note Gibson-Graham's caring localism, which is practiced in one's own "country" (land). This land is legible in ways the foreign is not—"outside one's country the body's sensory and practical capacities are underdeveloped."<sup>214</sup> Perception and hermeneutic tie together. To make the most of one's ability to listen to and be affected by the Earth, one must be in one's own home.<sup>215</sup>

As with the other registers, a divergent set of processes and politics generates the local and then acts upon this constructed ground. The erosion of rural and national communities, the destruction of the Earth's ecosystems, the severing of people from their land by extra-local forces have generated appeals to the local as the site of home, tradition, identity, empathy, and care. Scruton's conservative nationalism, Gibson-Graham's communitarianism, and Escobar's postcolonialism couple positive affect with the idea of the local by building it through the

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<sup>211</sup> Eckersley, "Communitarianism." See also Robert L. Thayer, *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6; Omar Dahbour, *Self-Determination without Nationalism: A Theory of Postnational Sovereignty* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 210-12.

<sup>212</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 14.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>214</sup> Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene," 337.

<sup>215</sup> It strikes me that the opposite is true, that *unfamiliar* territory stimulates and develops one's perceptive capacities.

hermeneutic register. This, in part, requires deploying the hermeneutic in a relatively uncritical manner. Ideas like the nation, community, tradition, and identity must operate without being subjected to challenges that would undermine their ability to fill the local with positive content and positive affect. The task is to rebuild the local home in light of the storms raging around it.

### ***The local, politics, and political economy***

Authors of the local—those who produce a discourse that gives the signifier meaning—often depict the locality as a place of social and ecological immediacy, as being singular and/or representing difference, and as a site of legibility, community, and tradition. This enables the local to stand outside politics, to be an apolitical space, operating either as a refuge or as a site of resistance. In turn, this grants it a positive affect and rhetorical value for those seeking to pursue certain political goals (e.g. economic retrenchment, “alternative” economies). For instance, those pursuing the localization of economies can legitimize such a commitment through claims of community. Some of those seeking to fight state or international forces (science, capital, development) may lionize the local as the site of difference, others as the site of tradition. The resulting discourses of localism do not entertain the possibility that inequity, hierarchy, and division may taint the local, that “foreign” worldviews can permeate the local and mediate how we see the world and act in it. If, as with ambiguous localism, such possibilities are admitted, they are ultimately discarded. The allure of the local prevails in the end.



Furthermore, I hope to have demonstrated here that the presence and desirability of localism includes but nevertheless surpasses the neoliberal horizon, both historically and qualitatively. Rather than be an artifact of neoliberal social engineering, the turn to the local comes from many directions. This helps explain its ubiquity. But what of its strength? I would point out that the discursive registers—phenomenal, singular, hermeneutic—in which localists construct the local are mutually reinforcing. The overlap of these registers enables one to build the local into a formidable and enchanting structure, one wherein we find real, concrete connections to each other and the earth, but in a way that is both unique and traditional. Hence, the localist discourse is inured to the sort of “contingency” that Appadurai outlines and instead takes on positive, definitive qualities. Rather than be something to problematize and study, localities become political economic solutions. In the following chapter, we will see this is especially true for those in political ecology.

## CHAPTER 4

### PLACE, NATURE, AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Within green politics exist activists, intellectuals, and academics who define themselves negatively with regards to environmentalism, considered a reformist program that seeks, quixotically, to green the status quo. By contrast, these greens dub themselves ecologists (whether deep, social, or simply political). For example, take this quote from Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra, writing in 1984 on the ecological roots of the German Green Party:

Far more than protecting or repairing the status quo, which is generally the goal of environmentalism, deep ecology encompasses the study of nature's subtle web of interrelated processes and the application of that study to our interactions with nature and among ourselves. The teachings of deep ecology include implications for our politics, our economy, our social structures, our educational system, our healthcare, our cultural expressions, and our spirituality.<sup>216</sup>

More recently, environmental political theorist Andrew Dobson has argued that “environmentalism and ecologism need to be kept apart because they differ not only in degree but also in kind ... crucially, environmentalism is not an ideology.”<sup>217</sup> Rather, environmentalism “argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief they can be solved without fundamental changes in

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<sup>216</sup> Spretnak and Capra are cofounders, respectively, of the US and German Green Parties. Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra, *Green Politics* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), 30.

<sup>217</sup> Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

present values or patterns of production and consumption.”<sup>218</sup> Conversely, ecologism as an ideology requires a transformation in our metaphysics—how we understand our role or place in the world. The anthropocentric worldview characteristic of modernity, which treats nature as a collection of discrete materials to be harvested and instrumentalized for man’s purposes, must be overturned by a new “ecocentric” worldview. As Spretnak and Capra allude, to be “ecocentric” means treating nature as the origin, teacher, source of values, and the possessor itself of intrinsic value.<sup>219</sup> We owe our existence to nature, which exists before and after us. By studying nature’s “subtle web of interrelated processes” we can learn how we humans ought to live with one another and with the land itself. The end goal is to embed (harmoniously) human activity within the webs and processes of ecology, respecting each constituent part as we strive to ensure our own reproduction as a species.<sup>220</sup>

Ecology becomes political ecology when the scientist realizes that achieving ecological embeddedness would require dramatic changes in how we live in and use the earth, that is to say, our political economy. Dissatisfied with environmentalist attempts at reform, for instance ecological modernization (the technological greening of existing industry, popularized by Thomas Friedman and his so-called

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>219</sup> In the next chapter, we will see how Aldo Leopold’s theorization of the “land ethic” was formative of the notion of that nature is end in itself to which we have an ethical obligation. There are also Kantian lineaments to this notion of “end-in-itself”; ecocentrics extend this obligation past the human species.

<sup>220</sup> These ideas are found across the “deep” green canon. For academic treatments, see Dobson, *Green Political Thought*; Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*; Christopher Manes, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1990). Cf. Kerry H. Whiteside, *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

“Green Revolution,”), political ecologists promote a “ground-up” approach that would remake our life system.<sup>221</sup> Conspicuous in this tradition is the emphasis on political economic relocalization. Contrary to what one might suspect given the importance ecologists place on interconnection and holism, place-based variants of political ecology—visions of ecological polities founded in local or regional sites—have become increasingly popular, perhaps to the point that they have marginalized the cosmopolitanism that greens have long touted.<sup>222</sup> I suggest that this raises two questions worth pursuing: what brought about this turn to place (or, in other words, why are place-based politics so persuasive or moving?), and what are the ramifications of this turn?

There are, I suggest, three historical forces pushing ecology in this direction. First, the green movement’s longstanding emphasis upon decentralization, smallness, the grassroots, direct democracy, the commune, the idea of community, and the goal of self-reliance have pushed political ecologists to “think small.” These predecessors, however, do not invoke or deploy the concept of place as do contemporary political ecologists. This has come with the second force, the ecologist’s call to become “ecocentric.” Ecocentrism helped birth the idea of bioregionalism, at the center of which is the idea that the ecological place ought to determine and delimit social systems and politics. The ecological place therein becomes the protagonist—not only the active player but the virtuous one as well.

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<sup>221</sup> Compare Arthur P. J. Mol and Gert Spaargaren, “Ecological Modernisation Theory in Debate: A Review,” *Environmental Politics* 9, no. 1 (2000); David Schlosberg and Sara Rinfret, “Ecological Modernisation, American Style,” *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>222</sup> Jonathon Porritt, *Seeing Green: The Politics of Ecology Explained* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Heise, *Sense of Place*.

The third ingredient in the turn toward place is the American tradition of nature writing. Writers like Thoreau and Leopold have become icons within political ecology for the manner they operate as conduits to their immediate surroundings, narrating their place as a vivacious, precious world to be known and (in Leopold's case) protected. Through and in response to these three forces place emerges as a protagonist within green politics, with place-based political visions now commonplace. Only in place, it seems, can we achieve the social and ecological bonds necessary to found ecological polities.

One conspicuous result of this tradition, particularly found within bioregionalism and other ecocentric visions, is a fetishized view of ecological place. Nature found in place appears to irrupt into being, untainted by human forces, waiting for humans to take notice. Place promises a phenomenological connection with this nature, translating into intimacy, vernacular knowledge, and eco-community.<sup>223</sup> Ecological places are not always already social ones, formed in conjunction with human history, a mixed zone that is neither entirely natural nor anthropogenic, instead they are sites wherein we can be affected and guided by nature. In place nature delivers us the knowledge and ethics necessary to construct ecological communities. In part, I suspect that the turn to place has occurred given the now longstanding critique and devaluation of Nature, the work of feminists, post-colonial thinkers, environmental historians, and critical theorists who've detailed the manner in which the concept has been used to legitimate patriarchy,

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<sup>223</sup> See chapter two. Heise also makes mention of these issues in her book, see Heise, *Sense of Place*, 29-30. While we start with the same reading of place-based political ecology, my chapter here seeks to historicize the centrality of place, highlight its fetishization, and relate this to problems of political economy.

imperialism, capitalism, etc.<sup>224</sup> A new, enchanted subject must emerge under which humans are to become students. We will explore this through Robert Thayer's work *LifePlace*.<sup>225</sup>

A smaller number of greens—notably academics—have questioned the fetishized concept of place of the ecocentrics. Ursula Heise does so in order to advance or recover the cosmopolitan potential of political ecology, rejecting place-based forms outright.<sup>226</sup> But the majority, including political theorists John Barry, Peter Cannavò, and Timothy Luke, offer benevolent critiques intended to recuperate place-based political ecologic visions from their shortcomings. They set out to re-instill social relations within the concept of place, knowing that places do not always carry progressive or ecological politics, that they may instead carry steep power asymmetries and repressions. Yet rather than jettison place as an indeterminate, potentially dangerous idea, they seek to determine the *right* form of place-based politics. This is the political ecologic twin of the ambiguous localism described in chapter two: the political ambiguity of actually existing places is left aside as place is filled with an ideal vision. For Cannavò, place-based politics promises to regenerate “home,” a settled, familiar, nurturing political ecology we’ve lost in the political economic flux of postmodernity. For his part, Barry seeks a “green” political economy constituted by *oikonomia* and the relocalization of production and

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<sup>224</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005); Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>225</sup> Thayer, *LifePlace*.

<sup>226</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, 10-19.

consumption. It seems that only by devolving our political economies into distinct places (localities) can we imagine a green, humane future.<sup>227</sup>

There are at least two important ramifications from these arguments. As ecocentric political ecology seeks to push us closer to nature, to build a direct connection, affect, and knowledge of our ecological place, it in actuality effects a separation from nature. Nature found in place inevitably carries social history; by eliding this social history those like Thayer construct a reified nature that leads us away from the mediated reality of all ecologies. Only by recognizing and studying these mediations, the ways in which we act in ecology, constructing places, can we understand nature as it stands and our role with regards to its present state. This asks us to treat place *negatively*—as a problem and a site for investigation—and not as an outcome or goal. I suggest that pursuing a critical investigation of places gives us dramatically more insight into the nature of the ecological crisis, knowledge that will be useful in building a politics that generates the types of spaces that place-based ecologists conjure through reification.

Secondly, from a theoretical standpoint, when we theorize “place” and “place-based” politics the operating assumption is that place itself has certain qualities which somehow constitute in a particular way our political imagination and political economies. Thought and practice become epiphenomena of place. This verges on fetishism: the notion that place carries certain social or ecological qualities is, conversely, the separation of our conceptualization of place from the

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<sup>227</sup> Because the green literatures upon which this chapter rests largely uses the terms ‘place’ and ‘locality’ interchangeably, I combine them in my analysis and critique of the literature. For instance, Cannavò’s pursuit of the “practice of place” is described largely in terms derived from Barry’s writings on localist political economies in *Rethinking Green Politics*.

political economic relations that generate and operate in places. This must be inverted: our political theories must be derived from the ways in which actual places suffer and thrive (socially, ecologically) in the contemporary political economy. In this, I concur with Barry, who ironically argues “there are good reasons for recasting green political theory as a *politics of actually existing unsustainability* rather than a *politics for (future) sustainability*.”<sup>228</sup> Political ecology, I suggest, is dogged by an inadequate pursuit of negative, critical theories of existing political economic systems and an overabundance of positive, sometimes quasi-utopian thought extending from fetishized place. If in chapter two I hope to demonstrate the discourse through which localism depoliticizes localities and hides their inevitably mediated qualities, in chapter three I seek to demonstrate the manner in which place-based political ecology fails to see places as eco-social achievements to be studied—place as means to enhance our political vision rather than a fetishized concept in which our politics are to be buried.

### ***The turn to place***

Why is place-based ecology so persuasive? Upon what history does it stand? I will argue here that place did not emerge *a priori* out of ecology, rather it is a recent development within a social movement remarkably consistent in its concern for political economic scale. I come to this conclusion via a survey of “early” political ecologic literature, a survey sparked by a question: place-based politics *today* occupies a privileged position within political ecologic thought, but has it always? Is

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<sup>228</sup> John Barry, *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability: Human Flourishing in a Climate-Changed, Carbon Constrained World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.



it a recent development generated by an external shock, for instance, the postmodern condition or neoliberalism? Or does it emerge as a reaction to forces of anterior origin?

If the most basic lesson of ecology is that everything is connected, from power plant to atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> to ocean pH levels to oyster reefs, the emphasis on place within political ecology is a strange outcome. It shunts aside that which is radical about ecology, the fact that it forces us to think in terms of systems, interconnectedness, and dependency, challenging science, economics, and metaphysics alike. For instance, just as the political economists revealed that the division of labor bound every individual to all others – a socialized economy – so does political ecology reveal the specialized and essential services each member of the ecosystem contributes to the total functioning of the system, as well as the reliance of each part upon the whole. Ecology would, it seems, undermine the very notion of place, considering the fundamental lack of boundaries within the ecosystem. If individual species do not appear as distinct entities, given the symbioses that make their life possible (e.g. the gut bacteria that enables our metabolism), how could a geography be divided into distinct ecological-social places?<sup>229</sup>

The emphasis upon place in political ecology is therefore to be considered an artifact of politics and economics. The roots of this lie in the early (1960s-80s) political ecologic literature. Despite featuring authors and traditions often in

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<sup>229</sup> By contrast, consider James Lovelock's idea of Gaia, or the field of earth system science, which attempts to model the Earth as a total system of biological, chemical, and physical processes. Each reflects the logical conclusion of ecological thought.

contention with one another, one finds a common problematization of the state, industry, market, and mass society and a common prescription—decentralization, community, and “smallness.” Theodor Roszak’s scathing polemic against the universal “bigness” that dominates the social world captures the common spirit of this disparate group.

I believe there is a connection, one that becomes visible when we realize that both person and planet are threatened by the same enemy. *The bigness of things*. The bigness of industrial structures, world markets, financial networks, mass political organizations, public institutions, military establishments, cities, bureaucracies. It is the insensitive colossalism of these systems that endangers the right of the person and the rights of the planet. The same inordinate scale of the industrial enterprise that must grind people into statistical grist for the market place and the work force simultaneously shatters the biosphere in a thousand unforeseen ways.<sup>230</sup>

The critique distills into a simple argument: that the world’s social systems have become too big to be sensitive to the small. I will briefly demonstrate the pervasiveness of this argument, found in the literature of social and deep ecology, bioregionalism, and the platform of the Greens in Germany and the UK.

The concern for hierarchy and domination that motivates Murray Bookchin’s “social ecology” stems from the conviction that man and planet suffer under a common totalitarianism. The practical forms in which totalitarianism operates, “the city, the State, an authoritarian technics, and a highly organized market economy”

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<sup>230</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), 33.

produce a “repressive rationality” disseminating values of patriarchy, egoism, and guilt across society.<sup>231</sup> Bookchin reserves particular critique for the state, which “is not merely a constellation of bureaucratic and coercive institutions. It is also a state of mind, an instilled mentality for ordering reality.”<sup>232</sup> The state is rapacious in its attempts to “physically and psychologically [rearrange] social life,” to imprint upon “psyche and mind” its political epistemology.<sup>233</sup> The scenario here is a constellation of large, repressive forces that dominate society directly through rule and indirectly through thought.

Arne Naess, considered the father of deep ecology, places at the root of the ecological crisis a “global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature [that] is now encroaching upon all the world’s milieu.”<sup>234</sup> This “techno-industrial” system is particularly dangerous not because, as per Bookchin, it is overseen by the state, but because of its “largely *uncontrolled* character: developments proceed at an accelerating pace even though no group, class or nature has necessarily determined, planned, or accepted the next phase.”<sup>235</sup> The logics of growth and consumption are sufficient to catalyze the system, which as it has expanded to become a “global culture” threatens the planet. Though Naess does not call out the state in the specific manner of Bookchin, Naess rejects the socialist model for its emphasis upon “central administrative units,” as well as the centrality of class-based politics given the

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<sup>231</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books 1982), 89.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>234</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 23.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 24, emphasis added.

diverse bodies of persons damaged by the system.<sup>236</sup> In other words, the negative externalities of the free market are not remedied by central planning. One big problem need not beget another.

Green Party activists in Germany and the United Kingdom pursued similar arguments against nation, state, and market. German Greens saw the nation-state “as inherently dangerous,” arguing that this “enormous centralization of power is inevitably used for economic competition, large-scale exploitation, and massive wars.”<sup>237</sup> This reaction stems from Germany’s bloody political history, yet we find a similar one amongst the British Greens as well. Jonathon Porritt reserves special criticism for centralized planning, noting the manner in which it created alienation in cities and reshaped the countryside to the detriment of rural communities. Centralized power is a problem, for “the larger it becomes, the more likely that standardized, depersonalized methods of operation will increase the amount of alienation people feel.”<sup>238</sup> According to this logic, there is an inverse relationship between the size of government and its sensitivity to peoples’ way(s) of life.

These authors identify smallness—political and economic decentralization, specifically—as the solution. To Roszak, the monastery is exemplary of “small alternatives that have managed to bring person and society, spiritual need and practical work together in a supportive and symbiotic relationship.”<sup>239</sup> Bookchin and Rudolf Bahro, the German eco-socialist, exhort the virtues of communes. To the

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 157-58; Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1973): 96.

<sup>237</sup> Spretnak and Capra, *Green Politics*, 48.

<sup>238</sup> Porritt, *Seeing Green*, 88.

<sup>239</sup> Roszak, *Person/Planet*, 293.

former, the commune must be based within and integrated into the bioregion; doing so offers a reconnection with nature, and at a social scale that promotes “direct, face-to-face, protoplasmic relationships,” culminating in direct democracy.<sup>240</sup> To Bahro, the commune promises both self-sufficiency as well as spirituality; like Roszak, he emphasizes monasticism as a historical predecessor and model.<sup>241</sup> Naess, who had the thinnest political vision of the group, proposes autonomous local communities.<sup>242</sup> The German Greens—influenced as they were by Naess’ deep ecology<sup>243</sup>—followed suit. They advocated the decentralization of state power into autonomous communities that operated through direct democracy.<sup>244</sup>

I suggest that the “localism” of early greens, writing in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, was motivated by the “heaviness” of centralized power, not so much the ephemerality and speed of postmodernity nor the insurgent neoliberal project. Furthermore, this political ecologic push towards the community, the grassroots, the local and the bioregional stemmed from a *conjunction* of political and ecological thought. If the weight of the state, mass society and market eroded social and ecological fabrics, decentralization could provide relief. But this alone was insufficient: decentralization had to be paired with an alteration in our worldview. As Andrew Dobson notes, “taking ‘men’ (and the societies that have spawned them) as they are, decentralized politics seems ineffective and naïve.”<sup>245</sup> *In response, political ecologists argued that the necessary transformation of man would originate*

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<sup>240</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 336-339.

<sup>241</sup> Rudolf Bahro, *Building the Green Movement* (London: GMP, 1986), “Why Communes?”.

<sup>242</sup> Naess, “Shallow and the Deep.”

<sup>243</sup> Spretnak and Capra, *Green Politics*, 30.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>245</sup> Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 102.

*in a new relationship with nature.* To develop the ethic of cooperation and care necessary to produce good communities, as well as the knowledge that would preserve our own ecological basis along with the broader sweep of nature, we had to return to nature. As we will see below, nature acts as a source of values as well as knowledge. If the politics of political ecology pushes us to smaller corporate bodies, then ecocentrism pushes us towards nature, who would be our benevolent tutor.

But where do we “find” nature? Herein lies the pivot towards place. In my reading, ecocentrism is not interesting so much as a philosophical adversary of anthropocentrism but for its effect upon how we see nature, and where we seek to find it.<sup>246</sup> The development of bioregionalism, I argue, was especially important in producing place-based political ecology, particularly of the fetishistic variety that is so politically troubling. This becomes apparent when we compare two political ecologic texts, one from Bookchin and another from Kirkpatrick Sale. In Bookchin’s earlier text, bioregionalism plays a small part in his broader argument and project, whereas for Sale bioregionalism *is* the project. Notably, place only comes to the fore as an active protagonist in the latter.<sup>247</sup>

Bookchin depicts nature as a social system that operates through the interdependence and cooperation of its diverse constituents, a radically different (social) sphere by comparison to the hierarchy and competition of modern human society. As he puts it, “I must emphasize that ecosystems cannot be meaningfully

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<sup>246</sup> Cf. Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*; Whiteside, *Divided Natures*.

<sup>247</sup> Another fruitful text for comparison would be Naess’ “Shallow and the Deep,” which advocates for the localization of communities and economies, but does not push place as an actor in-itself.

described in hierarchical terms.”<sup>248</sup> Instead, nature is constituted by “unity in diversity” and operates through a “dynamic balance” of these interdependent parts.<sup>249</sup> Second, it is precisely our *estrangement* from nature that has kept these valuable lessons out of society.<sup>250</sup> To relearn true sociality, “we must now try to transpose the nonhierarchical character of natural ecosystems to society.”<sup>251</sup> Hence the importance of the commune, a socio-political form wherein we might come to emulate nature’s cooperative and egalitarian systems. Secondly, these communes are to be adapted to the specific ecosystem in which they are embedded. “Very specific forms of nature—very specific *ecosystems*—constitute the ground for very specific forms of society ... The recent emphasis on bioregions as frameworks for various human communities provides a strong case for the need to readapt technics and work styles to accord with the requirements and possibilities of particular ecological areas.”<sup>252</sup> If nature provides the moral guidance for a lost humanity, the bioregion provides the material setting in which we must integrate our economy.

Place for Bookchin isn’t a conduit-site wherein nature’s wisdom funnels into and alters the human worldview so much as a materiality constituting the basis of society, one to be known and channeled for mutual (natural-human) benefit. Beyond the effect on practical reason, attention to bioregions promises a philosophical benefit: “bioregional requirements and possibilities place a heavy burden on

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<sup>248</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 26.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>250</sup> Hence my inclusion of Bookchin within the ecocentrism camp, a somewhat heterodox classification since his overt anthropocentrism seems to disqualify him from membership. With that said, Bookchin’s insistence that the transformation of human society will come through the adoption of the essential qualities of nature strikes me as fundamentally ecocentric.

<sup>251</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 36.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 33, see also 341-342.

humanity's claims of sovereignty over nature and autonomy from its needs."<sup>253</sup>

Bookchin uses this insight to refocus historical materialism and extend Marx's idea that we do not make history under conditions of our own choosing. Lacking from Marx's account is the "natural history that enters into the making of social history," an "active, concrete, existential nature that emerges from stage to stage of its own ever-more complex development." Labor is not the father and nature the mother, the one active and the other passive, rather both man and nature are actively creating the specific settings in which humans in each moment must (re)act. The bioregion—that "very specific ecosystem" into which humans are forced to operate—testifies to this mutual constitution of the Earth.

With Kirkpatrick Sale's description of bioregionalism, we immediately intuit a different valence of place. First, place becomes the operative concept. Second, whereas Bookchin derives a general eco-social constitution from the (supposedly) non-hierarchical, interconnected qualities of nature—a macro view—Sale's communities, including their politics and culture, are to be determined by their specific bioregion. The bioregion is defined by "*place*, the immediate specific place where we live." By place he means "the kinds of soils and rocks under our feet; the source of the waters we drink; the meaning of the different kinds of winds ... the limits of its resources; carrying capacities of its lands and waters ... and the cultures of the people, of the populations native to the land."<sup>254</sup> Despite the allusion to human culture, the bioregion is decidedly not to be defined by human interests. The

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>254</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1991), 42.



bioregion is “a place defined by its life forms, its topography and biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature.”<sup>255</sup> Nature becomes our governor: “human social and economic arrangements” must be “shaped by and adapted to the geomorphic ones, in both urban and rural settings.” Thus, political ecology becomes the practice of “dwelling”—becoming able receptors of nature’s needs and wisdom by staying in place. “To become dwellers in the land, to relearn the laws of Gaea, to come to know the earth fully and honestly, the crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand *place*, the immediate specific place where we live.”<sup>256</sup> Note here the odd conjunction of “specific place” and the idea of Gaea. In many ways, Sale’s ideas are an extension of Bookchin’s. Like Bookchin, he argues that only in communes can we learn the necessary art of cooperation, absorbing non-hierarchical nature and applying it to human society. And, like Bookchin, he emphasizes reclaiming the virtuous practices of traditional societies. The major difference, I suggest, lies in the emphasis on place. Bookchin can be read as a theorist of place-based communities, whereas Sale’s bioregionalism marks a movement in the *conceptualization* of place as an active subject.<sup>257</sup> Herein, I suggest, place becomes prominent and problematic.

Thus far my answer to the question of the origin and persuasiveness of place-based ecology, indeed, its continuing relevance in the face of persistent critique, is two-fold: first, political ecology has always held a common concern over bigness and

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>257</sup> The somewhat tortured phrasing of the latter clause attempts to imply that Sale is not the sole driver of this move. Doug Aberley’s history tells us that bioregionalism has several authors, including Peter Berg and Gary Snyder. Doug Aberley, “Interpreting Bioregionalism: A Story from Many Voices,” in *Bioregionalism*, ed. Michael Vincent McGinnis (Routledge, 2005). Snyder gives an eloquent defense of place in “The Place, the Region, and the Commons,” in Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*.

a common proposition that the small-scale provides some relief, even solution, to the colossal forces plaguing modern society and ecology. Second, there is not a particularly long leap to make from advocating for small, confederated communities and a return to nature (a la Bookchin) to the idea advocated by Sale that by being-in-place one has effected this return, and can therein build the type of communities necessary for an equitable and green future. But that leap did need be made. Bioregionalism helped to cement place within the vocabulary and conceptual constellation of political ecology. Robert Thayer's text, which we will examine at length in the next section, fulfills this culmination.

I will conclude this section by offering a third force that has pushed political ecology towards nature-in-place: nature writing. In perhaps the most influential text written about the subject, Lawrence Buell argues that the key quality of American nature writing is that its authors treat the natural place as more than a static setting upon which human drama unfolds.<sup>258</sup> These nature writers are ecocentric for they depict nature as an agent, as a bearer of its own interests, and as a series of processes (rather than a flat milieu).<sup>259</sup> This is accomplished through "mimesis," wherein the author relinquishes the anthropocentric perspective for the purpose of channeling nature into text.<sup>260</sup> Importantly, Buell argues that mimesis is accomplished only through the "experience of place." "If the visions of relinquishment and of nature's personhood are to be realized concretely...surely

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<sup>258</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 85, 254.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 114.

these events must happen *somewhere*.”<sup>261</sup> Herein lies the importance of phenomenology – first, the idea that we can only know the nature we experience and perceive, second, the idea that perception happens in place.<sup>262</sup> These ideas lead Buell to conclude, “the experience of place may be the commonest avenue toward experiencing relinquishment as ecocentrism.”<sup>263</sup> In the American canon we have several examples of writers who seek to channel the “experience of (natural) place” into text, with Henry David Thoreau as Buell’s archetype. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writers like Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, E. O. Wilson and Gary Snyder have carried the mimetic, place-based form forward.

Developing Buell’s analysis further, Timothy Morton argues that “eco-mimesis” is a technique intended to conceal the role of the author. In eco-mimesis, authors narrate a nature scene in which they are in the midst of experiencing, with the goal of channeling nature such that the author—the subject constructing the tale—disappears, leaving nature to stand alone and for itself.<sup>264</sup> By removing the author, the narrative generates an immediacy between reader and natural environment. When this constructed ambience, whose construction is hidden by the realism of the depiction, stands alongside political analysis, it lends the overall narrative objectivity (via the realism of the depiction) and an aesthetic (via the

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>262</sup> This phenomenology is central to place-based ecology. Mitchell Thomashow makes this explicit, arguing that place-based ecology is warranted due to the inability of human cognition to exceed the immediately perceptible. *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 5. Similarly, Val Plumwood argues that it is in place wherein the “more-than-human” can communicate with us. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 230-31. Likewise, Thayer argues that our scaled-up living has “extended the geographic range of human impact well beyond the limits of immediate human perception.” *LifePlace*, 56.

<sup>263</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 279.

<sup>264</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 35, 54, 182-83.

romanticism in the depiction).<sup>265</sup> Narrating the place, then, does more than Buell asserts – place is not simply where one can *be* ecocentric and narrate ecology, rather these narratives serve an auxiliary purpose for the ecologist in their capacity as *rhetorical* device.

As a literary technique writing place is an instrument, though its instrumentality relies on the authority of the genre. That is to say, the genre of nature writing channels our desire for ecocentrism into narratives of specific places wherein ecocentrism can be practiced (by the observant writer) as well as learned (by the reader).<sup>266</sup> The authority nature writing derives from this transaction enables other writers, whether theorists or activists, to intersperse vignettes of the natural place into their writing as a means to naturalize their arguments—to strip their arguments of their contingent personal and social character.<sup>267</sup> If nature writing is a didactic device dispersing ecocentrism and its fixation on place to the reader, intending to cultivate within the reader a new “environmental imagination,” then the strategic use of eco-mimesis by theorists and activists disperses this place-based imagination throughout the wider green literature. Emplacement becomes ubiquitous, forming what it means to be green.

In conclusion, “place-based” ecology emerges from a sequence in intellectual history wherein place as a concept has been repurposed by those concerned with ecological issues. Stemming from a mixture of intellectual and political traditions,

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>266</sup> Heise notes that even if place occupies a privileged position within nature writing, not all nature writing is so myopic. In her fiction writing, Ursula K. Le Guin specifically sought to connect the ecological notion “everything is connected” to its logical end: a totally interconnected world where there are neither definite places nor individual species. See Heise, *Sense of Place*, 18.

<sup>267</sup> See Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 230 as an example.

including the green turn to “smallness,” the development of eco-centrism and its offshoot, bioregionalism, and the longstanding tradition and contemporary significance of nature writing, place has become a protagonist and subject within green political thought. Reprising the discussion of the phenomenal register of the local, I suggest, too, that place-based thinking in no small part relies on the ideas of phenomenology. While figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Martin Heidegger are almost entirely absent from the green canon,<sup>268</sup> the idea that in place we can experience, be affected by, and come to know nature stems from this tradition. It eschews the laboratory and computer modeling common to other environmental politics, such as climate change, for the idea that place offers direct connection and insight. The immediate experience of nature enables political ecologists to write nature, know its contours, and build the right type of polities.

### ***Place and political vision: Thayer, Cannavò, and Barry***

How do place-based visions of political ecology seek to constitute our political vision? To answer this question, I analyze the writings of contemporary scholar-activists Robert Thayer, Peter Cannavò, and John Barry. Each of these authors, I suggest, attempts to push us “back” into place, a lost site wherein we once

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<sup>268</sup> Heidegger appears in those doing genealogies of deep ecology, given that Naess had read and commented upon the former’s philosophy. Furthermore, the concept of dwelling in place is often traced to Heidegger’s essay “Dwelling, Building, Thinking,” though I suggest it is not a direct influence (that is to say, a text regularly turned to for inspiration, or one of repeated discussion) on political ecology. Today, of those working (loosely) within the confines of political ecology, philosopher Tim Ingold is perhaps the most directly influenced by the phenomenological tradition, see Tim Ingold, “Epilogue: Towards a Politics of Dwelling,” *Conservation and Society* 3, no. 2 (2005); Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 331-342.

sustainably lived within our ecology. Each problematizes contemporary social and economic practices, particularly the way in which our life systems are detached from our immediate place. Each identifies the locality or region as the appropriate site of governance for a polity organized around place. But I have also selected these texts for their differences. They are representative of the broader scope of place-based political ecology, dealing with bioregions, community, and political economy.

Thayer follows the bioregional habit of giving over to nature the ability to define our “life places” and bioregions, which exist “in place,” waiting for us to take notice of their logics and contours. Furthermore, he asserts that it is in human nature to be “emplaced”—to live a life circumscribed by place. Cannavò as a political theorist cannot as easily deploy and rely upon “nature,” nor does he see place as stable. Instead, Cannavò notes the way in which places and regions, even natural ones, are formed via human interpretation of their surroundings. Additionally, he argues that actual places are always temporary, contingent artifacts of complex social-ecological forces. Places are always in flux, always pervaded by the outside. Furthermore, he admits that places may harbor a variety of politics, not only those carrying political ecologic values. Despite these problematizations of place, Cannavò also conceives of place as *home* – as familiar, legible, stable, and supportive. Indeed, it is the loss of this “home place” that prompts his project. As such, I suggest his text is representative of the schizophrenia found within place-based political ecology, whose adherents occasionally admit the problems of place while simultaneously building a vision of the virtuous place. In this regard, Cannavò subtly hypostatizes place, substituting out the more analytically satisfying conceptualization of place,

one premised in place's contingency, for an idealistic vision of the home place.

Barry, for his part, swerves between the recognition that places are constituted by ideology (and hence, politics) and idealizations of place that risk making place itself an active subject, and as such, reifying it. Furthermore, when putting forward his own green ideology that would ostensibly generate the places he would like to see, he presumes that republicanism (his preferred polity) and ecological outcomes can only be brought about in place. This turn to the local is an artifact of the broader green emphasis on place, and the outcome is a closing of political vision.

In *LifePlace*, Thayer begins with a despairing account of contemporary society. We are alienated and homeless. We suffer a "shallow vision" premised on the global, on consumerism, transience, information, and technology. We have surrendered our wisdom of and affection for specific places.<sup>269</sup> We are "biosphere people" – the global biosphere has become our province, our material resources, including food, often coming from thousands of miles away.<sup>270</sup> Thayer captures this shift in vision and material practice with the concept of postmodernity, a state of "erasure of uniquely placed culture."<sup>271</sup> To allow his words to carry their full weight:

Much has been written about contemporary severance from nature and the loss of community, identity, purpose, and sense of place. Our places and communities have been usurped by machines, sprawled out by the automobile, homogenized by consumer culture, seduced by the globalizing

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<sup>269</sup> Thayer, *LifePlace*, 1-2.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

economy, trivialized by television, and disconnected from deep wisdom by the shallow superficiality of the 'electronic superhighway.' The evolutionary tendency of humans to attach themselves to place and to one another has been co-opted by a culture that feigns such an attachment through advertising but seems only to demand that we consume more, communicate frivolously and electronically, and care less. The academic world has compartmentalized knowledge and occupation while the corporate world has globalized the 'location' of business and commerce.<sup>272</sup>

Aside from the assertion that humans have a tendency to attach themselves to place and to form community, this is commonplace anti-globalization rhetoric. It is precisely in that intermediary sentence that the weight of the argument lies: the importance of place and community to human beings. He repeats this idea later in the text, that we are *naturally given* to living in "small groups that identify strongly with *naturally definable regions*."<sup>273</sup> Thayer's thesis is that "without a fundamental realization of the question 'Where are we?' human meaning is not stable, and the logic of our own being collapses ... to deeply comprehend *where* one is is also to know *who* one is and to understand *what* needs to be done."<sup>274</sup> In this place-based ecology, place delivers identity, purpose, and logic, defined in our stead by nature.

The answer to the postmodern condition is therefore quite simple. Thayer works through a series of "axioms" to demonstrate the solution: first, "people who stay in place may come to know that place more deeply," second, "people who know

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 55. Emphasis added.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 1.



a place may come to care about it more deeply,” third, “people who care *about* a place are more likely to *take better care of it*,” and fourth, “people who take care of places, one place at a time, are the key to the future of humanity and all living creatures.” These axioms culminate in a hypothesis: “that a mutually sustainable future for humans, other life-forms, and earthly systems can best be achieved by means of a spatial framework in which people live as rooted, active, participating members of a reasonably scaled, naturally bounded, ecologically defined territory, or *life-place*.”<sup>275</sup> This is Thayer’s bioregional philosophy: that by “returning” to the life-place, by laying down roots, we will come to know our place, we will come to care about our place, and we will then protect our place. Only through this return to place can we achieve this end and sustain the broader ecology in which we are situated and made possible.

If we are to integrate ourselves into specific life-places, or bioregions, how do we know one when we see it?<sup>276</sup> Thayer states, the life-place is a “unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities.”<sup>277</sup> Biologically speaking, the region is known through the “spatially distributed natural assemblages or associations” of life.<sup>278</sup> Of course, since we start from a postmodern position of ignorance-of-place, we will need assistance such that we can even take note of these biotic assemblages, geologies, watersheds, etc. In a similar manner to Bookchin, Thayer proposes

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>276</sup> Intentional use of cliché—the bioregion is to be immediate and perceptible.

<sup>277</sup> Thayer, *LifePlace*, 3.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 4.

indigenous people to be our modern guide. In other words, Californians should emulate the life practices of the native tribes of California (in the bioregional habit, he works from his own life-place in order to found his analysis, that being the bioregion surrounding Davis, California). As he puts it, "I now live within the memory-space of a formerly bioregional culture. I reflect upon these first peoples with an eye to understanding their response to our region and hold forth the hope of emulating their lessons in this bioregion once again."<sup>279</sup> But perhaps these difficulties are overstated: Thayer points to the numerous "relocalization" movements that are already putting this philosophy into practice, including community ecosystem management projects, community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and local currency schemes. Our desperate need for life-place praxis has already translated into action.

In sum, Thayer's introduction to *LifePlace* lays out a compelling call to action premised on an ideology of place. I suggest that it fits squarely within the broader social zeitgeist constituted by anxieties over identity, environment, and economic and political disempowerment. Furthermore, *LifePlace* is interesting as an academic-activist treatment, reflecting the convergence of his academic vocation with his participation in local projects.<sup>280</sup> One may be tempted to argue that as an *activist* treatment of a problem, the text should not be subjected to the same analytical rigor that we would an academic text. If the goal is arousing an audience to act, then perhaps the substance of the argumentation is of secondary importance.

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>280</sup> In that regard, it stands in select company, alongside other place-based activist-academics such as Hess, *Localist Movements*; and J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Post-Capitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

I suggest that this is not an adequate argument. A critical apprehension of this text helps us understand the attractions and shortcomings of political ecology as currently being discussed and practiced. This benefits not only greens seeking to sharpen political ecology into a more effective instrument, but also students of politics who wish to have a better understanding of the oppositional discourses at work in contemporary politics.

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable weakness in Thayer's account is its idealization of politics. For instance, he suggests that the root of the ecological crisis lies in our perception and vision (rather than, say, the structural imperatives of capitalism). The following statement is characteristic: "unless we humans can find ways to consider ourselves residents of natural regions and to clearly identify with endemic dimensions, limitations, and potentials of land, water, and other life-forms, we will not be able to live sustainably."<sup>281</sup> In this statement, Thayer is typical of the broader green literature than has for decades made the inculcation of "new values" a priority. If we read the statement positively, it states that if we *consider* ourselves residents of natural regions and *identify* with our place then we will live sustainably. What this sentence conceals is the difficulty of converting such ideas into practice. Our current political economic structure incentivizes some practices and deters others; our legal system makes some practices possible and others punishable. By way of example, one northern Californian native tribe, the Karuk, has for decades faced "institutional racism" wherein state regulations deny them the ability to pursue subsistence strategies that greens such as Thayer would likely dub

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<sup>281</sup> Thayer, *LifePlace*, 8.

sustainable and bioregional.<sup>282</sup> Under the aegis of state regulations, the manner in which they hunt, fish, gather mushrooms, harvest wood, and use fire to control undergrowth has radically changed. Certain traditional practices must now be carried out in secret for fear of prosecution. It is thus an irony that Thayer uses native Californians and their practices as exemplars for bioregionalism. Just as his account leaves out the question of political and economic power, his exemplars are suffering under the weight of these unequal social relations.

The omission of the political and economic power that constitutes places contributes directly to the ways in which Thayer reifies it. Place is defined by nature, both our own natural composition as well as the landscape around us. Human history, he argues, is defined by “social cooperation in place”: we are beings given to working on behalf of bioregions.<sup>283</sup> Strangely, Thayer fails to account for the manner in which the power of this natural drive-to-place is attenuated to the point that we’ve become postmodern—alienated and homeless. Precisely within the passive voice of “is attenuated” is where the human story waits to be told. Furthermore, and characteristic of the literature, Thayer fetishizes place by calling regions into being as if they actually existed in nature. Though Thayer attributes some human characteristics to place (in part, they are defined by language and cultural elements), place is subsumed within the bioregion concept and thus all places are

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<sup>282</sup> Kari Marie Norgaard, Ron Reed, and Carolina Van Horn, “A Continuing Legacy: Institutional Racism, Hunger and Nutritional Justice on the Klamath,” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*, ed. Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011). For another rich account of the violence done to native Americans through state regulations over forest use, see Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>283</sup> Thayer, *LifePlace*, 55. This is a strange sort of fetishism, one that omits the very ecological movement in which Thayer participates. If environmental social movements emerge out of the natural properties of human beings, what’s the point of political ecology?

ultimately defined by nature. The ability for political and economic power to define (or erase) place is obscured by tales of human evolution and the supposedly objective contours of nature. If bioregions are formed out of natural assemblages first and human assemblages second, humans are at best an adaptive force within an ecology. Indeed, that is precisely the point of bioregionalism. But it is also its weakness, for it misses the manner in which human beings alter ecosystems as well as the fact that no human being (or any other creature) operates in a place that has not already been touched by human influence.<sup>284</sup> If we derive any lesson from anthropogenic climate change, it is that the human touch is felt everywhere. We never perceive an environment that isn't already anthropogenically "denaturalized." By reifying place through an appeal to nature, including human nature, Thayer loses sight of the fact that humans interpret an environment that contains social history.

By contrast, Cannavò explicitly refutes this concept of place, particularly the idea that nature defines spaces/places. Instead, Cannavò argues that "ultimately, human beings must decide what natural characteristics and geographic features are most relevant in defining a particular region."<sup>285</sup> Region, and place generally speaking, are always a human interpretation of the environment. Furthermore, as we might expect from an environmental political theorist, Cannavò also fills places with politics. In Thayer's account, places are harbors from the postmodern, global forces surrounding them; with Cannavò, places themselves are not exempt from power. He approaches place with a "healthy awareness of how attempts to draw

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<sup>284</sup> Perhaps the *deep* ocean, for instance the limited ecosystems carried by hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor, is the exception.

<sup>285</sup> Peter F. Cannavò, *The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 234-35.

boundaries and assign places have led to rank inequalities and unchallenged tyrannies.”<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, contrary to Thayer’s more static idea of bioregions, Cannavò’s place is always in flux, a temporary achievement of forces in motion. As he puts it, “a place is an aggregation of things and relationships—human and nonhuman, social and ecological—that are tangibly cohering, at least for a time ... Places are temporarily created out of flows ... what we recognize as a particular place is a moment of relative stability in some of these constituents.”<sup>287</sup> If places are moments of solidity in the network of human and ecological flows, places are also embedded within these broader forces. “The boundaries of places are porous, ambiguous, and fluid.”<sup>288</sup> This view is quite similar to that of Appadurai, as outlined in chapter two.

But these problematizations of place do not hold for long. Indeed, they seem to be a disclaimer, for place stands at the center of his political thought. Cannavò declares that there has been a “crisis of place,” that our home places have been destroyed by “political and intellectual currents peculiar to modernity and postmodernity.” Over the past century, the state, technology, and the market, among other forces, have “abruptly altered or erased places without regard to their ecological and social significance and complexity.” These forces have eliminated disparate places, converting them into a flat, “abstract space” that is “alienating and illegible to those inhabiting it.”<sup>289</sup> Thus, despite an awareness of the contingency and ambiguity of place, Cannavò seeks to rebuild the “the practice of *place*. This is the

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 7.

practice through which we conceptually and/or physically reconstruct our spatial environment into coherent, distinct locales, or places.”<sup>290</sup> Why is this necessary or desirable? Because only “in place” can Cannavò conceive of *home*, which he considers a fundamental requirement for human life destroyed by the aforementioned forces. Cannavò states:

attachment to some place, together with some measure of stability in our spatial environment, is necessary for a fully human life. We are physical, embodied beings who need to navigate, make sense of, and feel some measure of security in our spatial world. We need some enduring coherence in our environment and we need to have some familiar, comfortable places that we call ‘home.’<sup>291</sup>

It is this supposed human requirement for home places, as well as the necessary connection between home and a specific place, that forces Cannavò to abandon the idea of contingent place. Place cannot, in fact, be allowed to be contingent if humans have an innate need for home—familiar, comfortable places. Later in the text, he will further describe home places as predictable, secure, stable, and legible; a zone where one is anchored and has identity; as well as where one has agency and some degree of control.<sup>292</sup> We might ask a question similar to the one we asked Thayer—if humans have an innate need for home places, how did we end up in our postmodern predicament of illegible geographies? We have a strange tension between supposed human nature and actual political economic history.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 9, also 18 and passim.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 28.

As part of the dance between place's political ambiguity and social necessity, Cannavò must admit to the dangerous politics places can harbor while also working to resolve these problems. Though many attribute to place-based thinking a variety of evils, "these abuses are not intrinsic to the concept of home. Home can provide a base for resistance or refuge."<sup>293</sup> How do we get there? To maintain this idealistic rendering of home places, Cannavò lends home another political concept not necessarily "intrinsic" to home, democracy. Places can eliminate the specter of reactionary, oppressive politics "by pursuing democratic processes that give voice to all inhabitants."<sup>294</sup> The ability to function as refuge seems assured by a democratic constitution since it presumably would give "voice" to all.

In his political ecology, this is important. For Cannavò, places must maintain a careful balance between forces of "preservation" and those of "founding," that is, socio-economic drives to expand our use of the Earth. The democratic character of the home place grants political space for both those seeking to preserve and those seeking to "found," and mediates between the two such that neither force predominates. Places cannot be entirely given over to preservation, for we must provide for our human necessities and respond to change, but, ecologically speaking, places *especially* cannot be given over to the unrestrained processes of founding. "Founding" strips away the social and natural features that have accreted in place, and it is precisely the unrestrained forces of founding (the state, the market) that have generated the contemporary crisis of home places. The forces for preservation must therefore mediate the manner in which founding operates in

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 9.



order to ensure the sustainability of home places. A “fully inclusive and deliberative” democracy would ensure that such mediations occur.<sup>295</sup> This is an ironic use of democracy, which has historically been associated with excess and tyranny rather than with mediation or moderation. There is no *a priori* reason to suggest that democracy will lead to the latter.

Ultimately, however, Cannavò’s theorization of democratic home places has little to do with democracy or place per se but with the desire to put into practice ecological notions of sustainability. This becomes clear when we investigate how Cannavò responds to Pacific Northwest logging communities.<sup>296</sup> First, Cannavò notes the ways in which timber workers generate identity, community, and an attachment to nature through their occupation – logging. “Timber workers have indeed built histories and communities in close relationship with the forest, sometimes over the course of generations.”<sup>297</sup> They have a respect for the forest, identify with the forest, and see themselves as the forest’s guardian. All this suggests “a deep place attachment ... the extension of self and identification with place.”<sup>298</sup> But despite all the trappings of home, Cannavò rejects their version of home. Their claims of being respectful guardians of the forest are false for they are “trapped by a hegemonic discourse about markets, progress, and nature’s disorder that makes them accept the unrestrained exploitation of forests even though such exploitation ultimately undermines their own livelihood. For democratic control to be

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 76.

meaningful, hegemonic discourses must be challenged and demystified.”<sup>299</sup> In short, places must conform to ecological dictates of sustainability in order to be the type of democratic “home places” Cannavò wishes to see. In this text, democracy does not mean the ability of a people to define their place, rather it stands for a particular polity wherein the forces of preservation mediate the forces of founding.

By filling place with social relations, by defining even bioregions socially, Cannavò rightly attenuates the fetishization of nature in narratives such as Thayer’s. On the other hand, this text substitutes in a new set of problems. For place to be deployed politically, for place-based politics to escape its multiple possibilities, place must be filled by a positive political vision, one that would prohibit ulterior visions. That these ulterior visions could inhere in place is admitted but denied: any positive manifestation of problematic home places—such as the logging communities of Oregon and Washington—must be critiqued in ways not pursuant to place. In this way, place becomes rhetoric—an empty container put to work to advance a particular (and potentially controversial) vision of home. I suggest that this schizophrenia, bouncing back and forth between the understanding of place as an empty container potentially filled and defined by a variety of politics and ecological relations, and an assertion of place as carrying certain properties that make it the right site for our political ecologies, is endemic to the assertion of place-based politics. All place-based political visions, whether explicitly localist, regional, national, or even cosmopolitan, politick through scalar metaphors wherein the

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 228-29.

metaphor appears to take on a life of its own, as if place/locality/region can stand and carry certain properties not lent by the political vision of the analyst.

Notably, in his demand for the return of home, for restoring the lost “practice of place,”<sup>300</sup> Cannavò is forced to eliminate place’s fundamental contingency by calling into being a certain practice of place that not only does not correspond to actually-existing places but denies home places that do not conform to the dictates of ecology. What Cannavò is ultimately arguing for is not home, nor place, but a particular political economic system that would make particular types of places. Namely, he wishes to see an effective counterweight to the forces of founding, such that ecological sustainability is assured and members of the community have some oversight over the general operation of the economy. This call for a “working landscape”—a new political economy that would generate new land use policies—gets muddled by the simultaneous calls for a “practice of place,” which holds no necessary relation to the type of political economy he desires to propagate. The rhetoric of place instead acts as a sugar pill to aid in the dissemination of his political ecologic vision.

By comparison to Cannavò, John Barry’s monographs on green political economy do not create a romantic vision of home places, but they suppose a great deal about the characteristics of place. In his striving for a “concrete utopianism,”<sup>301</sup> and in tandem with several other influential ecologists pursuing “ecological” or

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>301</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, compare p. 6 and 12.

“green” economics, Barry centers his vision upon the local.<sup>302</sup> If the task is to re-embed our economies into our societies and ecologies, imposing social and ecological limits conducive to sustainability, we can only accomplish this by working at the level of the locality. Belief in global solutions, “some much wider political project to realize sustainability” is dead. The two decade effort since the Rio 1992 Earth Summit inaugurated a global green sustainability agenda has yielded little results.<sup>303</sup> Barry tells us that this failure left him with a “growing sense of doom.”<sup>304</sup> Where he finds hope, by contrast to these grand (and failed) attempts at a global vision of sustainability, is in the “pragmatic” politics of the “here and now.” We ought to discharge “ideological” projects of sustainability and instead “dig where we stand.”<sup>305</sup> The question is how to enable “*this* particular group of people to manage the resource base at *their* disposal effectively and deal with the threats *they* face.”<sup>306</sup> This is also a recognition of difference, that the variety of landscapes and cultures undermines the search for a single recipe for sustainability. “This concern with particularity and place echoes the idea that there is no one model of sustainability or mode of political and economic life which while achieving [ecological] resilience, is also one that is applicable to each and every human context.”<sup>307</sup> Relocalization is

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<sup>302</sup> Herman E. Daly, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (London: Macmillan, 2007); Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Routledge, 2011); Wes Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011).

<sup>303</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 13.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13. The idea that the local is specific and concrete helps produce books with titles like Rob Hopkins, *The Power of Just Doing Stuff: How Local Action Can Change the World* (Totnes, UK: Green Books, 2013).

<sup>306</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 225.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

our hope because it is thoroughly practical, determined in the concrete reality of each place.

Re-localization has positive personal, community, political, and ecological reverberations (several of these will be familiar from chapter two, or from Thayer and Cannavò's texts). The face-to-face interactions typical of local economies will build community, the "human-scale" of local economies will enable "democratic control" over those economies, and the need to manage resources and direct one's own economy will turn today's passive consumers into active citizens.<sup>308</sup> The culmination is a "social economy," or the reembedding of the economy into a society guarded over by those citizens.<sup>309</sup> Politically, relocalization promises independence for communities—self-provisioning means less dependence upon distant markets and polities.<sup>310</sup> Furthermore, localization (re)builds a "strong connection to place and an interest in caring for it," particularly our political economic traditions, "the local specific and locally evolved practices, habits, and customs adapted to local interests, identities, and environmental conditions."<sup>311</sup> It also promises more fulfilling production and consumption. Greater self-provisioning means moving out of the pin factory and to more creative, rewarding forms of work.<sup>312</sup> And dwelling promises a "new sustainability of desire," best exemplified by Slow Food.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> John Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue and Progress* (London: Sage, 1999), 167; Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 158.

<sup>309</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 180-86.

<sup>310</sup> Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 175; Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 28, see chapter 3 and the concept of "resilience," 164 for "economic security".

<sup>311</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 225-26.

<sup>312</sup> Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 177-78.

<sup>313</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 212.

Re-localization also has ideological benefits. Projects like Transition Towns or Slow Food open up “an urgently needed space for rethinking economics,” urgent because “the economy is a state of mind, the active creation of particular types of thinking and subjectivities.”<sup>314</sup> If the neoclassical worldview today constitutes how we think economics and act economically, with its emphasis on growth, consumerism, etc., then green localist projects are invaluable for providing heterodox ideas. Hence Barry makes it clear that relocalization is not simply about concrete practice, but is conjoined with an ideological project. The aim is “to one and at the same time *re-politicize and democratize thinking about economics* as much as it is about democratizing the economy through strategies of localization or the promotion of social enterprises.”<sup>315</sup> Here, Barry stresses the return to *oikonomia*, the management of resources based on the limited needs of the household vis-à-vis material reproduction and “flourishing.” He then makes the familiar contrast between *oikonomia* and the market economy, which is premised on the endless accumulation of wealth and as such sets no limit on the use of the Earth.<sup>316</sup>

Crucial to the ecological aspect of the project, localization sets limits to growth, consumption, and accumulation. The local economy “is a bounded economy, delimited by membership and place.”<sup>317</sup> By membership, Barry means the human residents and what they need to flourish.<sup>318</sup> By place, Barry is referring to the

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 158. As examples of “social enterprises,” Barry refers on p. 183 to “community energy projects, local farmers markets, slow food cooperatives, sports clubs, libraries, community health and fitness centres.”

<sup>316</sup> Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 166.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>318</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 10. “Flourishing,” the Aristotelian concept, is central to Barry’s vision.

immediate ecology, that which nature can sustainably supply and absorb in return. But how precisely does localization enforce boundaries? First, it works in tandem with the worldview of oikonomia. Second, Barry argues that localization, by limiting the distance between the sites of production and consumption, would make participants in the economy more aware of the limited carry capacity of their immediate environment. Again, greater familiarity presumably would generate knowledge and care of one's ecological surroundings, leading to self-imposed limitations on one's activity.<sup>319</sup>

I suggest that there are many commendable aspects of Barry's work. It forms part of the still underdeveloped red-green push to join critiques of capitalism with visions for an ecologically sustainable and socially equitable future. As he aptly notes, convincing ourselves that "we live in societies with economies, not economies with societies"<sup>320</sup> is the "necessary prelude to reintegrating economy and ecology."<sup>321</sup> And though tangential to my discussion here, his book combines this critique of capitalism with a compelling case for why classical republicanism ("neo-Roman," in his terms) may possess the right worldview and polity for dealing with the ecological crisis.

But I suggest as well that this book is beset by the same shortcoming—the prizing of place and localism—that characterizes and hamstring the broader political ecology movement. We encounter the false immediacy and apolitical character typical of place-based political visions wherein place itself appears to have

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<sup>319</sup> Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 165, 177.

<sup>320</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 164, also 180-86.

<sup>321</sup> Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics*, 167, 184.

settled characteristics and no internal political dynamics. In implying that the local place is somehow “concrete,” that there is a such thing as “this people” or “that place,” Barry’s account fails to attend to the inevitable mediations of place and fractures found amongst “a people.” Furthermore, I would suggest that it is politics which constitutes places and therefore how a place operates. The struggle over the organization and direction of the political economy sets limits to how we use places, not relocalization itself. Note the example of fisheries, which are inscribed “in place” but have diverging results regarding fishery management. Some fisheries have self-imposed limitations on their catch, some have had these limitations imposed by regulators, and some have ignored the risks of fishery collapse entirely. The *scalar* political economy—the political economic forces that operate across space—determines the outcome. Relocalization, the turning to specific places, does not in itself signify anything. The risk is that by lending locality, or place more generally, qualities of its own (concreteness, particularity), we make place itself an active subject whose qualities become the vehicle to community and resistance. Place, in this guise, becomes fetishized.

Barry, I am sure, knows that places carry no definite qualities and that is why he pairs his relocalization agenda with an ideological one centered on *oikonomia*, the new (old) worldview in which we limit our needs based on what we need to “flourish.” As is customary with the genre, localization is paired with the desire for self-reliance, wherein a community whittles down its consumption to what can be produced locally in the name of ecological sustainability and political independence. The desired result is a mutual “resilience” of land and community. Furthermore, this



project is to be pursued (or achieved) through a republican democracy: a community composed of an active citizenry managing their own social economy.

But why must *oikonomia* or resilience be local? Why need democratic republics be local—and why the easy association of the two?<sup>322</sup> Why is an active citizen only imaginable in her home place? Part of the answer is surely Barry's despair at internationalist efforts to combat the ecological crisis. The failure of governments and international institutions to achieve a convincing solution to the crisis, marred by the efforts of economic interests, send us to the local, where the supposed concreteness and particularity of individual communities can provide the proper setting for achieving consensus over a green future. The tonic for this idealistic argument, I suggest, are Cannavò's logging communities. As Cannavò notes, in logging towns we find a home place: people with a sense of community, historical roots, and even something of an environmental outlook. If not a *demos*, we certainly find a concurrence over the necessity of their profession. But for greens they are the *wrong type of home place*. This is indicative of the fact that there is no connection between place as an abstract concept, localities as real places, and the specific political economic forms sought by greens. There is no necessary connection between localities, green outcomes, and democratic communities. Only ideology and practice can make localities, but localities need not be the sole bearers of ideologies and practices.

I would also suggest, based on what I have presented in this chapter, that the importance of place/locality for Barry's argument is part and parcel of the broader

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<sup>322</sup> Certainly part of the answer is the historical association of republics with small city-states, such as Geneva or Florence.

turn toward place within political ecology, itself contingent upon the early green thinking of the 1960s-80s. We must theorize through the local place because there is wide concurrence among greens of the virtues of the local. Just as there is an easy association of locality with democracy, so too is there one between locality and ecology. These associations blind greens to not only the *problems* of place and localities, but the problems of pushing place-based politics as a tool to achieving a broader ecological outcome. For example, the United States has had “place-based” communes for much of its history, which by and large have neither maintained their own “place” nor led to the broader societal transformations sought by the greens. The political problems which beset places that seek to operate heterodox political economies is not something that Barry nor other greens often attend to.

Is the answer to be found in ideology? Transforming our worldview from the liberal one premised on growth and private property rights to one premised on *oikonomia* and usufruct? Surely these are important ideas and they do pose a challenge to the typical neoliberal discourse of the economy. But therein lie two difficulties to achieving the transformation through the path Barry takes. First, localization can easily come to stand *for* these positive outcomes, rather than be considered a (contingent) outcome of the mass adoption of these ideas. This is particularly notable when we assign definite qualities to place. What is convenient as rhetoric is myopic as politics. Second, by emphasizing too greatly the importance of worldviews he risks the path of idealism, deterring analysis into the political economic impediments for a political ecologic transformation. Place and ideology, I suggest, could better be addressed through a critical analysis of the political

economy of actual places, or through genealogies of the economic concepts taken for granted today. What we require are *critical* theories of the contemporary politics of unsustainability, those which increase our knowledge of the forces that create and sustain inequitable, environmentally-destructive polities.

In criticizing political ecology, I hope to be working toward this end. By demonstrating how political ecologists fetishize, idealize, and rely on place in their political vision, I suggest that they inadvertently contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. Despite my critique of Barry, my intent here is quite similar to his own. Barry, notably, calls out theorists of sustainable development for indirectly contributing to the status quo by pursuing a goal that is unattainable:

One could be forgiven for thinking that from the point of view of those profiting and benefiting from the continuation of actually existing unsustainability, that the ideal way for this system to continue relatively unchanged, while acknowledging its unsustainability, would be to focus on the pressing and urgent need to develop a workable and agreed conception of sustainability.<sup>323</sup>

I suggest that the same holds true for the many greens working today to envision and convince us of the necessity of place-based political ecology. Nothing serves better to maintain the status quo than repeated attempts to define the virtues of place and just what a good, green, place-based politics would look like. As Barry indicates, there is an issue of opportunity cost. Given the minority status of greens within the broader society, it is imperative that they take their valuable time,

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<sup>323</sup> Barry, *Actually Existing Unsustainability*, 7-8.

energy, and talent to pursue *knowledge of our current predicament* rather than echoing each others calls for place-based political ecology.

### ***Conclusion***

Theorizing political ecology as the crisis and promise of place is what so often undermines political ecology's political potential. The problems with overt fetishisms like Thayer's seem to me obvious. By fetishizing the ecological place we eliminate the social history inhered in nature, as well as the social history that inevitably mediates our relationship to and interpretation of nature. The more we do this the further we get from actually existing nature, with regards to the social content of its materiality and our knowledge of it. On the other hand, idealizations of place are perhaps less obvious and therefore more problematic. Cannavò, for instance, is not arguing for place-based politics but for a particular variant of political ecology that premises itself upon an idealized view of (home) place, one which leads us away from the actual material practices that form places in the world today. And while this idealistic vision of place has a use value as rhetoric, the more we emphasize place and theorize the places we'd like to see, the less we attend to the political economic forces constituting places today. Only through intimate knowledge of the latter can we know what lies between our present and the desired political ecologic future. Place, therefore, has political potential *as a negative*, as a problem and site of investigation.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> I should note that Cannavò does detail certain political and economic processes that have led to, as he puts it, the "crisis of place." He makes certain "case studies" as well: the logging industry, urban sprawl, and New York City's Ground Zero. What I find problematic is that in spite of the consistent

Assuming Cannavò's claim regarding our innate desire for home is true, wouldn't a more successful mobilization strategy be one that details the forces that *prevent* us from realizing home places? While others, such as J.K. Gibson-Graham, consider this argument akin to participating in the hegemony of capitalism, dwelling/reveling in the way the broader political economic structures dominate us to the point that we can imagine no way out, I would suggest that such problematizing is fundamentally *educative* and necessary to elicit the type of emotional responses desired by greens. To arouse a people to arms, one must make them aware of the structures that hold them back, not only give them a vision of an ideal future.<sup>325</sup>

Theorists of place-based ecology thus restrict our political economic vision by fetishizing nature (in place), hypostatizing place (as if place possesses the qualities that make community, democracy, ecology possible), and lauding place-based politics as *the* path toward an ecological future. Like the localist literature as a whole, they shy away from the problem of the contingency of place and its politics. Perhaps most significantly, these proposals fail to account for how the political economy mediates the nature we encounter, as well as any attempt made to "dwell" in place. At the most basic level, the contours of the political economy—the system of property laws, the ownership of land and capital (wealth), and the cost of access

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evidence that places harbor a multitude of politics, Cannavò maintains an idealized form of place – place melts into home. Despite the emptiness of the home place, he cannot jettison this ideal for the entire balance of his place-based politics rests upon its positive assertion. There can be no place-based politics if place is too contingent to be meaningful.

<sup>325</sup> Subtext: while critics of alternative projects are too quick to dump them in the neoliberal box, inattentive to the attraction of nature and place-based discourses, those constructing these alternative imaginaries are insufficiently attentive to the power of neoliberalism. Both sides need to expand their vision, one to the margin and the other to the center.

to land and capital—impose serious constraints on those wishing to construct eco-social communities of the type theorized by Barry. There are very few places that stand outside these forces; within the system, those possessing wealth have a greatly disproportionate advantage in determining the direction of localities. The hypostatization of place is a distraction from this reality.

The emphasis on place also precludes the systems thinking so important to ecology—were one to take the latter seriously, one neither would nor could not start from place. Instead, one would begin the analysis treating the political economy and ecology as systems that work together to produce certain types of places. One would attempt to imagine a convergence in these two systems such that their spatial forces produce the types of landscapes, rivers, seas, farms, towns, and cities desirable to those interested in community and ecology. In short, one would begin with interconnection. How can we explain this turn away from the basic lesson of ecology? The longstanding green discourses of community and smallness and the ecocentric desire to find and interact with a pure nature have made the turn to place commonsensical for those attempting to erect a political ecology. Place appears to offer the ingredients necessary to construct the types of polities and relations with nature that are denied by the existing order. Conversely, there is insufficient attention paid to how that existing order—e.g. neoliberalism—makes it difficult to erect precisely the places greens desire.

## CHAPTER 5

### PASTORAL AGRARIANISM IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

Defending the family farm is like  
defending the Bill of Rights or the Sermon  
on the Mount or Shakespeare's plays. One  
is amazed at the necessity for defense.<sup>326</sup>

At the center of the American alternative agri-food movement is a concern over the fate of the family farm and traditional, rural communities. Actors in the movement operate under two assumptions as they strive to “save” these farms and communities. The first assumption is the idea that family farms can be emplaced—circumscribed sites of autonomy and independence characterized by the soil and organic community. The second assumption is the idea that there are social and ecological benefits of emplacement. Family farms are in some fundamental sense *good*; these farms and traditional rural communities are of the American essence. In terms of ecology, those who “dwell” on small plots of earth know the land and are therefore uniquely situated to care for it. The first assumption is required to make the second seem realistic; the second is necessary to make the emplacement of family farms and rural communities attractive. I term these ‘assumptions’ because they very rarely are challenged within the food movement. From chapters two and three, one may immediately discern the roots of these assumptions in the ideas of localism and place-based political ecology. I argue that there is a third necessary ingredient, a discourse I term pastoral agrarianism. This is a conjunction rarely

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<sup>326</sup> Wendell Berry, “A Defense of the Family Farm” in *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2009), 31.

encountered; its constituent terms are familiar yet elusive. And though its roots lie in figures long dead, this discourse is of great import for those interested in understanding alternative politics in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenge here, then, is threefold: first, to specify the terms and their conjunction; second, to detail their histories in American political thought; and third, to identify contemporary pastoral agrarians and trace both their historical roots and contemporary impact.

### ***Pastoralism, Agrarianism, Pastoral Agrarianism***

Terry Gifford in his synthetic work *Pastoral* gives us a useful schema by which to plot the uses of the term. First, the pastoral is a historical literary genre: “to refer to ‘pastoral’ up to about 1610 was to refer to poems or dramas of a specific formal type in which supposed shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with (mostly) idealised descriptions of the countryside.”<sup>327</sup> Within this poetic tradition the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* of Virgil are the most notable. Second, and of particular interest to me in this chapter, is the idea that the pastoral is an “area of *content*. In this sense pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban ... a delight in the natural is assumed in describing these texts as pastorals.”<sup>328</sup> In this regard, Virgil’s *Eclogues* are doubly pastoral, first by being told in a pentameter verse and second for being stories of shepherds, their contentious relationship with nature and the city of Rome. Virgil’s shepherds are sympathetic figures and their

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<sup>327</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, emphasis added.



way of life that with which the reader is to identify. Notably, the pastoral “delight in the natural” does not necessarily refer to delight in the *wild*. Virgil’s shepherds are as concerned with the caprice and power of nature as they are with the reach of Rome. To borrow Leo Marx’s phrase, the pastoral is found in the “middle landscape,” that cultivated space standing between the city and the wilderness.<sup>329</sup> This space is best exemplified by the garden, where man is the steward and nature the provider of the vital force. The pastoral is the conjunction of the best of man and the best of nature, with the shepherd as the primary beneficiary.

To understand the history and significance of the pastoral “content” I rely upon two texts, Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* and Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. These analyses draw their power by conjoining literature and its devices, the preoccupations of its writers, and the transformations in each, with concomitant historical developments in politics and economics. Williams, for instance, identifies an important shift in English pastoral poetry in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, moving away from the Virgilian mode and its emphasis upon the precarity of the shepherd (buffeted by the forces of nature and the city) to pastorals that *idealize* nature and rural life. He corresponds this shift in the literature to the political economic transformations underway in Britain in the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the time, power began to transfer from the landed aristocracy to parliament, financiers, and merchants. Within the landed class itself a division opened between the larger and more capitalized landholders who were able to successfully navigate the transition from feudal to capitalist agriculture, and the lesser nobles who were

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<sup>329</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 88-103.

succumbing to debt and losing their lands.<sup>330</sup> As a result, the pastoral lost its Virgilian tension between serenity and precarity and became a political tool for the threatened gentry, a literary mode by which those allied with the gentry could express the legitimacy of their claims over the land and society.

Pastoral literature thus began to narrate what Williams calls “golden ages” wherein natural and social drama was wholly absent. Nature became associated with providence, stripped of its violent potential, and stripping away the presence of those who worked the land. The pastoral became the “magical recreation of what can be seen as a natural bounty ... the actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; who trap the pheasants and partridges and catch the fish; who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order.”<sup>331</sup> Animals in these accounts literally offer themselves for slaughter—material insecurity and labor eliminated in one stroke. Nature’s benevolence was only matched by the landowner’s, who shows care to his flock as befitting the feudal noblesse oblige. The “house” of the lord becomes, in the literature, not only a literal shelter but one that supplies a feast to which all are invited. “The view of the providence of nature is linked to a human sharing: all are welcome, even the poor, to be fed at this board. And it is this stress, more than any other, which has supported the view of a responsible civilisation, in which men care for each other directly and personally, rather than through the abstraction of a more

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<sup>330</sup> See also Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 39-62.

<sup>331</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 32.

complicated and more commercial society.”<sup>332</sup> For the gentry, navigating the rapid changes of their day, the literary idealization of “feudal and immediately post-feudal values...of an order based on settled and reciprocal social and economic relations of an avowedly total kind” served as “a critique of capitalism. The emphases on obligation, on charity, on the open door to the needy neighbor, are contrasted...with the capitalist thrust, the utilitarian reduction of all social relations to a crude moneyed order.”<sup>333</sup> The pastoral became a device for those who would divide the social world into town and country, artificial and natural, instrumental and moral, impersonal and communal, for the sake of beatifying the old rural order.

Marx comes to the same conclusion. “What is important about the rural world,” Marx extracts from British pastoral poetry of the period, “is not merely the agricultural economy but its alleged moral, aesthetic, and, in a sense, metaphysical superiority to the urban, commercial forces that threaten it.”<sup>334</sup> But as industrialization, enclosure, and the capitalization of farming progressed in England, so too did the value of pastoral poetry that sanitized the countryside diminish. Even if such poetry never was taken fully as a realism, it had to gesture to a kernel of truth to be politically effective. Marx and Williams note two results, first the increasing attention paid to nature, resulting in its romanticization in 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry, and secondly a relocation of the pastoral setting from the English countryside to the American continent.<sup>335</sup> The shift to nature and America is quite straightforward: if capitalism and urban life had made too great an incursion into

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>334</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 99.

<sup>335</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, 68-79.

the social life of the countryside to permit its idealization, then the only remaining actor left to idealize was nature. In the age of Enlightenment, and for those not working directly in nature (e.g. peasants), nature need not be considered a wearying nor dangerous force.<sup>336</sup> Better, on the American continent that same ideal nature laid undisturbed. Man could settle the vast continent, building a gardenscape and moral economy that England once held dear. As Marx puts it:

Attractive as it was, the idea of a society of the middle landscape was becoming less easy to believe during the 1780's. In England the process of "improvement," or what we should call economic development, already seemed to have gone too far. By then the enclosures were destroying the vestiges of the old, rural culture, and the countryside was cluttered with semi-industrial cities and dark, satanic mills. At this juncture the next thought was obvious and irresistible. For three centuries Englishmen had been in the habit of projecting their dreams upon the unspoiled terrain of the New World ... In America it was still not too late (or so one might imagine) to establish a home for rural virtue.<sup>337</sup>

Thus it was that the American political leaders came to see in the American landscape the seeds for a virtuous nation. "The tendency to identify nation with countryside promoted by the English squirearchy," those gentry attempting to defend their traditions and power against the tides of centralization and commerce,

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<sup>336</sup> Donald Worster's history of ecology details the transformations in European understandings of nature as science, technology, and industrialization advanced. Worster, *Nature's Economy*.

<sup>337</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 103-04.

“became, in time, accentuated in England’s colonies.”<sup>338</sup> The same town and country division promoted by the English gentry and reflected in the literature of the day will become apparent in the writings of the early Americans. Jefferson and Madison, for instance, will use the pastoral device to highlight the dangers of the city and commerce and center their political vision in the middle landscape.

Classically, going back to the conflicts in the Roman Republic over agrarian reform, agrarianism referred to social movements centered upon the universal accessibility or ownership of arable land. Globally, this type of politics continues to be salient today, exemplified by the MST in Brazil, Zapatistas in Mexico, and the efforts of the Maasai in Tanzania and Kenya to protect their pastures from being enclosed and turned into exclusionary conservation areas and game parks. In the US, agrarianism in this sense has largely laid dormant since the 1930s, when the plight of indebted and tenant farmers held its last real sway over Washington. Concentration of farming has been the de facto policy of the US government since the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933,<sup>339</sup> and while “saving the family farm” has long been an impetus for food politics, I find scant evidence of any attempt to introduce land reform in its strict sense (property redistribution or caps on property holdings).

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<sup>338</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 32.

<sup>339</sup> The Act was the government’s main incursion into the food markets during the Depression. In short, it provided a price floor for seven staple crops and, as such, assisted only commercial growers. Farmers marginal to the economy were bypassed. While the government tried to address the needs of the latter with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1938, this program proved highly controversial, with commercial groups like the Farm Bureau successfully lobbying against it (likening it to socialism). The FSA was short-lived, gutted in 1943 and gone by 1946. Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

Agrarianism in the US has referred instead to the “celebration of agriculture and rural life for the positive impact thereof on the individual and society.”<sup>340</sup> Or, as Paul Thompson puts it, “ideas that attribute special powers or status to farming ... agrarian ideas are explicit statements of how basic production practices relate to the formation of personality and social institutions.”<sup>341</sup> The specific sources of inspiration for such thinking in the US include James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, the anti-Federalists, and the French immigrant farmer Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur. The details of their thought I will lay out in the next section, for now I will note that their writings were vital (particularly Jefferson) to establishing a link between farming, moral character, and the functioning of the young republic. To the agrarian mind, farming is not a self-contained practice nor a simple economic act, rather it is a practice whose effects reverberate through the social and political character of the nation.

What, then, of their conjunction into “pastoral agrarianism”? First, I should note their points of divergence. Most obviously, in Gifford’s first sense of the pastoral, lyrical poetry in pentameter verse telling the life story of shepherds, the pastoral is a distinct genre. Second, regarding the content of these original pastoral stories, the pastoral largely depicted a negative relationship between city and country wherein the politics of the city posed a threat to the life of the shepherd. The agrarian tradition frequently does so as well—the city is the site of banks and commodity exchanges, historically actors that farmers have considered to be hostile

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<sup>340</sup> David B. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” *Agricultural History* 65, no. 4 (1991): 1.

<sup>341</sup> Paul B. Thompson, “Agrarianism as Philosophy,” in *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 27.

to their interests. But fundamental to American agrarianism is the idea that a countryside composed of independent farmers provides the morality and therefore social basis for the American republic—what I term the “moral contribution” argument. In other words, rather than a purely contentious relationship (as in Virgil’s pastoral) between town and country, the American agrarian posits the flow of the good from the farm to the city. If in the Virgilian or the aristocratic English pastoral, the countryside was to remain a distinct entity, the city and its inveterate vices kept in the distance, in the agrarian tradition the morality of the countryside is to pervade all spaces within the nation.

Despite these differences, there are good reasons to conjoin the traditions for the purpose of understanding American politics. Most obviously, both deal with the countryside, rural living, and the provisioning of food; more significantly, for both the sympathetic figure is the farmer. The English had long converted the pastoral protagonist from shepherd to farmer in an attempt to localize and make meaningful the pastoral narrative; as an English import, the American pastoral was always centered upon the farmer.

By substituting the husbandman for the shepherd...it was easy to transform the farmer into a cult figure. Instead of striving for wealth, status, and power, he may be said to live a good life in a rural retreat; he rests content with a few simple possessions, enjoys freedom from envying others, feels little or no anxiety about his property, and, above all, he does what he likes to do.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 98.

In the American context, the pastoral narrative has told the story of the “middle landscape,” the farmer’s conversion of the wilderness-frontier into an orderly and beautiful garden.<sup>343</sup> As such, it would be very difficult to entangle the pastoral from the agrarian without rendering one or both an overly simplistic concept. For instance, Marx attempts to classify Jefferson not as an agrarian but as a pastoralist. How so? “The chief difference is the relative importance of economic factors implied by each term. To call Jefferson an agrarian is to imply that his argument rests, at bottom, upon a commitment to an agricultural economy.”<sup>344</sup> I suggest this oversimplifies agrarianism, eliminating its social and moral components. Indeed, Jefferson was not committed to agriculture as an *economic* sector, but rather to a agrarian society featuring land widely distributed amongst smallholders. Conceived as such, it is difficult to determine whether the belief in the positive social and political ramifications presumably created by a smallholder society properly belongs to the agrarian or pastoral position. Jefferson looks at minimum equal parts agrarian as he does pastoral, more so if one considers the broader political function to be fulfilled by American farmers.

With that said, by terming the conjunction “pastoral agrarianism” (rather than “pastoral-agrarianism”) I denote the fact that pastoralism is something distinct which modifies and informs American agrarianism. *Specifically, I refer to the sentimental pastoral that idealizes rural community, its denizens, and its connection with nature.* The agrarian tradition seeks the independence of the farmer from the

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Annette Kolodny, *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>344</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 126.



city, banks, and markets, and connects this independence to broader social ramifications of possessing such a class, the “moral contribution” of the farmer.<sup>345</sup> To this aim, the pastoral lends images of a nurturing, providential nature and a happy rural community (exemplified by the lord’s feast). These narratives have proven useful to today’s agrarians who wish to maintain the image of farmers as actors worth preserving for the sake of community and environment.

I specifically refer to *farmers* for agrarians since the 1950s have been keen to distinguish the farmer—connoted with smallness, the family, and political economic precarity—from *growers*, who are connoted with commerce, industry, the large-scale, and political economic privilege. The pastoral thus not only supplies positive affect to farmers but in so doing helps to distinguish their class of agriculturalists. Therefore a pastoral agrarian narrative would idealize rural community, emphasize and idealize the farmer’s connection to nature, testify in support of farmer independence, and argue the importance of the farmer’s moral contribution.

I therefore justify the pastoral agrarian conjunction as an actual literary-political tradition in the US and for the fact that it enables a critical appraisal of today’s alternative agri-food movement. Most significant, sentimental pastoralism contributes to agrarianism a blind spot when it comes to the *internal* politics of the countryside. Agrarians challenge the political economic asymmetry between

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<sup>345</sup> Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the role of banks, railroads, and commodity exchanges in agriculture grew dramatically—reflecting, respectively, the importance of credit to finance land and capital equipment purchases, the importance on rail for transportation of commodities to market, and the growth of large agribusinesses devoted to the buying and trading of commodity crops. How these actors inadvertently spawned agrarian populism and American progressivism, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1960); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 133-66; David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 158-75.

growers and farmers, the former carriers of substantially greater capital than the latter, as well as between corporations and farmers, but not between the farmer class, farmers and agri-food workers, nor within the individual farm itself. The sentimental pastoral in its pacific rendering of the countryside covers over the fact family farms are also economic actors, producing commodities for sale on the market. Not only do they compete with their neighbors (in their “community”), individual farms are formed out of power asymmetries between owners and hired labor, as well as between typically male heads, subordinate women and children.<sup>346</sup> This is not to suggest that these limitations are purely derivative of the pastoral, for the pastoral is put to use by farmers attempting to coalesce support for their socio-economic place in society. As we will see below with Wendell Berry, this leads to particular questions, challenges, and distinctions, representing certain actors and histories, leaving out aspects of the rural economy that would complicate the alternative agri-food movement.

### ***Toward a pastoral agrarianism: Jefferson and Leopold***

In this section, I will investigate the writings of the two figures I believe are most significant in their impact upon contemporary pastoral agrarians, Thomas Jefferson and Aldo Leopold. This is not to say that other figures commonly associated with the pastoral or agrarian traditions in the US, such as Crevecoeur, John Taylor of Caroline, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Liberty Hyde Bailey, or the Southern Agrarians are unimportant but that Jefferson and Leopold give us the best insight

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<sup>346</sup> Maria B. Chiappe and Cornelia Butler Flora, "Gendered Elements of the Alternative Agriculture Paradigm," *Rural Sociology* 63, no. 3 (1998). Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism," 4.

into the mentality of today's figures like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson.<sup>347</sup> Another reason, itself quite practical, is that Berry and Jackson frequently refer back to Jefferson and Leopold, and therefore to fully capture the connotations of such references requires some exposition of each. Regarding existing scholarship of Jefferson and Leopold, while the former has been exhaustively read and interpreted as a pastoralist and agrarian, the latter, Leopold, has not, but rather as an ecologist, environmentalist, or conservationist.

Jefferson's agrarianism is typically derived from his *Notes on Virginia* and his letter to John Jay, in which he declares that the "cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds." Precisely what prompts Jefferson to make such a statement is of interest.<sup>348</sup> Jefferson's collaborator James Madison gives us a useful vantage point: "I go on this great republic principle, that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. Is there no virtue among us? If

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<sup>347</sup> A number of texts analyze the contribution of these figures to American pastoral and agrarian thought. See Thompson, "Agrarianism as Philosophy."; James A. Montmarquet, "American Agrarianism: The Living Tradition," in *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000); Marx, *Machine in the Garden*; Smith, *Virgin Land*; Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>348</sup> Certainly we must consider Jefferson's own attachment to plantation life, wherein he applied his intellect to the challenges of recovering a land whose fertility had been lost by relentless tobacco/corn crop cycles, as well as his experimentation with numerous foreign cultivars (olives, sesame, rice). Two factors, however, qualify this image of an authentic, independent agrarian at odds with the new manufacturing economies. First, of course, is Jefferson's reliance upon slaves. While his attitude towards his slaves may be complex, Jefferson attempted to innovate new productivity measures to maximize the productivity of his slave labor, whom he collectively referred to as the "machine." Specifically he sought to divide tasks in such a way as to ensure continuous production, a farm-cum-factory. Secondly, Monticello housed an actual factory—a (lucrative) shop producing nails. Lucia C. Stanton, *"Those Who Labor for My Happiness": Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012), chapter 5.

there be not, we are in a wretched situation ... to suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in its people, is a chimerical idea.”<sup>349</sup> Especially so were one contemplating and advancing a constitutional model that granted significant, for the time, powers to the masses over government. The fear was not that the people would be too ignorant to govern, but rather that their poverty would make them susceptible to demagogues and tempt them in the direction of property expropriation. As Madison says in his letters and in *Federalist* 10 and 54, the Constitution sought to defend both the “rights of persons and the rights of property.”<sup>350</sup> The rights of property and the greater American republican experiment relied upon the virtue of its people, defined in the republican way: those who would subordinate individual or factional interest for that of the commonwealth. To put it another way, the constituents of the republic must resist the corruption that doomed previous republics, fallen to the demagogic populism of men like Caesar.<sup>351</sup>

As we see in the writings of Madison and especially Jefferson, farmers were the virtuous class that would make the republic possible.<sup>352</sup> Given that 90 percent of Americans were at the time farmers, it could not otherwise be so—no matter the

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<sup>349</sup> James Madison to the Virginia constitutional convention, 1788. Quoted in Douglass G. Adair, *The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 162.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>351</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 14-47.

<sup>352</sup> This, as we will see with Berry, has historically endeared Jefferson to the American farmer. As Griswold notes in 1946, while academics had only just recently taken an interest in Jefferson American farmers had “adopted him as their patron saint,” with farm groups holding bicentennial celebrations of his birthday (1943). A. Whitney Griswold, “The Agrarian Democracy of Thomas Jefferson,” *American Political Science Review* 40, no. 4 (1946): 658.

elaborate checks and balances of the Constitution, as even Madison admits.<sup>353</sup> In many ways, for the time this was not considered a flight of fancy but sound political theory. The farmer, being able to self-provision the majority of his material necessities, need lay no claim on the state nor on the property of another. To this was added the patrician's position that only the economically independent could neutrally weigh matters of politics, one which justified the restriction of suffrage to landowners.<sup>354</sup> By contrast, those who did not possess property (land), those whose living was made in the market economy, especially laborers, were tainted by the social ramifications of the market. This analysis led Jefferson to argue for keeping manufacturing offshore, in Europe, importing necessary goods but not the corrupting system of production itself.<sup>355</sup>

The most famous statement of these principles is Jefferson's Query XIX in his *Notes on Virginia*.<sup>356</sup> In the *Notes* he coalesced the pastoral agrarian through a series of contrasts between the Virginian landscape and society and that of Europe.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Fn. 349.

<sup>354</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 127. Voting restrictions based on land ownership were not fully repealed in the US until 1856.

<sup>355</sup> This stance proved troublesome over Jefferson's political career as events forced him to move in seemingly contradictory directions. Most notably, Jefferson's trade embargo and push to ignite domestic manufacturing prior to and during the War of 1812. McCoy, *Elusive Republic*, 218-23, 227-32. Marx argues that there was no contradiction in Jefferson's thought, rather that his position against manufacturing in his 1785 *Notes on Virginia* had to be moderated in the face of British and French belligerence. Specifically, that the United States in 1807 (the year of the embargo) had to produce its own wares if it wished for independence and a certain standard of living. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 153.

<sup>356</sup> The *Notes* were a written response to a series of questions posed to him by the Frenchman Abbé Raynal. They are often considered as a nationalistic statement made by a Jefferson who wished to impress upon his French interlocutor the advantages and greatness of the American landscape and nation. See Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 68.

<sup>357</sup> See Buell on "the enlistment of the pastoral as a vehicle of national self-definition." *Environmental Imagination*, 52 and chapter 2.

Immediately before his great and often-quoted statement about the virtuosity of the American farmer is this passage:

In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other?

Knowing what comes next, it is easy to interpret this question as a rhetorical one. With that said, one could take this passage as involving two empirical observations followed by an open question—that the key difference between Europe and Virginia is that in the former the land is not accessible to all those who would wish to farm it, necessitating a manufacturing and market system to absorb their labor and distribute material goods. Given that in the US this is not the case, that the land is large enough to absorb all American labor, ought the US seek to develop its own manufacturing base? Here is his famous reply:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.

Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the

husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers.

The binary is clear. Farmers are men of industry, are godly, and hence virtuous; laborers and merchants are godless (“not looking up to heaven”) and subservient to the needs of the market. This has a distinct political effect:

Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption.

The contrast is between the farmer, whose material self-sufficiency engenders independence from the market and hence the ability to be a citizen, and the “other classes” who are inevitably corrupted by the market. Following Machiavelli and Harrington, Jefferson notes that such corruption proves fatal to republics: “It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.” Jefferson makes clear the agrarian belief that agriculture is not merely an economic sector, and that farmers contribute social and political virtue to the nation. If the independent (property owning) farmer class did not constitute the majority, the American republic could not survive.

This idea did not stay in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century: the Great Depression and the conundrum of the “family farm” carried this conclusion, and Jeffersonian agrarianism on the whole, into the 20<sup>th</sup>. I would argue that the “family farm” as a distinct *concept* and operator in political discourse has a specific history that began in the 1930s.<sup>358</sup> This way of thinking and talking about the smallholder originated in the experience of the Great Depression and the political struggle to protect small owner-operated farms from economic extinction.<sup>359</sup> We find evidence of this in Congressional documents: as farmer misery increased under economic and climactic strains, Congressional figures utilized Jeffersonian language in order to push for ameliorative legislation. For instance, in advocating a new homestead act, sponsors asserted: “we believe that with the Nation’s farm families living in their own farm homes and applying their energies to the creation of the Nation’s new wealth, while society protects them in the freedom of their homes and in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labor, there can be no doubt as to the future safety and progress of our people.”<sup>360</sup> By helping family farms, the legislators understood themselves to be acting “in harmony with the principles which underlie our great

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<sup>358</sup> Google NGram analysis of its scanned book archive agrees with this assertion. It appears 1935 is the year in which the “family farm” signifier entered the popular lexicon. I argue that this is a product of the political wrangling over destitute American farmers during the Depression. See <http://books.google.com/ngrams/> and enter “family farm” (without quotation marks) into the search bar.

<sup>359</sup> For details on the fight between commercial and social and environmental interests in agriculture, such as between the Farm Bureau and proponents of the Farm Security Administration, see A. Whitney Griswold, *Farming and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), chapter 6; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 123-29; Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), chapters 5-8; Adam D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State: Institutions and Interest Group Power in the United States, France, and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chapter 3.

<sup>360</sup> U.S. Congress, “Homesteads for Actual Farm Families: Report on H.R. 8286,” ed. Subcommittee of the Committee on the Public Lands (1936), p. 37.



representative government.” As per the analysis in above, these ideas should be familiar, though the idea “farm family” is new.

The goal of the legislators here is to distinguish these farmers from tenant farming and sharecropping on one hand, and absentee or corporate farming on the other. The family farm was to stand for and perpetuate republican virtue against the rentier class and the descent of the rural population into landlessness.<sup>361</sup> In arguing for the passage of the Farm Security Administration, the primary act which targeted marginal farmers, USDA Secretary Henry Wallace asserted: “the family-sized farm, owned by the man who operated it, was the ideal of our past land-settlement policy. But we failed to safeguard the ownership of the land...farm land fell into the hands of speculators and absentee land-lords.”<sup>362</sup> The Secretary then makes clear the connection between the notion of the family farmer and the Jeffersonian agrarian vision, arguing for “reconstructing our agriculture in a fundamental manner by promoting farm ownership among the tillers of the soil. In this manner we can give our Nation greater social and political stability.” The point, then, is to protect the landed smallholder from economic pressures so that this class can serve as the social and political basis of the country. Given the incredible upheaval of the Depression, the agrarian narrative must have provided a comforting fallback for politicians worrying over the future.

In sum, Jeffersonian agrarianism persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the idea of the family farm and its battle with the commercialization and concentration

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<sup>361</sup> Brewster notes that tenant farming has long been considered a “badge of servility.” John Brewster, “The Relevance of the Jeffersonian Dream Today,” in *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000 [1963]), 216-19.

<sup>362</sup> Hearing before the Committee on Agriculture, *Farm Tenancy: Hearing on H.R. 8*, 1st, 1937.

of farming. Along with the characterization of the family farm as an essentially American social unit, we must also come to appreciate how the family farm in our day has become associated with environmental sensitivity and ecological outcomes. I trace this to Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). The history is ironic, for Leopold devotes considerable time to castigating the farmers of his day. But he laid the groundwork for an “stewardship” vision of farming which later would be combined by Wendell Berry with the Jeffersonian association of farmers and social virtue.

Like Jefferson, Aldo Leopold was a complicated figure who wore many hats, though today he is most alive in the memories and intellects of scientific and political ecologists, environmental political theorists, and those in the alternative agri-food movement. It could have been otherwise, as Donald Worster recounts in *Nature's Economy*.<sup>363</sup> Leopold had trained under Gifford Pinchot, head of the new US Forest Service and the lead conservationist of his day. Today Pinchot is often remembered and derided by ecologists for his economistic management of natural resources. Indeed, the very notion of natural “resources” implies an anthropocentric division of the natural world, identifying “useful” species that are to be tended (e.g. trees but not wolves). Reading Leopold’s most famous work, *A Sand County Almanac*, certainly recalls that background, as Leopold’s interest in the landscape is much more “hands-on” and managerial (sometimes referred to as “positive conservation”) than those who simply sought to fence-in wild spaces.<sup>364</sup> Where

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<sup>363</sup> Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 258-290.

<sup>364</sup> Two qualifications should be noted: first, while working for the Forest Service Leopold worked to create road-less areas to preserve wild spaces; second, Leopold’s main personal interest was in restoring landscapes degraded by human activity. For the last decade and a half of his life, he and his family worked to restore the landscape of an abandoned farm in western Wisconsin.

Leopold made his turn, and where he would later attract the attention of the environmental movement, is in his re-envisioning of the man-nature relationship as a *social* one, embedding man inside the ecological community, stripping away any sense of man's privilege or otherness vis-à-vis nature. By enlarging the boundary of the community to include the biota and land, in what Leopold terms his "land ethic," humans are required to establish ethical relations with the species and features of the landscape. In so doing, Leopold eliminates the anthropocentric reading of nature then characteristic of conservation. Of all his ideas, the land ethic proved the most durable, with many regarding it as the original "ecocentric" philosophy of nature.

In this brief exposition of his thought, however, I wish to advance the notion that Leopold was a pastoralist.<sup>365</sup> Here Marx's distinction between the "complex" versus "sentimental" pastoral becomes useful. The latter is Marx's pejorative term, wherein the pastoral becomes a "vehicle" for fantasies of escape from urbanity or civilization.<sup>366</sup> Nature and rural life become idealized and the city and its affectations forgotten. On the other hand, the "complex" pastoral works within the interplay of civilizational and natural forces, much as Virgil does in his *Eclogues*. In the complex pastoral, the countryside does not represent an autonomous zone from the city—witness the despondent shepherd Meliboeus, whose lands had been gifted by the emperor Octavian to his returning veterans (indeed, symbolizing the broader

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<sup>365</sup> Compared to his ecocentric philosophy, little has been said of his pastoralism. Buell lumps him in with the pastoral tradition in America but largely fails to justify such an inclusion; *Environmental Imagination*, 40-41. William Barillas, writing on the "Midwestern pastoral" more thoughtfully justifies such a categorization—borrowing Leo Marx's concept, he considers Leopold a writer of the middle landscape. "Aldo Leopold and Midwestern Pastoralism," *American Studies* 37, no. 2 (1996): 61. Unfortunately, Leopold is absent in Marx's treatment. Marx wrote his *Machine in the Garden* in the early 1960s and therefore may not have read Leopold; Leopold did not achieve a wide readership until his *Almanac* was reissued in 1968.

<sup>366</sup> Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 10.

Roman agrarian politics, wherein soldiers were often given farmland as a means of remuneration and an enticement for loyalty).<sup>367</sup> In these pastorals, life in the countryside is not questioned—it is a good—but it is a way of life threatened by outside forces. It is that conflict that sparks the pastoral, which becomes a drama inasmuch as a celebration of nature or rural life.

Leopold's writings tell exactly such a drama, but what is unique and what popularized his thought in the 1960s is that he analyzed the civilization-nature nexus from the perspective of an ecologist. As a nature-writer—enterprising to immerse himself in nature, learn and describe its secrets to his audience, enriching his and our understanding of ecology—he worked to alter the public's conception of the environment, shifting us from the passive, material connotations of the term “environment” and giving us an appreciation of the ecology's dynamic and synthetic qualities as well as its fragile constituents (e.g. the exterminated wolf). Leopold thought that changing our conception of nature required changing how we *perceived* nature, and toward that end he worked to promote in his readership a “conservation esthetic.” To be in awe of the American landscape was not something innovative in Leopold's time—indeed, going back to *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson sought to narrate the greatness of the American wilderness and its formations (lyricizing, for instance, Virginia's Natural Bridge).<sup>368</sup> What we required in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was something new:

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<sup>367</sup> Paul Alpers, *The Singer of the Eclogues: A Study of Virgilian Pastoral* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 68.

<sup>368</sup> In a rather base expression of nationalism, Jefferson's trumpeting of the size of American nature (its territorial expanse, grandness of mountains, width and length rivers) was intended to contradict the Comte de Buffon's assertion that American flora and fauna were smaller than their European

We come now to another component: the perception of the natural processes by which the land and the living things upon it have achieved their characteristic forms (evolution) and by which they maintain their existence (ecology). That thing called “nature study,” despite the shiver it brings to the spines of the elect, constitutes the first embryonic roping of the mass-mind toward perception.<sup>369</sup>

Helpfully, in the first section of the *Almanac* Leopold provides exemplary accounts of nature study, detailing his forays into his surroundings and his attempts to make sense of the ecological processes under his feet. As he remarks in the vignette “Home Range,” “the wild things that live on my farm are reluctant to tell me, in so many words, how much of my township is included within their daily or nightly beat.”<sup>370</sup> Leopold made it very much his mission to figure such things out.

Comparing himself with the creatures around him, he asks, “who is the more thoroughly acquainted with the world in which he lives?” By comparison to those who would worship the great monuments in the American landscape, for instance Ansel Adams and his photography of Yosemite, Leopold stood out. He attempted to prove that that which others may not see, not know, or consider banal is in fact fascinating and utterly important.

Leopold’s knowledge of ecology enabled or opened up new manners of perception, an ability to see nature differently, or see an entirely different nature,

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counterparts. Lee Alan Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>369</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches from Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 173.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

and thereby generate a new aesthetics, one that found value and beauty where others previously did not. This new aesthetic then could come to serve the purposes of ecology and its conservation, completing the circle. It had to combat the entrenched aesthetic of nature that only saw its value in recreation and monuments, which by opening up wild spaces eliminated the very wild nature it valued.

The trophy-recreationist has peculiarities that contribute in subtle ways to his own undoing. To enjoy he must possess, invade, appropriate. Hence the wilderness that he cannot personally see has no value to him. Hence the universal assumption that an unused hinterland is rendering no service to society. To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.<sup>371</sup>

Those who appreciated nature, Leopold argues, must not be in the business of “building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.”<sup>372</sup> We had to teach Americans to see nature as does an ecologist, learn to perceive it as a collective organism. “The incredible intricacies of the plant and animal community—the intrinsic beauty of the organism called America...were as invisible and incomprehensible to Daniel Boone as they are today to Mr. Babbitt.” The bombshell in this quote—the organism called America—Leopold hoped would provoke an entirely new manner of perception and in so doing an entirely new way of valuing nature. Nature would no longer be the provider of materials or the site of escape and recreation, but an organism in which we are but an appendage. The end point, the land ethic, a communal relationship with nature that preserves the whole

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 176-77.

organism, requires a new aesthetic as “we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand.”<sup>373</sup>

Leopold’s ecology was matched by a romantic vision of a lost America. His *Almanac* was a product of the 1930s and 40s, the time of the Dust Bowl and rural emigration, the mechanization and commercialization of farming, and the expansion of the automobile and the road. In a characteristically poignant statement, Leopold states “one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”<sup>374</sup> The wound most damaging was the road, which enabled mechanized man to invade the countryside and eliminate the American wilderness. The American “is the motorized ant who swarms the continents before learning to see his own back yard.”<sup>375</sup> This was distressing for Leopold, who emphasized the value we derived from contact and struggle with wild, untrammelled nature. Take, for instance, his comparison of American and European hunting trips: “European hunting and fishing are largely devoid of the thing that wilderness areas might be the means of preserving in this country. Europeans do not camp, cook, or do their own work in the woods if they can avoid doing so. Work chores are delegated to beaters and servants, and a hunt carries the atmosphere of a picnic, rather than of pioneering.”<sup>376</sup> While the American expedition was not nearly so aristocratic, it was instead trivialized by machines. *Pioneering* was now over. First it began with rail, then roads and automobiles, then innumerable gadgets, “and now, to cap the

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>374</sup> Aldo Leopold, *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 165.

<sup>375</sup> Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 176.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 193.

pyramid of banalities, the trailer.”<sup>377</sup> Machines had destroyed what Leopold called “split-rail value,” using as the rough-hewn split-rail fence of the pioneer as a metaphor. This loss was profound:

Ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility. The shallow-minded modern who has lost his rootage in the land assumes he has already discovered what is important; it is such who prate of empires, political or economic, that will last a thousands years. It is only the scholar who appreciates that all history consists of successive excursions from a single starting-point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values. It is only the scholar who understands why the raw wilderness gives definition and meaning to the human enterprise.<sup>378</sup>

The “cultural value of wilderness” did not inspire Leopold to espouse primitivism. Instead, he professes the romantic belief that the struggle to know and use the wilderness provides societies with meaning and their sense of self (“definition”). Technological progress ushers in decadence; machines have made the landscape a zone of banality. “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middle men, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow.”<sup>379</sup> Leopold himself, a resident of Madison and a professor at the University of Wisconsin, sought to ensure his own connection to the vitality of nature. In true Thoreauvian fashion, Leopold bought an

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 200-01.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 223-24.



old, exhausted farm roughly one hour's drive from Madison to provide a "weekend refuge from too much modernity."<sup>380</sup> The trope here is unmistakable—though only appearing a small handful of times in the text, modernity is contrasted with the wild and represents man's short-sighted efforts to destroy his natural roots (what elsewhere he refers to as our "wild rootage").<sup>381</sup>

When Leopold broods, "that land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten," I interpret him to be speaking both to wild and cultivated land.<sup>382</sup> From the attachment of Leopold to his farm, his numerous criticisms of contemporary agriculture and agronomy, and his vision of positive conservation, I would argue that his main concern was not the death of the pioneer experience and the expanses of American wilderness. Instead, he was primarily motivated by our destruction of the middle landscape—America's farmlands. This concern is both cultural and ecological. As evinced by the topic sentence, Leopold values farming for its impact on society: "it is a reminder of the man-earth relation," a trace threatened to be suffocated by modernity.<sup>383</sup> Ecologically speaking, "the farmer, by the very nature of his techniques, must modify the biota more radically than the forester or the wildlife manager."<sup>384</sup> As such, it is of vital importance that those working the land do so in a way that preserves the cultural value and ecological integrity of the land.

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., vii-viii.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 222.

In one vignette, "Illinois and Iowa," Leopold reflects on the farmland, farmers, and institutions he sees pass by his bus window. He notes that between the farmer's fence and the edge of the roadway "grow the relics of what once was Illinois: the prairie."<sup>385</sup> Their perception of nature diminished, "no one in the bus sees these relics." Embodying this lack of insight is a farmer sitting near. "A worried farmer, his fertilizer bill projecting from his shirt pocket, looks blankly at the lupines, lespedezas, or Baptisias that originally pumped nitrogen out of the prairie air and into his black loamy acres ... were I to ask him the name of that white spike of pea-like flowers hugging the fence, he would shake his head. A weed, likely."<sup>386</sup> The bus then passes by a farm. "Everything on this farm spells money in the bank. The farmstead abounds in fresh paint, steel, and concrete. Even the pigs look solvent."<sup>387</sup> Leopold makes a clear contrast: on one hand, the virtuous observer (himself) who sees what the farmer does not—the diversity and functioning of the ecosystem. On the other, the ignorant farmer who only tends to his bank account, reflecting an agricultural system purely driven by economic imperatives. Leopold exhorts his reader with what may be his most quoted passage:

Quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 117-18.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 119.

integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.<sup>388</sup>

In terms of farming, this ethic would convert farmers from producers of monocultures of commodity crops to those who know the biotic *community* and ensure a place for all its members. He would have farmers become farmers of not just soybean but “wild plants and animals,” ensuring habitat for all native residents. Leopold laments the fact that “there is, as yet, no sense of pride in the husbandry of wild plants and animals, no sense of shame in the proprietorship of a sick landscape.”<sup>389</sup>

Here emerges the crucial concept of stewardship: that the farmer is not only responsible for his commercial enterprise but also for the health of the land. Observers “overlook entirely the sense of husbandry developed by the European landholder in the process of cropping. We have no such thing as yet. It is important. When we conclude that we must bait the farmer with subsidies to induce him to raise a forest...we are merely admitting that the pleasures of husbandry-in-the-wild are as yet unknown both to the farmer and ourselves.”<sup>390</sup> Indeed, in the aftermath of the Dust Bowl, when wheat farmers stripped the soil of its biota and made it so susceptible to erosion, the idea of stewardship must have seemed alien. Leopold was never wholly sanguine about the ability of the state to produce good outcomes;

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 224-25. This is not only a message to farmers but also to his fellow conservationists. Those following Gifford Pinchot, including himself in his early years, saw nature as a collection of resources to be managed for the sake of future economic needs, much akin to contemporary “sustainable development.” Leopold, by theorizing the ecosystem as a community, would challenge this economistic attitude. *Sand County Almanac*, 221.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 175.

instead, he sought to reform the values underlying agriculture and agronomy.<sup>391</sup>

Farmers themselves would need to take an interest in protecting the biotic community.

To summarize, I argue that Leopold produces a unique pastoral that responds to the conjunction of the economic and philosophical forces of modernity and the biotic community of the countryside. The recreationist and the farmer are his two targets, those men who bring modernity to bear on the country, the first with his trophy-hunting of nature and the second with his conversion of the land into a simple object of production. He problematizes the way in which machinery has enabled certain destructive forms of recreation, eliminating the very wild that weekenders from the city sought to experience. He castigates modern men for failing to see the ecology under their feet, the perception of which would induce wonder and education without incurring an ecological cost. And finally, he sees farmers as converters of the middle landscape into a purely economic terrain, not only stripping nature's resources in the process but also the cultural values ("split-rail value") that farm life traditionally provisioned. Economic reason, modernism, and the city conspired to conquer the American landscape, both its wild and garden spaces. Ecological perception and knowledge and stewardship under the aegis of the land ethic could reverse this tide.

I will conclude this section by briefly reflecting on that which these two figures, Jefferson and Leopold, handed down to contemporary pastoral agrarians. If Jefferson idealized farmers by attributing the health of the broader American society

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<sup>391</sup> On the limitations of government in conservation, see *Sand County Almanac*, 213-14.

and politics to their presence and numbers, then Leopold idealized what ecological knowledge and a land ethic could do in the hands of farmers. Each of these figures had very good reasons for coming to these positions. Jefferson was guided by the idea that a republic required a majority of the population to belong to the landed class, to be reliant upon the land and therefore not dependent upon their fellows or the market. Leopold rightly understood agriculture to be a practice that is uniquely intrusive into the ecology. Therefore it made good sense to target farmers and implore them to think beyond the economic performance of their farm. What Jefferson did not represent or grapple with were the enormous imbalances of power found in the American countryside, particularly between blacks and whites. Leopold, for his part, makes it seem as if the re-orientation of perception, aesthetics, and values were sufficient to subordinate economic reason.

Wendell Berry, standing at the opposite end of the transformations in the countryside that Leopold chronicles and problematizes in his *Almanac*, will combine both of these idealities. For him, farming is a profession that can and should produce both a social and ecological crop. The key is to restore the agricultural class who carry such virtue and knowledge of the land: emplaced family farmers.

### ***Wendell Berry and the pastoral agrarian imagination***

For my purposes here, attempting to understand the alternative agri-food imaginary and how pastoral agrarianism contributes to it, Wendell Berry matters for two reasons. First, Berry may be considered the patron saint of alternative agri-food. Mark Bittman calls him an “American hero” and states, “if you read or listen to

Wendell and aren't filled with admiration and respect, it's hard to believe that you might admire and respect the land or nature, or even humanity."<sup>392</sup> Lawrence Buell asserts that Berry's agrarian vision is "deliberately anticonsensual, an insurgency of the disempowered."<sup>393</sup> As such praise indicates, one coming from a popular columnist and the other a distinguished professor of American literature, Berry is a rare figure, one who attracts attention from literary and academic admirers and maintains a broad public audience. Berry himself achieved considerable academic success, earning a Master's at Stanford and later holding a position in the department of English at New York University.<sup>394</sup> But true to his emphasis upon roots, place, and the value of farming he gave up this position to move back to his native Kentucky, where he farmed, wrote, and taught at the University of Kentucky. His allure, I suggest, comes with this marriage of literary talent, philosophical insight, and grounding in the land. Among the secondary literature, one finds little criticism.<sup>395</sup>

Secondly, Berry is important for his use of the pastoral to expound and preach the agrarianism of Jefferson. His most important work, *The Unsettling of America* (1977), is a systematic attempt to revive Jeffersonian thought in an age of modernization and ecology, and it has contributed to alternative agriculture an emphasis on land stewardship, family farming and local economies, as well as a critique of industrialism, corporations, cities and consumerism. Like Leopold, he

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<sup>392</sup> Mark Bittman, "Wendell Berry, American Hero," *New York Times* April 24, 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 44.

<sup>394</sup> In "A Native Hill," Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2003).

<sup>395</sup> A notable exception is Eric T. Freyfogle, "Wendell Berry and the Limits of Populism," in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Nashville: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

criticizes the manner in which productivism reigns over stewardship, and the way in which we have lost our intimate knowledge of the land. Berry tells us that productivism, science, and specialization have resolved “the question of how we will relate to our land” in the most superficial and shortsighted way possible.<sup>396</sup> This criticism is joined by an observation, that there is an “uncanny resemblance between our behavior toward each other and our behavior toward the earth.”<sup>397</sup> Berry arrives at this conclusion through the juxtaposition of industrialism (using the metaphor of the strip mine) and stewardship, prefiguring the work of Thomas Lyson, who we will encounter in the next chapter:

Let me outline as briefly as I can what seem to me the characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind. I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health—his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his community’s, his country’s.<sup>398</sup>

Having encountered Leopold, much of this is familiar pastoralism, a criticism of the intrusions of the industrialism of the city and its exploitative mentality into the countryside and the man-land relation. The difference, however, is that Berry much more romantically looks upon traditional farming and farm communities than does

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<sup>396</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 7.

<sup>397</sup> This powerful line of critique extends back to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and is found in the left literature of the 1960s-70s (notably, Herbert Marcuse and Murray Bookchin). *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Leopold. Note the Jeffersonian connection between the farmer and the health of the country. Elsewhere, he makes this connection explicit: he wishes to revive the “independent, free-standing citizenry that Jefferson thought to be the surest safeguard of democratic liberty.”<sup>399</sup> Only the farmer can be so independent and “free-standing” as they have “independent access to the staples of life.”<sup>400</sup> If the modern man, on the other hand,

lives by the competence of so many other people, then he lives also by their indulgence; his own will and his own reason to live are made subordinate to the mere tolerance of everybody else. He has *one* chance to live what he conceives to be his life: his own small specialty within a delicate, tense, everywhere-strained system of specialties.<sup>401</sup>

This passage echoes the association Jefferson makes between those immersed within the market economy and dependency. Today’s city-dweller may perhaps be more educated and produce a more valuable product than Jefferson’s buckle-makers, but they are equally dependent upon the market for their livelihood. A country aspiring to democracy cannot be composed as such; for Berry, as for Jefferson, the health of the country is at stake.

With agriculture increasingly dominated by growers, agronomic specialists, and massive corporations, we must fight to preserve the small, place-bound, family farms that are so crucial to our nation. Berry emphasizes the “connection between the ‘modernization’ of agricultural techniques and the disintegration of the culture

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 21.



and the communities of farming,” leveling upon the machine and technology the charge of “community-killing agriculture.”<sup>402</sup> He is keen to disassociate farmers themselves from these transformations. “This...is not primarily the work of farmers—who have been, by and large, its victims—but of a collaboration of corporations, university specialists, and government agencies. It is therefore an agricultural development...motivated by...the ambitions of merchants, industrialists, bureaucrats, and academic careerists.”<sup>403</sup> Again, we find a pastoral narrative depicting the outside invasion and “unsettling” of the rural order. History does support this statement, at least in part. Daniel Danbom notes the way in which early 20<sup>th</sup> century farmers resisted the efforts of extension agents to transform (“rationalize”) farming.<sup>404</sup> And Berry is correct that the mechanization of farming came out of and bolstered the university scientists and corporations that produce and sell the technology, as well as large growers who, marshaling their capital and economies of scale, could afford and did derive disproportionate benefit from such technology. On the other hand, we might begin to question the historical veracity of the “old fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer”—did Berry’s farmer ever exist?

As a Jeffersonian, Berry cannot address this question. Instead, he picks up the torch of the family farm, that venerable rural institution, and adds to it an ecological hue. In associating the family farm with nature and championing it against the industrial-scientific-bureaucratic agriculture spawning factory farms and killing the soil, Berry pastoralizes his agrarian vision. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>404</sup> David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1979).

Berry takes Leopold's vision of positive conservation, guided by the land ethic, and ascribes it *retrospectively* to the family farm.<sup>405</sup> Berry asserts that the "care of the earth is our most ancient and worthy...responsibility" and that the family farm is the land's proper operator.<sup>406</sup> "The idea of the family farm...is conformable in every way to the idea of good farming: farming that does not destroy farmland or farm people. The two ideas may in fact be inseparable. If family farming and good farming are as nearly synonymous as I suspect they are" it is because "land that is in human use must be lovingly used; it requires intimate knowledge, attention, and care."<sup>407</sup> Berry makes the logical leap between family farms and good farming by asserting that family is the right unit for stewarding the land, large enough to supply the necessary labor and small enough to be "local" or attuned to the qualities of their land. By contrast, "the industrial ideology is wrong because it obscures and disrupts this necessary work of local adaptation."<sup>408</sup> The universalism of university-based agronomy, promoting one-size-fits-all techniques, machinery, and pesticides, and agri-business's "monomania of bigness," or the drive to achieve the largest, most productive farms possible have come at a great cost to the land and the rural communities that populate it.<sup>409</sup> Both are eroded by industrial agriculture, one literally washing away with the rain, the other slowly ground down by marketplace

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<sup>405</sup> By contrast, Leopold, writing decades earlier, noted that Midwestern farmers had long been devoted to "the game of wheating land to death." *Almanac*, 13. The way each treats the farmer is the key difference between the two authors. Leopold had very little good to say about them, though he recognized, given their intensive use of the land, that changing the ethos of farming was essential. He brilliantly remarks in his essay "The Farmer as a Conservationist," that "the landscape of any farm is the owner's portrait of himself." Aldo Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God: And Other Essays by Aldo Leopold* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 263.

<sup>406</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 14.

<sup>407</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Defense of the Family Farm," in Gary Comstock ed., *Is There a Moral Obligation to Save the Family Farm?* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1987), pp. 348-49.

<sup>408</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 233.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

competition and a bureaucratic system designed to eliminate smallholder communities.

In his ecological mode, Berry's agrarian vision at times appears very much like Leopold's land ethic, eliminating the division between farmer and the land, associating each with a common outcome.

We have given up the understanding—dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought—that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other.<sup>410</sup>

The core difference between the two is that Berry isolates one social institution—the small, family farm—as the carrier of the countryside's ecological future.<sup>411</sup> This, I suspect, has as much to do with Berry's own association with rural life and farm communities as it does the necessities of ecology. In light of chapter three, there is no way to dissociate Berry's insights here from the emphasis upon smallness and place in the green movement of his day, but overall I would argue that his attention

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>411</sup> By contrast, Leopold subtly criticizes the agrarian romantics. "They are showing us drama in the red barn, the stark silo, the team heaving over the hill, the country store, black against the sunset. All I am saying is that there is also drama in every bush, if you can see it. When enough men know this, we need fear no indifference to the welfare of bushes or birds, or soil, or trees." Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God*, 263.

and affect for the land are distinctly agrarian. The emphasis upon above on *culture* makes clear that Berry's primary concern is to reshape our values such that we come to recognize and re-evaluate the emplaced, familial, and communal rural life of a (presumably) by-gone age.

From *Unsettling* (1977) to his recent Jefferson lecture "It All Turns on Affection" (2012), Berry consistently reads these problematic transformations through the question of values. The forces which Berry believes propel industrialism, technology and productivism, are not logical outcomes of capitalism but rather modern tendencies: sloth, placelessness, and the belief we have been emancipated from nature. He ridicules the contradiction of the modern character: "there is nothing more absurd, to given an example that is only apparently trivial, than the millions who wish to live in luxury and idleness and yet be slender and good-looking." He relates this to "our attitude toward work. The growth of the exploiters' revolution on this continent has been accompanied by the growth of the idea that work is beneath human dignity, particularly any form of hard work. We have made it our overriding ambition to escape work, and as a consequence have debased work until it is only fit to escape from."<sup>412</sup> Seeking nothing but the escape from work, moderns fail to see that they left behind a place of meaningful work, beautiful minds, bodies, and culture. "From a cultural point of view, the movement from the farm to the city involves a radical simplification of mind and character ... such a man, upon moving to the city and taking a job in industry, becomes a

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<sup>412</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 12.

specialized subordinate.”<sup>413</sup> In contrast, by working for himself, by providing for himself, and by working an occupation with diverse challenges, the farmer can take pride in his “workmanship.” Farm life is the antidote to the simple, trivial drudgery of the city economy. Berry here has no lessons for those stuck in the city, the subtext is that only rural living and working an authentic farm can provide a meaningful life in the modern era.<sup>414</sup> He never considers the possibility that for many farming itself was drudgery, a motivating factor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century flight to the city, and never deviates from the Jeffersonian position that the countryside is the site of right-living and the store of values for the nation.<sup>415</sup>

The battle, then, is over the fate of the countryside. On the ever-present factory farm the grower is caught in the same web of dependency and simplifications as the factory worker. Strikingly, this farm is run by inputs (seed, fertilizer, pesticides, machinery) that come not from the farm itself (respectively, from past harvests, from animals, and from hand labor) but from distant universities and factories. The farmer becomes dependent on industry, and his work diminished into machine planting, spraying, and harvesting (Berry even chides the modern for the air-conditioning in his tractor). Increasingly, the countryside itself becomes a no-place. “And in the midst of this land, where farmers are no less dependent on Shell Oil Co. and John Deere than they are on the weather, stands

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>414</sup> Berry here is not alone, one immediately recalls Paul Harvey’s speech “So God Made a Farmer,” also a product of the late-70s.<sup>414</sup> Harvey works on many of the same themes, including the diversified nature of farm work, the work ethic of the farmer, and the family, community, and religious orientation of the farmer.

<sup>415</sup> These tensions are wonderfully evoked in Willa Cather’s semi-autobiographical novel, *My Antonia*.

\_\_\_\_\_'s place."<sup>416</sup> On the other hand, the good farmer is both the product and producer of place: "a good farmer, on the other hand, is a cultural product...he is made by generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated, tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground."<sup>417</sup> On one hand, we have forces homogenizing farming and the landscape, on the other, forces that maintain its diversity, that is to say, its places. Again he contrasts the factory and family farms: "to treat every field, or every part of every field, with the same consideration is not farming but industry. Kindly use depends upon intimate knowledge, the most sensitive responsiveness and responsibility. As knowledge (hence, use) is generalized, essential values are destroyed."<sup>418</sup> Only farm families and settled communities accumulated the knowledge necessary to steward the land, knowing its particularities and needs. The challenge is to disseminate this idea and prompt a re-valorization of emplacement.

To convince his audience, he even mirrors the bioregional literature in its emphasis on the instruction nature gives to those dwelling in her places. In this line of argument, nature becomes an agent willing to guide humanity. "If we are observant and respectful of her, she gives good instruction. As Albert Howard, Wes Jackson, and others have carefully understood, she can give us the right patterns and standards for agriculture."<sup>419</sup> On our part, our ability to receive that message is

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<sup>416</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 208.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>419</sup> Wendell Berry, "It All Turns on Affection," 2012 Jefferson Lecture of the National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/wendell-e-berry-lecture>. Also see "Nature as Measure" in Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*.

limited by the “effective reach” of our affection, which does not seem to extend much beyond our immediate vicinity, our own place.<sup>420</sup> Here too, Berry’s argument mirrors that of place-based ecology, which builds off what Ursula Heise calls an “ethic of proximity”—the notion that we naturally sympathize with and are receptive to that which is nearest to us.

The future of the land is thereby tied to the future of this class of agriculturalists. So too does dis/em-placement have great bearing on the future of the nation:

There are several things that people will *not* be free to do in the nation-of-the-future that will be fed by these farms-of-the-future. They will not live where they work or work where they live. They will not work where they play. And they will not, above all, play where they work. There will be no singing in those fields. There will be no crews of workers or neighbors laughing and joking, telling stories, or competing at tests of speed or strength or skill. There will be no holiday walks or picnics in those fields because, in the first place, the fields will be ugly, all the graces of nature having been ruled out, and, in the second place, they will be dangerous.<sup>421</sup>

Berry brings together several threads to paint this dystopian picture. The displacement of the cottage industry into the factory; the displacement of farm products into the factory and even the farmer himself into the city, returning “home” on weekends; the conversion of work into drudgery; the conversion of the fields into dangerous spaces, saturated by pesticides; the conversion of the fields into

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<sup>420</sup> Berry, “It All Turns on Affection”. Heise, *Sense of Place*, 28.

<sup>421</sup> Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 74.

homogeneous spaces by monocropping, and the concomitant elimination of trees, bushes, diverse flora, and crooked streams (a process previously lamented by Leopold). Above all, the elimination of rural culture itself, common work and play. The complex and sentimental pastorals converge, becoming instruments for Berry's mission to denigrate modern displacement and revitalize, at least in our mind's eye, the traditional countryside, its geographies and social institutions.

What we are working for, I think, is an authentic settlement and inhabitation of our country. We would like to see all human work lovingly adapted to the nature of the places where it is done and to the real needs of the people by whom and for whom it is done. We do not believe that any violence to places, to people, or to other creatures is "inevitable." We believe that the industrial ideology is wrong because it obscures and disrupts this necessary work of local adaptation or home making.<sup>422</sup>

With these ideas as the basis of his thought, it was very easy for figures in the local food movement to embrace Berry and for Berry to embrace them. In his characteristically pithy manner, he argues that "without prosperous local economies, the people have no power and the land no voice."<sup>423</sup> For everything the family farm and its emplacement promises—connection to nature and land stewardship, social connectivity and "neighborliness", political economic independence and security—the local economy seems to deliver as well. Pastoral agrarians capture much of the idealism of place and nature found in political localism and place-based ecology.

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>423</sup> Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 261.



## ***Conclusion***

Berry's thought demonstrates the assumptions of the pastoral agrarian narrative and how they close down analysis into political economic issues. Working in the pastoral vein, he argues that there is an "authentic" settling of the land—small farms and communities rooted in their landscape and customs and social connections—that is being disrupted by values and forces emanating from the centers of government, manufacturing, and trade. Updating the pastoral for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berry folds into the critique the ecology-industry binary, highlighting the ways in which productivism, science, and industrial technique have denuded the landscape of variety and even its precious soil. These forces have combined to, as he puts it in his evocative title to his 1977 book, "unsettle" America. In this way, Berry defines the country through its countryside, a pastoral trademark going back to the poetry and politics of the fading English gentry. To this, Berry adds the Jeffersonian vision of an America populated by small farms, whose members' virtue forms the basis of the community and nation.

The intended outcome is a restoration of a lost American countryside. Through pastoral agrarian rhetoric he attempts to rally his readers, urban and rural, to the defense of the family farm, traditional farm practices, and rural communities. In the past decade, he has helped to channel his sympathizers towards locavorism, considering it conducive to the rebuilding or maintenance of existing rural

communities and their environment. To the extent that he has a message and challenge for urbanites, it is to refashion their consumption choices accordingly.<sup>424</sup>

We might begin to think what Berry's rhetoric leaves out or obscures. First, the American agrarian narrative always served a "covering" function for social, political, and economic institutions and practices that did not conform with the narrative of virtue and independence. In Jefferson's day, the narrative elided slavery, rural poverty, and an urban-rural power asymmetry. It covered over events like Shay's Rebellion and the workings of Jefferson's own plantation at Monticello. Later, it would conceal the reality of American homesteading, which rather than settle the countryside in a beautiful quilt was a mess of bad farming and transitory populations. So too would it obscure tenancy farming and sharecropping, which blighted the South, as well as indebtedness to banks and reliance upon rail monopolies for access to the market. These power asymmetries, both inside localities and between locals and distant forces (the banking and rail sectors), were factors that would spark the progressive era and reveal to many the dire straits of the American countryside.<sup>425</sup> Last but not least, the Depression era, with its own generation of indebted farmers and eroded landscapes. The prosperous, ecological, small farms and integrated, sociable rural communities—"authentic settlement"—that Berry mourns probably never existed as a general feature of the American countryside.

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<sup>424</sup> This is particularly clear in *Unsettling of America*, 24-25.

<sup>425</sup> Several important agri-food groups emerged in this period, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, National Grange, and local-regional farmer co-ops; as well as state-led efforts to modernize farming, led by extension offices operating under the Smith-Lever Act.

Furthermore, we should consider the *internal* dynamics of the rural community and family farm which are left aside in the agrarian narrative. For instance, Berry does not consider the presence and problems of farm labor. Both in Berry's grandfather's time and today, farmers from Florida to California and north to Massachusetts have utilized cheap, commodified labor in order to produce their goods. As a one-time tobacco farmer himself, Berry must be aware of the fact that countless "family farms" rely upon outside "help." He alludes to this fact in his definition of a family farm, "one that *is* farmed by a family, perhaps with a small amount of hired help."<sup>426</sup> Not only is the quantity left ambiguous, so too is the *quality* of labor. "Help" is an interesting way to describe the relations between farmers and workers, implying some sort of giving or common bond. In this language, the socio-economic asymmetries between owner and worker are obscured. So too does the systematic legal discrimination against farm workers, their lack of rights and protections enjoyed by nearly all other workers, go unmentioned. (I imagine that Berry would assign these problems to the factory farm, and consider worker exploitation to be something done by growers not farmers.) In addition, the farm has always been a site of power relations, not just between farmer and hired farm labor, but between men, women and children, between tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and plantation owners. The farm has been a site of subordination and drudgery for women, danger for children, exploitation for blacks and whites alike. A narrative which constructs a corona around this

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<sup>426</sup> Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*, 31.

fading socio-economic order is both seductive in its romanticism and dangerous in its depoliticizations.

But what about the values that Berry hopes to revive in America? As I argued in chapter one, in these values one finds the *positive* inducements building the alternative agri-food movement. Independence, security, health, tradition, connection, community, ecology—through pastoral agrarianism, all have become discursive supplements of the family farm and local food economies. What is problematic are not the values themselves, for they are desirable ends to achieve, but the sole association of those values with rural emplacement and farming, the inattention to contrary evidence, and the inattention to the political economic structures that impede the realization of these values. Even if one were to entertain the notion that emplacement generates positive outcomes, the Jeffersonian vision relies upon the equitable distribution of farmland. And while many in the alternative agri-food movement, including Berry, problematize the growing concentration of land holdings and the elimination of small and medium-sized farms, nowhere does one read or encounter advocacy for the type of land reform that would deliver this most basic ingredient. Doing so would require questioning the sanctity of private property. Values and ideas matter, but values without a recognition of and mobilization around the structures that inhibit the realization of those values are ones easily adopted by the market, turned into new niches for consumption and robbed of their spark.

## CHAPTER 6

### AND JUSTICE FOR ALL: ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES AND THE NARRATION OF LABOR IN FOOD POLITICS

The purpose of this chapter is straightforward: to depict in greater detail the alternative agri-food movement, to analyze how labor and political economic structures are represented in the movement, and to connect localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism to these representations. That is to say, to document the manner in which these discourses affect the political economic vision of alternative agri-food. There is also a critical component to this exercise. Previous analysis has emphasized the manner in which the movement has participated in or reflected neoliberalism, specifically the marketization of the movement, and its corresponding individualism and voluntarism. Critics connect these strategies to the notable limitations of the movement. I hope to add to this conversation by looking beyond neoliberalism to these other discourses, connecting their ideas to political economic omissions within alternative agri-food discourse and practice.

The first half of the chapter examines the alternative agri-food movement from what I consider to be its own mainstream perspective, using Thomas Lyson's *Civic Agriculture* as an exemplary text. I then introduce the food justice literature, which has sought to politicize areas of the agri-food system left unattended by the mainstream perspective (such as Lyson's). The idea is to get a sense of the contours of the movement as well as the manner in which alternative discourses come to shape, frame, and delimit its politics. The second half of the chapter engages the

ways in which voices inside the movement, both mainstream and not, narrate agri-food labor<sup>427</sup> and the contributions the discourses make to these narratives. My contention is that actors across the movement commit three “sins” with regards to representing labor: omission, instrumentalization, and homogenization. That is to say, agri-food labor is either (a) not represented in the narrative, (b) included but used as a negative trope to justify ends not their own, or (c) are included but lumped together with other actors (such as family farmers) who possess disparate positions within the political economy. I find this to be true even in the case of the food justice literature, which explicitly sets out to negate the sin of omission by “frontloading” labor in its narrative, yet ultimately homogenizes agri-food workers together with small farmers and consumers.

The point of this exercise is to critique the alternative agri-food movement for its myopic representations of labor, contributing to the politicization of alternative food politics, but also to trace this myopia to the discourses in question. I seek to buttress this analysis by consulting an additional source of evidence: alternative projects that explicitly centralize and seek to ameliorate the condition of agri-food labor. Toward that end, I investigate two such projects in the US—the Domestic Fair Trade Association and the Agricultural Justice Project. As with the food justice literature, I note that these projects make strides towards the representation of agri-food labor but fail to account for political economic difference, and as such, homogenize the players in the game. I find traces of the three discourses in the literature of these projects, and tie these discourses to the

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<sup>427</sup> I use the term agri-food labor to account not just for farm workers but food processors as well.

problem of homogenization. Based on my investigation of the activist literature and these two initiatives, my conclusion is that outside of agri-food labor organizations, actors in the alternative agri-food movement fail to recognize and represent agri-food laborers as a social group with particular interests and a distinct position within the political economy. I believe that we can, in part, attribute this outcome to the discourses in question.<sup>428</sup>

On one level, this chapter is documentary in nature, offering empirical evidence to support my claim that these three discourses are influential in informing and delimiting alternative thought and practice in the United States. On the other, it is critical-theoretical. As has perhaps become apparent to the reader, treating these three discourses as if they were wholly separate would be a mistake. While they address different facets of political life—localism attends to the proximate community, political ecology to man-nature relations, and pastoral agrarianism to the countryside and farming—there are important imbrications between each. Specifically, I am referring to the ways in which place and nature (as well as their immediate connotations: locality, community, and environment) inform the worldview of each discourse. For instance, place is something created by a human community and by an ecology, indeed a conjunction of the two, and a place is where (for instance) a farmer must operate and therefore know and tend. Or put somewhat differently, many have equated nature with place and therefore the task of knowing and tending it been devolved to those people living-in-place. Because

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<sup>428</sup> A more class-centric analysis would hold that workers are omitted, instrumentalized or otherwise misrepresented because farmers do not stand to gain from their empowerment. This argument has merit, but does not explain the fact that (a) many *non*-farmers (including academics) narrate labor in similar ways, nor (b) the popularity of localist and farmer-based narratives among consumers.

place and nature are conjoined to the extent that in some narratives they are inseparable (e.g. in Thayer's "lifeworld"), so too do these discourses become difficult to disentangle. In the analysis of the food movement that follows, I slide back and forth between the discourses precisely because there are no strict boundaries between them.

These imbrications, I argue, serve to strengthen the group. For instance, as seen in chapter one, Ackerman-Leist responds to the claim that his localism is politically naïve by pointing to the environmental necessity of going local—our spatial powers must be confined and cordoned off by the needs and sensitivities of the local ecology or we perpetuate the crisis threatening our existence. But so too can these imbrications be the undoing of these discourses. If apolitical depictions of place and nature buttress these discourses and enable each to come to the defense of the other, then they may also be the threads that critics unwind in the pursuit of politics. In other words, localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism may politicize *certain* aspects of contemporary life but through their idealization of place and nature leave other politics behind. The task is to recuperate the politics found in rural place, on the farm, in the countryside, at the market, and in man-nature relations, and, secondly, to connect these politics to the economic structures that help produce them.

### ***Model farms, farmers, consumers, and communities***

Many scholar-activists seek to synthesize an alternative food *system*, wherein food is no longer seen as a simple commodity and daily necessity but the lynchpin holding



together nature, community, and economy. For many reasons this is a useful venture. Environmentally, agriculture is the human practice most transformative of the Earth's surface and waterways, and a major source of anthropogenic forcing of carbon and methane into the atmosphere. Socially, the global food system currently produces 22% more daily calories than each person on the Earth requires, yet 12 percent of the human population experienced chronic hunger between 2011-2013.<sup>429</sup> The question of food production does indeed tie together pressing environmental and social concerns. In the United States, activists pursuing the nature-community-economy equation in agriculture typically work from the vantage point of the small, family farmer (what some call the "family-scale" farm) and the conscientious food consumer. To date, concern for the environment, farmers, food safety and quality has prompted activists to emphasize the bringing together of producers and consumers within local food systems. This, I argue, is the mainstream position within the US' alternative agri-food movement. What I seek to do here is to analyze this narrative for its constituent parts.

To do so, I've selected Thomas Lyson's *Civic Agriculture* as it exemplifies the broader literature. Forming the architecture of this text are a series of binaries through which Lyson contrasts conventional and "civic" agriculture. These binaries include: neoclassical economics/pragmatism, productivism/development, experimental biology/ecology, corporate orientation/community orientation, and corporate middle class/independent middle class. In short, conventional agriculture is marked by industrialization, the prioritization of efficiency and production totals,

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<sup>429</sup> FAO, IFAD, and WFP, "The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013: The Multiple Dimensions of Food Security," (FAO, 2013), 19.

and globalization and free trade. Furthermore, it works towards corporate interests and subordinates the interests of citizens or communities to the interests of those corporations. Civic agriculture, by contrast, re-embeds the food system within the social and ecological contours of the local place. By redirecting production and consumption to the local place civic agriculture stewards the land, produces social connection and therefore community, and the nurtures the local business class that provides a buffer against the larger economy.

In the first binary, that between neoclassical economics and pragmatism, Lyson's idiosyncratic use of pragmatism becomes sensible when put into the context of the greater localist discourse. In this instance, pragmatism means dwelling locally, knowing the local social and ecological needs, and subordinating economic reason to "holistic" measures of well-being. He argues that whereas "neoclassical economics seeks the most efficient solution to a problem regardless of historical context or place, pragmatism advocates seeking the optimal solution that takes into account the historical, cultural, and environmental conditions that frame problems."<sup>430</sup> The tangible outputs of the efficiency motive are mechanization, which engenders monocropping, and free trade, which unites all global consumers with the most efficient (cheapest) producer in the market. As is typical with the broader literature, Lyson equates these tendencies with homogeneity and placelessness.<sup>431</sup> Against this neoclassical vision, Lyson's pragmatic farmers root their practice in place, its unique qualities, and knowingly re-embed (in the

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<sup>430</sup> Thomas A. Lyson, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 71-72.

<sup>431</sup> Even here in Singapore, in the midst of a banana growing region, I have a hard time avoiding the Cavendish banana.

Polanyian sense) the economy within this broader system. Harking back to chapter two, Lyson's pragmatism becomes legible when read through the political thought of those who lionize place—those who treat localities as concrete, community-oriented systems as practical, and community denizens as holistic thinkers who subordinate economic reason within a socio-ecological framework. Furthermore, Lyson's depiction of civic agriculture is in tune with localists who contrast the homogenizing global with the world's diverse localities and their unique knowledge, practices, and products.

Farms appear to belong to the community rather than be private, microeconomic enterprises caught in market logics. In Lyson's vision, small farmers possess a "community orientation" and "[cooperate] with one another to meet the needs of consumers in local (and occasionally specialty global) markets."<sup>432</sup> Furthermore, "equity and environmental issues within the community are given weight that is equal to or greater than efficiency and productivity ... the emphasis for producers working out of a civic agriculture framework is on household and community welfare."<sup>433</sup> Locality and community are treated as synonymous which is why Lyson presumes that localizing the food system would return it to the community. His vision of the community, however, is notably rooted in the small business (in this case, local farmers). While conventional agribusiness promotes large organizations that subordinate the interests of individual workers and communities to that which is "good for the company," Lyson's civic agriculture

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<sup>432</sup> Lyson, *Civic Agriculture*, 75. Here Lyson's local food system recalls Kloppenberg's foodshed, which we encountered in chapter one.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

would rebuild the small farms of America, promoting an “independent class rooted in the local community.”<sup>434</sup> Jefferson’s vision of an America constituted by small, independent farms whose operators contribute the virtue necessary for the well-being of the nation returns here in Lyson’s narrative. These farmers must be looked after for “what is ‘good’ for the socioeconomic health and well-being of the local community is integrally tied to the welfare of the small-business community.”<sup>435</sup> Considering the holistic-communal vision of the farmers composing Lyson’s small business community, it would be folly not to sustain this group and place them at the foundation of one’s eco-social-economic system.

Lyson also tells this story through the differing ways in which conventional/civic agriculture relate to nature. Lyson critiques conventional agriculture for its “reductionist” use of science, coopting biology through productivism and turning the identification of favorable traits into commodities themselves (e.g. seed genetics). By contrast, “ecological approaches to agriculture seek not so much to increase output/yield but to identify moderate production processes that are ‘optimal.’”<sup>436</sup> As to what ‘moderate’ and ‘optimal’ mean, Lyson leaves it vague except that we know that “optimality” is pegged to the requirements of the specific ecological place. Lyson is not effusive on the subject, but one may safely place him within the ranks of those who see the farmer as a land steward engaged in agroecology.<sup>437</sup> By being rooted (in the literal ground), the farmer has the knowledge and self-interest necessary to tailor his techniques to the

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>437</sup> Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, *Food Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 181.

requirements of the soil vis-à-vis its ability to sustain an output. In sum, through his connection to the place, his knowledge and virtue, the small farmer stewards both the land and community.

As I hope to have demonstrated, Lyson's account is replete with elements of the discourses investigated in chapters two through four. The concreteness of the locality, the social cohesiveness promised by the local place, the potential that a localized economy has for promoting diversity, the manner in which localization promises ecological outcomes, the value of rural living, farming and farmers—all these form the “ideological infrastructure” of Lyson's text as well as alternative agri-food writ-large. In other words, the admixture of these ideas forms the basis of the alternative vision and validates it to the broader audience. Regardless of whether activists are true believers or merely using these discourses as useful rhetoric to advance what is in reality a class politics (many notable activists are themselves engaged in agri-businesses), the components of these discourses are found scattered across the literature and form the movement's justification.<sup>438</sup> They also help to delimit its vision.

In defense of the small farmer, ecology, and local communities, Lyson sharply critiques conventional agriculture and the neoliberal economy (specifically, the subordination of social and ecological values to economic reason). But it is important to know the limit of this critique—how “deep” does it go? He selects specific aspects of the contemporary political economy—industrialization,

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<sup>438</sup> Notable examples include Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Nashville: University Press of Kentucky, 1993); Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture*; Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*; Joel Salatin, *Folks, This Ain't Normal* (New York: Center Street, 2011); Rodale, *Organic Manifesto*.

productivism, globalization and free-trade—for critique, but does not engage with more basic elements such as private property, competitive markets, and the profit imperative. This is in no small part due to the fact that Lyson is no anti-capitalist. As he states, “there may be positive benefits to communities that embrace a *community capitalism* model of economic development. Communities that nurture local systems of agricultural production and food marketing, as one part of a broader plan of diversified economic development, can gain greater control over their economic destinies. They can also enhance the level of civic engagement among their residents.”<sup>439</sup> The goal here is not to rethink the economy per se but to relocalize it and thereby build small (farm) businesses. Community development, such as the rebuilding of local food systems, “may eventually generate sufficient economic and political power to mute the more socially and environmentally destructive manifestations of the global marketplace.”<sup>440</sup> The problem is a *specific* form of capitalism—global free trade and economic concentration—rather than capitalism itself.<sup>441</sup> The idea of a “property-owning democracy”—common among Jeffersonian agrarians—turns private property into a virtue, something to be disseminated equitably such that all (i.e. the “middle class”) can participate as owners in local markets.

Left unexamined in Lyson’s text is whether his agrarian, eco-local vision is possible to achieve within a market economy populated by private firms, or whether

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<sup>439</sup> Lyson, *Civic Agriculture*, 105.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> This concern over concentration is legitimate – a few highly lucrative farms capture most of the total agriculture sales. In California, for example, census data from 2012 show that the top 8 percent of farms (measured by gross sales) took in 86 percent of the total receipts. In other words, they captured \$36.9 billion of the total \$42.6b industry. Nationally, farms grossing over \$1 million annually accounted for 3.8 percent of the total farm population but 66 percent of total sector sales.

dynamics in such a market tend to produce precisely the opposite outcome—inequality via the concentration of economic and political power. In the food economy, these inequalities are manifested (in production) in the inequitable access to land, and on the consumption end, as inequitable access to food.<sup>442</sup> Can we achieve a vision like Lyson’s—a socially equitable, cooperative, and ecological political economy—while leaving the fundamentals (private property, competitive markets) of capitalism in place?

I suggest that we connect the absence of this question in Lyson’s narrative to not only the hegemony of capitalism but also to the manner in which he idealizes localities, particularly so in terms of their social and ecological relations. For Lyson, private property and competitive markets are not a problem if carried and populated by the right actors. As detailed above, the values of “civic farmers” ensure they will be “pragmatic” and thereby search for “optimal” social and ecological outcomes. In other words, these are not narrow-minded actors bound to mantra of productivism. Better still, a marketplace populated by such virtuous producers and consumers produces community itself. In what is now a familiar trope Lyson argues that “the direct contact between civic farmers and consumers nurtures bonds of community. In civic agriculture, producers forge direct links to consumers rather than indirect links through middlemen.”<sup>443</sup> And, characteristic to the literature, he identifies CSAs and farmers’ markets as the institutions necessary to foster such

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<sup>442</sup> Land access tends to go unmentioned in US politics. Guthman notes the effects of high land prices on cropping patterns and labor costs in California, see Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 64-68. The USDA has sought to lower the barriers to entry into farming; it runs the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program that provides grants to newcomers. In the private sector, the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) provides resources to help farmworkers become farmers. See <http://www.albafarmers.org/>.

<sup>443</sup> Lyson, *Civic Agriculture*, 85.

contact. This is not only what one might call, following Lavin or Guthman, the neoliberalization of the concept of community, wherein community occurs at the producer-consumer nexus in the market. This is the adoption and perpetuation of localist and pastoral agrarian idealisms of place and nature. By stripping local places of division, inequality, and outsiders, including the idealization of farmers and local market institutions, the locality becomes the site of resistance to the greater political economic forces. Indeed, the local place is not the passive *venue* of resistance, it produces resistance itself through its qualities—concreteness and practicality, social and ecological connection. In sum, the qualities of the local and those who inhabit it act as a prophylactic against economic, social, and environmental ills plaguing the general (indeed, global) economy and society. These are what I consider the positive inducements that attract activists to the local, pastoral, and agrarian visions, ones which thereby maintain and spread these discourses.

### ***Politicizing Alternative Agri-Food: Food Justice***

Bodies of thought such as Lyson's support and culminate in statements such as the following: "the local food movement, by de-industrializing the table through self-transformation and ethical food practices, has the potential to be an immediate 'here and now' way to build a different world and resist neo-liberalization."<sup>444</sup>

Immediately one notices familiar tropes of the local – the notion that the local is immediate, here, and now; that it is the site of ethics; and that the locality harbors

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<sup>444</sup> Patricia Allen and Alice Brooke Wilson, "Agrifood Inequalities: Globalization and Localization," *Development* 51, no. 4 (2008): 538.



the potential for resistance against the spatial force (neoliberalism). We also get a hint of the pastoral through the contrast with the industrial food system. Precisely why localizing food systems should result in “self-transformation” and ethical living is left aside; such is the power carried by the local.

The apolitical qualities of these narratives such have not gone unnoticed. DuPuis and Goodman’s early and thoughtful critique collects these narratives under the header “romantic anti-politics of localism studies.” These studies

embrace the local as the normative realm of resistance, a place where caring can and does happen. This echoes much of the US local food system literature, in which care ethics, desire, realization, and a sustainable vision become the explanatory factors in the creation of alternative food systems. In these norm or ethics-based explanations, the “Local” becomes the context in which cultural values work against anomic capitalism.<sup>445</sup>

That alternative food systems could be erected simply through care and a desire for sustainability is an idealism, so too is the idea that local food systems are inherently caring and sustainable.<sup>446</sup> DuPuis and Goodman rightly ask whether localities are necessarily socially just: “who gets to define ‘the local’? ... what kind of society is the local embedded in? ... We are concerned that localism can be based on the interests of a narrow, sectionalist, even authoritarian, elite, what we call an ‘unreflexive’ politics.”<sup>447</sup> In keeping with the scholarly preoccupation for neoliberalism, the

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<sup>445</sup> The “liberatory localism” of Allen and Wilson, mentioned in fn. 444, is exemplary of this idealization of the local. DuPuis and Goodman, “Should We Go ‘Home’ to Eat?,” 360, 361.

<sup>446</sup> Robert Feagan, “The Place of Food: Mapping out the ‘Local’ in Local Food Systems,” *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no. 1 (2007): 26.

<sup>447</sup> DuPuis and Goodman, “Should We Go ‘Home’ to Eat?,” 361.

authors worry that localists fail to account for the manner in which localism can work in the interest of a transnational, neoliberal elite (as discussed in chapter one). They seek to politicize localities and localism by demonstrating its embeddedness within the broader neoliberal project.

There is, therefore, something of a split between academics, some who bind together the movement with neoliberalism (e.g. DuPuis and Goodman, Guthman, Lavin) and others who seek to produce and defend the movement from critique (e.g. Lyson, Kloppenberg). The other key (and most recent) dynamic in the alternative food literature is the social justice frame, which has led to the “food justice” concept and lens.<sup>448</sup> Similar to the way in which environmental justice arose to challenge the white and affluent basis of American environmentalism, so too have activists raised questions about the food movement: who is represented (and who is omitted) in the alternative agri-food movement? Scholar-activists working within this framework have sought to incorporate farmworkers, minorities (including the indigenous), and the poor into the greater critique of the conventional food system; implicitly, food justice also forms a critique of the alternative-agri food movement itself. Using the monoculture/polyculture binary, wherein alternative agri-food fights to eliminate the homogeneity of field and plate by relocalizing and thereby diversifying agri-food systems, Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman argue that “the movement’s predominantly white and middle-class character...suggests that it may itself be something of a monoculture. It consists of a group of ‘like-minded’ people, with

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<sup>448</sup> Given my focus on the *alternative* movement, I am not attending to the various academics, mostly scholars working in agronomy and economics, who’ve sought to defend and perpetuate the conventional food system and its emphasis on scale, machinery, technology, and food security through free trade. From this side, the most visible figure is Robert Paarlberg.

similar backgrounds, values, and proclivities...moreover, those active in the food movement tend to have the wealth necessary to participate in its dominant social change strategy—the purchase of local organic food.”<sup>449</sup> In other words, threatening the movement are not just the greater forces of the political economy but the movement’s own internal composition and dynamics, specifically its white, affluent, consumerist constituency. To these authors, food justice means the incorporation of the “low-income communities and communities of color that are all too often absent from the dominant food movement narrative, and are disproportionately harmed by the current food system.” They seek to tell these “silenced histories” such that food “is not only linked to ecological sustainability, community, and health but also to racial, economic, and environmental justice.”<sup>450</sup> In sum, by broadening its scope they aspire make a polyculture of the movement itself.

One group that food justice seeks to recuperate are farmworkers—likely the most exploited members of the food system and also the least likely to figure in the literature of the movement. While (constructively) critical scholars, including Guthman, Lavin, Sandy Brown, Christie Getz, and Patricia Allen, have sought to introduce labor into the discussion, and while academics and activists working outside the movement have given the public rich accounts of the history and travails of farmworkers and food processors,<sup>451</sup> mainstream accounts within the movement

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<sup>449</sup> Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, "Introduction: The Food Movement as Polyculture," in *Cultivating Food Justice*, ed. Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 2-3. See also Julie Guthman, "If They Only Knew: The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food," in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, ed. Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>450</sup> Alkon and Agyeman, "Food Movement as Polyculture," 4.

<sup>451</sup> The most recent exemplars of this literature are Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Frank Bardacke,

tend to give labor a very short shrift.<sup>452</sup> To remedy this shortfall, Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi's *Food Justice* begin their account with a broad history of the working conditions of agri-food laborers in the United States. By virtue of their typical absence in the literature, the "front-loading" of agri-food labor is extremely valuable. The authors surface issues like contemporary indentured servitude (made notorious by the efforts of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and documented by Estabrook in his excellent *Tomatoland*), wage theft and sexual harassment, and touch upon structural discriminations such as the exemption of farm labor from the child labor regulations introduced in the Fair Labor Standards Act. By connoting contemporary agri-business with slavery and the oppression of early industrial factories, Gottlieb and Joshi seek to introduce new connections and arenas for struggle.

What is most important about the food justice literature is how a call to represent omitted groups culminates in a position of "justice for all," including farm owners, workers, consumers, and the environment. "The concept is simple and direct: justice for all in the food system, whether producers, farmworkers,

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*Trampling out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (London: Verso Books, 2012); Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Barry Estabrook, *Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2011). Other compelling accounts include Daniel Rothenberg, *With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Steve Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Miriam Wells, *Strawberry Fields: Politics, Class, and Work in California Agriculture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Richard Walker, *The Conquest of Bread* (New York: The New Press, 2004); Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996). Among popular figures in the food movement, Eric Schlosser is perhaps the only writer who has given consistent attention to the problems of agri-food labor. See Eric Schlosser, "In the Strawberry Fields," *Atlantic Monthly* (November, 1995).

<sup>452</sup> Again, I'm defining mainstream accounts by contrast to those who constructively criticize the movement, such as those who consider its neoliberal imbrications or those who problematize its class and racial composition.

processors, workers, eaters, or communities. Integral to food justice is also a respect for the systems that support how and where food is grown—an ethic of place regarding the land, the air, the water, the plants, the animals, and the environment.” As with the broader social justice literature, it seeks to represent, recognize, and unite *all* aggrieved parties (including the land). This requires placing marginal actors “at the center of arguments about how food is currently grown and produced.”<sup>453</sup> Left out of the discussion is whether all actors can equally occupy the “center.” What does the center look like when actors occupying distinct political economic positions are merged together?

Nevertheless, there is also a strategic interest in incorporating excluded actors—building a coalition sufficient to upend conventional agribusiness. As Alkon and Agyeman put it, “if activists in the food movement are to go beyond providing alternatives and truly challenge agribusiness’s destructive power, they will need a broad coalition of supporters. We argue that such support can best be found in the low-income communities and communities of color.”<sup>454</sup> There is certainly something to be said for this argument—many have blamed the weakness of the left on its inability to coalesce its diverse constituents, though given the political problem of situating each and every group at the “center” one wonders about how this might be put into practice.<sup>455</sup> Below, we will investigate two initiatives attempting to do just this.

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<sup>453</sup> Gottlieb and Joshi, *Food Justice*, 224.

<sup>454</sup> Alkon and Agyeman, “Food Movement as Polyculture,” 4.

<sup>455</sup> Most recently, Naomi Klein has taken environmentalists to task for working in their own niche and failing to build bridges to labor and social justice movements. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), chapter six.

### ***Narrating agri-food labor***

The account of the travails of agri-food labor in *Food Justice* is an excellent start, though their account bypasses several other important policy discriminations faced by farmworkers: in most states no right to collective bargaining, and in all states no right to overtime pay nor workers' compensation.<sup>456</sup> Furthermore, farmers have for decades claimed that there are chronic labor shortfalls and in response the federal government has imported thousands of workers annually under the H-2A guest worker visa program. This influx of foreign workers (in addition to those entering without documentation) helps to suppress wages and occasionally guest workers have proved useful for growers seeking to break strikes.<sup>457</sup> Additionally, employers employing guest workers do not pay FICA (federal insurance contribution) nor FUTA (federal unemployment) taxes on these workers, which may make guest workers more economical than domiciled workers. H2-A guest workers themselves have very little leverage over the terms and conditions of their employment. Guest workers are invited by an individual farm, only receive authorization to work at that particular farm, and must return home following the harvest. As such, guest workers are not able to shop their labor. Furthermore, guest workers are not protected by the provisions of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act. The

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<sup>456</sup> Notable is the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of California (1976) that grants CA farmworkers the right to collective bargaining (probably the most important policy achievement of the United Farm Workers). Recently, the UFW and other organizations have attempted to enact card check and overtime legislation in California. The former was vetoed by Governor Brown in 2011, the latter by Governor Schwarzenegger in 2010. For a general account of these policy discriminations, see Oxfam, "Inventory of Farmworker Issues and Protections in the United States," (Oxfam, 2011).

<sup>457</sup> Wells, *Strawberry Fields*, chapter 3.

program therefore explicitly undercuts the bargaining position of guest workers and implicitly the workers domiciled in the US.

We can use this background information to assess the efforts of alternative agri-food activists to make the American food system more participatory, democratic, and “embedded.” This particularly holds for those involved in disseminating the notion of food justice, given that they make it their explicit intent to incorporate actors like farmworkers into our political vision. To what extent do scholars and activists target these structural discriminations and seek to eliminate them? In some ways, this is a “soft” test considering that it leaves aside more structural bases of the political economy, such as private property. To do justice to the food justice literature, i.e. to highlight the relatively more sensitive treatment it lends to farmworkers, I will first attend to the narration of labor in the “mainstream” food movement literature.

In the mainstream movement literature, the question is representation and recognition. One encounters a particularly startling omission of agri-food labor in Maria Rodale’s *Organic Manifesto*. Of the famed Rodale family, who have for many decades sought to legitimate organic farming and disseminate its methods (in part through publications produced by their Rodale Institute), she condemns the “chemical farming” of industrial American mega-farms, as well as the ways in which big farms, their lobby, and the state have conspired to eliminate small and ecological farms. Regarding farm labor, she has the following to say:

Organic farming is more labor-intensive than chemical farming, and therein lies an irony. The government is always seeking to create more jobs, but its

actions actually emphasize the drive for ‘efficiency’ for farmers, which means fewer human hands and more hours spent alone in giant tractors. Farmwork is hard work, there is no question about it. It’s also satisfying, physical work that has sustained American families for 3 centuries. Just as important as the jobs is how we treat people who do them. No food system can ever be good for us, says Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, ‘if the people who harvest our food, process it, and prepare it for us are treated badly.’

Switching to all organic food production is the single most critical...action we can take *right now*.<sup>458</sup>

I quote at length because there are several things to unpack from this quote. First, she rightly notes that organic farming requires greater human labor input – particularly with regards to the elimination of pests (e.g. weeds). Second, she rightly notes that the mechanization and “chemicalization” of farming has been promoted in the name of efficiency—increasing yield and decreasing labor costs by trading human labor for machines and sprays. Third, she is correct in noting the physical difficulty of farm work. But here comes the problem. Precisely after she makes these three points she calls upon the hallowed figure of the American farm family—that most hardworking breed of Americans. She uses her narrative to defend the family farm and, in so doing, she fails to mention that the “satisfying, physical work” of the American family farm is often done by hired labor. To understand precisely how much hired labor, I have consulted USDA data on family farms:

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<sup>458</sup> Rodale, *Organic Manifesto*, 153.



**Table 1 – Family Farm Labor Data**

	<b>Family farms by sales totals</b>			
	Low sales	Medium sales	Large sales	Very lg. sales
<b>Number of family farms</b>	434,599	111,389	93,601	110,152
<b>% of total # family farms</b>	58.0	14.9	12.5	14.7
<b>Avg. man year of labor</b>	1.4	2.5	3.1	8.4
<b>% qty. hired labor</b>	5.8	13.4	21.4	60.7
<b>Avg. hired labor (man years)</b>	0.1	0.3	0.7	5.1
<b>Avg. qty. hours hired labor</b>	163.3	678.8	1329.8	10145.4

Note: Calculations using United States Department of Agriculture census data.<sup>459</sup>

To briefly explain the data, low sales farms gross under \$100,000 annually, medium sales farms between \$100,000 and \$250,000, large sales farms between \$250,000 and \$499,999, and very large farms \$500,000 and above. The USDA defines one “man year” of labor as 2,000 hours worked. Low sales farms derive on average 5.8 percent of their annual labor from hired sources, meaning they use on average 163 hours of hired labor per year. It is notable that only very large sales farms preponderantly rely upon hired labor.

The data makes it appear as if small family farms utilize very little hired labor – is this the case? One must consider the fact that labor input is heavily dependent upon the crop—grains are planted, protected, and harvested mechanically. Livestock operations rely on relatively little labor input. On the other hand, fruit and vegetable farms require hand labor since delicate crops cannot be harvested mechanically. Second, this data depicts sales figures, not farm size. In a relatively

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<sup>459</sup> Robert A. Hoppe and David E. Banker, "Structure and Finances of U.S. Farms: Family Farm Report, 2010 Edition," Economic Information Bulletin 66(U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010), 8.

small area, one can grow high value commodities and thereby invert the relationship between farm size and sales. The “small family farm” one mentally depicts may be quite lucrative, or quite marginal. With this in mind, the report breaks down these farms by commodity.<sup>460</sup> It is notable that low sales farms quite disproportionately raise cows (perhaps dairy farms, considering the low revenue total), “other livestock” (including sheep, goats, bees, aquaculture, etc.), and “other field crops” (mainly grains). Considering their specialization, it is understandable that low sales farms do not rely much upon hired labor.

Overall, according to USDA data American family farms derive 33 percent of their labor from hired sources. For fruit and vegetable farms that figure would be much higher – though only accounting for 14% of US farms, they account for 39% of national farm labor expenses.<sup>461</sup> In short, hired farmworkers have a considerable presence on American family farms, including or perhaps especially in the organic sector, which, as Rodale notes, relies more heavily on human labor. For instance, of the 2,714 organic farms in California, 1,916 reported hiring or contracting labor in 2008 (71 percent).<sup>462</sup> The point being, that when Rodale borrows from Schlosser to implore her reader to take steps that would improve the livelihoods of those who harvest and process our food, implying that it is the *American farm family* who does such work, she is only telling part of the story. Given Schlosser’s writings and advocacy for agri-food laborers, my speculation is that Schlosser was in fact

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>461</sup> Philip Martin, "Farm Labor in California's Specialty Corps," *ARE (Agricultural and Resource Economics) Update* 17, no. 6 (2014): 11. Accessible at <http://giannini.ucop.edu/are-update/>

<sup>462</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, "2007 Census of Agriculture: Organic Production Survey (2008)," Volume 3, Special Studies, Part 2 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010), 84.

referring to hired workers in this quote and that his language was lifted out of context to serve an ulterior (Rodale's) purpose.<sup>463</sup>

In sum, here Rodale commits what I term the “sin of omission,” wherein farmworkers should, by virtue of the context, be mentioned and made part of the story but instead are omitted. This silence is typical to the food movement literature—making the food justice literature useful indeed. The other common “sin” in the literature occurs when the author uses farmworkers as a negative trope, instrumentalizing their story in an attempt to validate alternative practices that do not involve the amelioration of agri-food labor conditions. I use the term ‘trope’ here because it calls to mind repetition and the use of a term for the purpose of embellishment—indeed, in the food movement literature when agri-food workers appear they are typically mentioned with respect to their degraded status and their story juxtaposed to the promise offered by alternative agriculture. We find an example of this in Lyson's text:

A farm or food operation that is not integrated into the economic structure of the local community, that produces for the export market, that relies on nonlocal hired labor, and that provides few benefits for its workers is not a civic enterprise ... factory-like fruit and vegetable farms that rely on large numbers of migrant workers...would not be deemed very civic.<sup>464</sup>

In his attack on conventional farming, Lyson rightly notes the manner in which agribusiness hires migrant workers, provides very few benefits, and how their role on

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<sup>463</sup> I cannot demonstrate the veracity of this hunch given that Rodale gives no citation (nor does a Google search return any hits from Schlosser's writings or interviews).

<sup>464</sup> Lyson, *Civic Agriculture*, 62.

the farm is akin to a factory worker (connoting perhaps a narrow function, repetition, and disposability). This characteristic reliance upon non-local labor obviously runs contrary to the requirements of civic agriculture, which is premised in the relocalization of food systems. Labor too, it seems, need to be “local.” What is interesting in this quote is not these obvious characteristics, per se, but the subtle way in which the difficulties of hired and migrant agri-food labor comes to valorize civic agriculture. Lyson leverages the story of these laborers (albeit, very briefly—this is their only mention in his text) against conventional agriculture with the explicit intention to juxtapose its practices to the “civic.” Farmworkers feature in the text only to the extent that they are useful in denigrating the opposition. Lyson makes no account of their interests nor do we know how he envisions their fate in a world composed of “civic agriculture.” Are they made local?<sup>465</sup> Are they eliminated from local communities and “sent back”?

The state of agri-food labor serves as a negative image useful in the valorization of the alternative agri-food movement even as the movement does not make a place for it. Returning to Rodale, in her “manifesto” she dutifully tells us that farmers growing crops that can’t be picked by machine (such as some fruits and vegetables) have to hire help, many of them migrant workers. They are often illegal immigrants who have no health insurance, and they bear the brunt of the damage caused by toxic farming practices, with much higher

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<sup>465</sup> This is plausible if we imagine temporary farm jobs made permanent—that is, farms employing workers on a year-round basis. Under this arrangement, the workers would be permanent features of the farm and therefore present in the community (I choose the verb “present” deliberately, as they would be physically present but one cannot know *a priori* the characteristics of their socio-political presence. To what extent would they be members of “the community”?).

rates of cancer, birth defects, and other diseases. But because they are just itinerant laborers, their problems are not the farmers' responsibility. I have heard about farmers actually enslaving illegal immigrants to do their dirty harvesting work for free.<sup>466</sup>

Given Rodale's preoccupation with chemical farming and her ambassadorship for organic, she uses the issue of pesticides to raise concern over the practices of the former. She rightly notes that conventional agriculture submits workers to pesticide exposure, and in this regard organic agriculture does indeed make a difference for workers. That said, later in the text when she relates a typical "year in the life" of an organic grower, she makes no mention of the fact that organic growers often rely upon hired labor—especially those growing high value fruit and vegetable crops.<sup>467</sup> And while organic agriculture makes a difference in terms of reducing exposure to pesticides, it contains no provisions for worker betterment. In fact, many organic farmers oppose the inclusion of any sort of "social" provisions into the organic certification process.<sup>468</sup> Put simply, organic farming is a class and environmental project. Rodale duly dedicates her book, "to all the leaders of the world, who hold our future in their hands. To my whole family who shares this honorable path with me. And to the farmers."

I suggest that these two sins—of omission, of using labor as a negative trope—characterize the food movement literature with regards to labor. The

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<sup>466</sup> Rodale, *Organic Manifesto*, 54.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> In a recent survey of California organic farmers, most farmers disapprove of adding a social/labor component to organic certification. Aimee Shreck, Christy Getz, and Gail Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture: Findings from an Exploratory Analysis," *Agriculture and Human Values* 23, no. 4 (2006).

burgeoning food justice literature, I argue, commits a third sin, that of homogenization. Returning once more to Gottlieb and Joshi's account of food justice, alongside their inclusion of marginalized actors (e.g. farmworkers) the authors *flatten* these actors, stripping away their unique positions and interests. They argue for "justice for all in the food system, whether producers, farmworkers, processors, workers, eaters, or communities" as well as for "the systems that support how and where food is grown—an ethic of place regarding the land, the air, the water, the plants, the animals, and the environment." But how would food justice be put into practice? Crucially, they identify "small, local, sustainable farms as the building blocks of any democratic and just food system."<sup>469</sup> Such is the power of the localist and political ecologic vision that the theorization of food justice cannot escape its confines. Because the local place connotes democracy and ecology—resolving the problem of inclusion and participation as well as the environmental problems borne of agriculture—the authors turn to the local and seek to funnel our efforts there once more. One may again ask, where does this leave the worker?

Writing in a different context (on participatory development), Pauline Peters notes that there is a "tendency to separate participation from politics ... to bracket off politics." Peters argues that participation must go beyond inclusion and recognition of affected groups, that true "participation is a political process involving contestation and conflict among different people with different interests

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<sup>469</sup> Gottlieb and Joshi, *Food Justice*, 224-25.

and claims."<sup>470</sup> This insight, I suggest, equally applies to those envisioning food justice. For instance, the farmworker's political economic role within the local is certainly different than that of the farmer's, who owns or has at her disposal land and capital. Gottlieb and Joshi do not account for this basic difference nor the "contestation and conflict" which such structural differences generate. By failing to account for the *differences* between the actors they lump together they create an idealism ("food justice") that will not be useful in achieving their goals (participation, democracy). On the terms they specify, i.e. working through small, local food systems, participation will continue to be channeled through existing political economic differences (e.g. owner vs. worker, local vs. migrant) and the resultant power asymmetries. The allure of the coalition, of an easy path to justice, invites the authors to homogenize the actors and strip them of political economic content.

To conclude the discussion thus far, I present this as evidence that the depoliticization of food politics goes beyond consumerism, pervading even those explicitly seeking to remedy the food movement's thin politics (e.g. those theorizing food justice).<sup>471</sup> Secondly, the source of this depoliticization is not strictly speaking neoliberalism, but rather there are multiple sources including and especially discourses of localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism. Left unsaid above, I speculate that an additional source of the silence regarding the potential for

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<sup>470</sup> Pauline Peters, "Encountering Participation and Knowledge in Development Sites," in *Development Encounters: Sites of Participation and Knowledge*, ed. Pauline E. Peters, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>471</sup> Cf. Feagan, "Place of Food," 38; Laura B. DeLind, "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* 28, no. 2 (2011); DuPuis and Goodman, "Should We Go 'Home' to Eat?."

conflict between farmers and workers is that in pastoral agrarianism farmers are unambiguously virtuous actors whose existence is under threat from external forces. Unlike the “grower” and his factory farm who mines the soil and contributes to global placelessness, the small and local farmer does not connote politics or economics, particular interests and power, but rather they are *acted upon* by the powerful. The political economics of agriculture has been cordoned off by food activists such that industrial/conventional agriculture becomes the bogey and small, local farms the threatened class that we must protect. Scholar-activists like Gottlieb and Joshi can skip past the structural differences between farmers and workers because in this political economy *both* the small farmer and the worker are threatened by the same force. Possessing a common enemy, they therefore ought to make natural allies.

Here pastoralism is most useful in eliding rural power relations, ones that are not contained within the confines of factory farms but rather all farms. Access to land, labor relations, and the profit imperative—these political economic questions and motives split farmers and farmworkers no matter the size nor ecology of the farm. Small farmers and farmworkers do not enter the fray with the same resources nor the same short or medium-term goals. Only one of these actors has access to land, buys labor, and must make a profit. The other has a commodity to sell (labor) but (typically) little to no direct access to land. No matter the size of the farm, the competitive pressures of the marketplace foster microeconomic logics wherein the farmer is required to suppress wages. For their part, farmworkers have the choice to either accept the wage, engage in collective bargaining (in California), or leave the



sector.<sup>472</sup> And contrary to the claim that small businesses may treat their workers better, there are suggestions that large operations are preferred by farmworkers, as they may provide better wages or working conditions; farms making large profits appear to have greater leeway in devolving some of this revenue down to the workers.<sup>473</sup> In short, small farms hire labor, small farms are microeconomic enterprises just as are large farms, and small farms may be buffeted by market forces such that they cannot be as generous towards their workers as they'd like. Indeed, for many farmers labor costs are *the only cost of production over which they have some control*.<sup>474</sup> The argument is not that large farms are the answer, but that the incessant focus on small and local farms does not account for these economic factors.

### ***Narrating Labor in Food Justice Initiatives***

Thus far I have used the scholar-activist literature for analysis – but what of actual alternative agri-food initiatives (AFIs) that are seeking to ameliorate the conditions of agricultural workers? How do they represent the concerns of farmworkers and put into practice programs intended to address their interests? Here, I will analyze two initiatives—the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP), and the Domestic Fair Trade Alliance (DFTA)—seeking to bring fair trade to the domestic food economy. I select these AFIs not because they are especially large or influential, but because they

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<sup>472</sup> Again, only in a small number of states do agricultural workers have the right to collective bargaining. Additionally, unions face great difficulty in terms of winning contracts from employers.

<sup>473</sup> Allen et al., "Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape," 67.

<sup>474</sup> Richard C. Lewontin, "The Maturing of Capitalist Agriculture: Farmer as Proletarian," *Monthly Review* 50, no. 3 (1998).

centralize labor within their projects, adopting the language of social justice and fair trade. (To be clear, these two AFIs fulfill different functions. The AJP certifies farms, wholesalers, and retailers that abide by their social-environmental justice standards. To these firms they grant the “Food Justice Certified” label. By contrast, the DTFA evaluates US fair trade programs, including the AJP, intending to critique and augment standards as well as provide a guide to consumers.) Given their emphasis on workers and social justice, with these AFIs one may expect a more frank discussion of (a) the structural inequalities that mediate the relationship between farmers and farmworkers and (b) the fact that each group possesses distinct interests that may come into conflict. The question is, do we find such language in their programs? And if we find omissions, can we trace these back to the discourses in question—localism, political ecology, and pastoral agrarianism?

Notably, each of these AFIs work within the “certification and labeling” tradition common to the alternative food movement. Just as the organic industry functions through a set of standards, a certification process that certifies farms which meets those standards (e.g., are “organic”), and a label for the package to alert the consumer to the organic quality of the food, so too do these groups have their own standards, certification process, and label. Thus it is that they fall within what Guthman and others consider the “neoliberalization” of the alternative movement – channeling the social, economic or political impetus for the alternative practice (organic, fair trade, etc.) into the market, making the alternative practice voluntary and reliant upon consumer “support.” This, as I suggested in chapter one, has been

the main criticism of alternative AFIs to date.<sup>475</sup> I would like to see if we can compliment this critique by connecting the discourses in question to silences regarding political economic structure and the particularity of worker interests.

The Domestic Fair Trade Alliance takes part in the broader attempt to “translate the traditional principles of international fair trade...into the domestic, regional and local economic spheres.” Indeed, one of the notable aspects of alternative agri-food is the fact that the fair trade industry has focused its efforts on producers located *outside* the borders of its consumer base, seeking to ethicize trade relations with foreign producers while remaining silent about the distribution of value within the domestic food supply chain. The DFTA has sought to close this gap. Working to include and benefit “those most marginalized in our current food and agriculture system (such as workers and small-scale producers),” the DFTA has drafted a mission statement, a set of standards, and has used those standards to evaluate the various fair trade programs operating in the US.

Looking within the mission statement, the goal of the DFTA is a conflict-free community, a “healthy community where all look after and support each other...and all contribute to and benefit from a clean and harmonious environment. Family-scale and community-scale farms and businesses thrive. All people recognize the realities, challenges, and effects of production, distribution, and labor.” Within this vision, the interests of workers and owners are consistently conjoined. The goal is “fair wages, fair prices,” or put more specifically, “our primary goals are to support family-scale farming, to reinforce farmer-led initiatives such as farmer co-

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<sup>475</sup> Guthman, “Polanyian Way.”; Guthman, “Neoliberalism.”; Brown and Getz, “Privatizing Farm Worker Justice.”

operatives, [and] to ensure just conditions for agricultural workers.” Just as with the food justice literature, “justice for all” is the aspiration, placing each party in the food system at its center.

The crux of the matter is not, however, the end goal but the interim—what path does the DFTA set out for achieving this goal? There is little appreciation for the fact that owners and workers begin this process occupying very different political economic positions. For instance, by promoting family-scale farming the DFTA claims that it would build “economic democracy,” by strengthening the positions of farmers and workers the program would ensure their “independence,” and representation and communication mechanisms would ensure that the “resources from trading relationships” would be governed in a “participatory manner.” But democracy connotes equal ability to participate and govern, which is inapplicable in an enterprise featuring hired labor. The laborers may provide insight into cropping but one struggles to imagine the farmer devolving all farm-related business decisions to the farmworkers. One also wonders what democracy could possibly mean given the seasonal nature of farm employment. Participatory governance over the distribution of farm revenue is also a mirage on a privately owned enterprise. Collective bargaining—which the DFTA mandates—is not the same as participatory governance. And independence is a strange term given that farmers depend upon the presence and provisioning of the labor commodity, just as laborers depend upon the firm for their wage. Independence in this arena would mean farmers no longer depending upon hired labor (self-provisioning) or workers no longer depending upon firms for employment (becoming farm owners

themselves). Neither of these outcomes are accounted for, and none of these structural distinctions feature in the literature.

To further pursue these issues, one may examine the specific criteria upon which they gauge the mechanisms for democratic participation in fair trade programs. These include whether “all stakeholders...are actively engaged by the program,” whether there is community support from stakeholder groups (e.g. unions), whether there is a “pay equity policy to limit the gap between the highest and lowest paid employee,” including managers and owners, and whether the program creates a channel for workers to “voice questions or concerns.”<sup>476</sup> In my analysis, these criteria do not fit squarely within the concepts of democracy or participation, nor do they address some of the issues raised in the previous paragraph. Transparency and communication are desirable but the DFTA does not take into consideration the structural inequalities (who can do what with what information) that delimit participation. A pay equity policy would be a boon to workers but it is not itself productive of the DFTA’s goals.

To moderate these criticisms, relative to other initiatives in the movement, the DFTA does set a high bar with regards to labor. Working in the interests of farmworkers, the DFTA would ensure “that there are mechanisms in place through which hired labor has an independent voice and is included in the benefits of trade through mechanisms such as living wages, profit sharing, and cooperative workplace structures.” The idea of an “independent voice” refers to organized representation (unions) and collective bargaining, to which most farmworkers in

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<sup>476</sup> Domestic Fair Trade Association, “Evaluation - AJP Food Justice Certified,” (DFTA, 2013), 20-23. Accessible at [http://fairfacts.thedfta.org/?attachment\\_id=231](http://fairfacts.thedfta.org/?attachment_id=231).

the US have no access; living wages speaks to the declining real wages of farmworkers since the 1980s; and profit sharing and “cooperative workplace structures” would erode the strict line standing between the private firm and private laborers. Were all farmworkers to be accorded these rights, it would undoubtedly transform the quality of life of those workers. The question, of course, is whether certification-and-labeling is going to get us there, particularly in a program that downplays the conflicts found within the sector, those between farmer and worker; between undocumented, guest, and domiciled workers; and between large, medium, and small farms.<sup>477</sup>

The DFTA’s only five-star rating goes to the AJP, which is unique in requiring that participating firms grant workers the right to collective representation and bargaining, as well as a living wage and numerous benefits typically only found in the non-farm sectors (worker’s compensation, unemployment insurance, sick leave, among others). The AJP truly sets a high bar within the field and in that regard is commendable (though it also helps to explain why it has so few participants). But what concerns us here is the political economic vision of the AJP: how does it see the relationship between farm owners and agri-food workers? In their “Principles and Underlying Assumptions” section at the beginning of their standards document, the AJP states:

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<sup>477</sup> Though the AJP combined small and medium sized farms, there may be good reason to separate the two. Some in the industry are working to protect farms that fall “in the middle,” claiming that medium sized farms suffer because they are too small to maximize economies of scale but too large to engage in direct sales. See, for instance, <http://www.agofthemiddle.org/>. Indeed, there is some evidence that small farms are rebounding, while the number of medium sized farms continues to decline. The 2012 farm census notes a net increase in the number small farms (under 50 acres) between 1997 and 2007, and a large decline in the number of medium-sized farms (between 50 and 500 acres). U.S. Census Bureau, “Statistical Abstract of the United States,” (2012): 536.

The goal is to build and maintain a mutually respectful and supportive relationship amongst the various parties in the food system (e.g. buyers, farmers, farm employees, cooperative employees, restaurant employees, and other food business owners and employees), *rather than an antagonistic one*. We envision a symbiotic relationship, in which despite occasional differences and disputes, the farmer, farm employee, and other food business employees and managers, buyers of farm products, and citizens...are able to live full and rewarding lives.<sup>478</sup>

This statement sits quite comfortably next to or within the food justice literature of Gottlieb, Joshi, Alkon and Agyeman. Potential for conflict is downplayed and symbiosis—a mutual payoff—is accentuated. Beyond the obvious, the document effectively *disallows* contentious politics and the type of participation theorized above by Peters. The next sentence gives a clue as to the reason why: “although these standards are applicable to a range of scale operations they are primarily intended as a tool for small and medium scale family farms and food businesses to help these groups add value and further differentiate their market share. These standards include sections that can be used by all types of food businesses.” In short, the kernel of the AJP, like all other certification-and-label schemes, is to add value—revenue—to the firm (whether a farm, restaurant, retailer, etc.). Like organic or other fair trade schemes, the AJP’s “Food Justice Certified” label seeks to entice a consumer who will pay a little more for a socially just product. In this case, a consumer interested in promoting fair trade *within* the US. The added value accrues

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<sup>478</sup> The Agricultural Justice Project, “Social Stewardship Standards in Organic and Sustainable Agriculture: Standards Document, September 2012,” (AJP, 2012), 8.

in the hands of the firm owner, who according to the AJP's principles must devolve some of that additional revenue to workers in the form of a "living wage" and benefits. As such, everyone benefits—the consumer has a clean conscience, the farmer makes a profit, and workers increase their welfare.<sup>479</sup>

Domestic fair trade is built upon the notion that small farms and farmworkers *already* have a mutual interests, and that domestic fair trade simply has to tap into this potential. The argument goes that both groups are marginalized and threatened by the preponderant power of large farms and the general dynamics of the agricultural sector. As Elizabeth Henderson and Richard Mandelbaum put it:

There is a growing consciousness among organizations and individuals involved in reforming the current U.S. food system of the ties that bind family farmers, farmworkers, and the communities that support them. Farmworker organizations are increasingly recognizing that workers and small-scale farmers are more alike than they are different relative to their position in the agricultural economy. Likewise, small farmers are increasingly recognizing the essential link between the future viability of the small family farm with just and humane working conditions for farmworkers.<sup>480</sup>

Henderson and Mandelbaum, two of the founders of the AJP and indeed two prominent members of the alternative agri-food movement, position family farms as an endangered economic/social class and seek to congeal farmworkers and family

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<sup>479</sup> Again, here is precisely where Brown, Getz, and Guthman would enter with their criticism. AJP, like other certify-and-label programs, relies on the producer-consumer nexus and displaces into the market what might otherwise be a set of relations governed by the state. This critique, steeped in the neoliberal lens, ought now be fully familiar.

<sup>480</sup> Elizabeth Henderson and Richard Mandelbaum, "Bringing Fair Trade Home: The Agricultural Justice Project," *The Natural Farmer* 2, no. 75 (Winter 2007-2008): 33.



farms into a common unit. Both groups, they argue, stand to gain from uniting against the large forces in the sector. Again, *the tendency is to obscure the structural differences and power relations between family (virtuous) farmers and agri-food workers*. Not only is this a goal—to unite all parties and work toward a just food system—the assumption is that this is already in part a reality.

This assumed unity helps explain why the food justice literature and domestic fair trade programs fail to address whether “mutual centralization” is possible. Note that in the conjunction of farm, worker, and community the latter appears as a flat, unproblematic unit that provides “support.” We find this sentiment in the DFTA’s mission statement, which declares that “strong local communities are the foundation of society.” And, as is typical of the genre, at the base of “the culture of farming and rural communities” stands the “family-scale farm.”<sup>481</sup> In another typical move, the DFTA links family-scale farms to “environmental and humane stewardship” of the land.<sup>482</sup> In these depictions of the family farm, community, and stewardship, the DFTA stands firmly in the center of the greater agri-food movement.

The convergence of these two groups over a “justice for all” mechanism that emphasizes the market is perhaps no surprise in a neoliberal era, but nor is it surprising that these projects carry over the same political economic myopia of the food justice literature. My explanation for these shortcomings, as should now be familiar, is that these projects and activists are steeped in a series of alternative discourses that do not raise or even allow for these insights. Indeed, it would

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<sup>481</sup> Domestic Fair Trade Association, “Evaluation - AJP Food Justice Certified”, 4.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

otherwise be confounding that the AJP allows for collective bargaining while downplaying antagonisms between owners and workers. (Perhaps the implicit assumption is, like the withering away of the state, that the standards of the program would coalesce actors over time such that collective bargaining would eventually become obsolete.) In any case, one finds the pretenses of localism and pastoral agrarianism littered across their literature. First, the aforementioned assertion by the DFTA that local communities form the foundation of society. Second, their connection of family-scale farms to local communities and ecologies: in the DFTA language on family-scale farming, they argue that family-scale farms are a means to “preserving the culture of farming and rural communities, promoting economic democracy, [and] environmental and humane stewardship and biodiversity.” At no point do the DFTA nor the AJP consider whether family-scale farms may be ambiguous socio-political actors, that the size and ownership of the farm may not determine their role in local communities, and that communities composed of family-scale farms may take very different characteristics. This is striking considering their efforts on the part of farm workers, who only tenuously occupy space within American rural communities.<sup>483</sup>

Third, the logic here is that the evils of farm employment are generated from the “mainstream” and “industrial” farm system. This exempts the family-scale farm from critical scrutiny, placing it in the apolitical zone of the pastoral. Localism and

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<sup>483</sup> Philip L. Martin and J. Edward Taylor, "Poverty Amid Prosperity: Farm Employment, Immigration, and Poverty in California," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 80, no. 5 (1998); Don Villarejo, "The Health of US Hired Farm Workers," *Annual Review of Public Health* 24, no. 1 (2003). Palerm depicts a more hopeful scenario, noting the ability of some migrant workers to lay roots and build community. Juan-Vincente Palerm, "The New Rural California: Farmworkers Putting Down Roots in Central Valley Communities," *California Agriculture* 54, no. 1 (2000).

pastoral agrarianism here fuse together. We need family-scale farms because they are the bastions of (rural) community, essential to economic democracy, and because they are presumed to be more generous toward their workers. We see here the allure and usefulness of the Jeffersonian discourse, reappearing in fair trade schemes to add value to their products and to promote an owner-labor coalition to oppose the mainstream farm system. But we also see that these projects rely upon the affect generated by the local – these farmers must be saved because they are the linchpins of the local community. Family-sized farms and the local become synonymous.

American pastoralism never had to account for farm labor, being equal parts enamored with the yeoman and forgetful of slavery. The path of least resistance today seems to equate small farmers with workers, as done above by Henderson and Mandelbaum. This brings me to my final point, that the only way to actually merge owners and workers, considering the structures of the political economy, would be to name and eliminate the structural cleavages between owners and workers. In its weakest form, one would address farm revenues. Though a “living wage” would starkly contrast with wages earned by agri-food workers today, that wage would presumably remain constant regardless of the profit accrued by the owner. One could eliminate this disjuncture by promising a living wage plus pegging bonuses to farm profits—profit-sharing. A stronger union between the parties would address the issue of private property—instituting collective ownership. All parties working the farm would own the farm and, without wishing to idealize worker co-ops, this arrangement seems much more credible with regards to

building participation and achieving economic democracy, both in the micro sense within the firm and in the macro sense within the broader economy. Today, the Jeffersonian vision of a property-owning democracy would have to take into account the scarcity and expense of land as well as the hundreds of thousands of laborers that make American farming possible. Worker co-ops would address this issue, though it leaves all other main economic structures in tact—private firms, competitive markets, and the profit imperative.

### ***Conclusion***

Having analyzed over the course of four chapters the presence, role, and power of these discourses, I should like to return briefly to the issue posed at the start of the project: the paths to political economic stability. Obscuring political economic cleavages through the language of “stakeholders” or “justice for all” does not preclude transformative politics per se—the political economy is overdetermined and certainly cannot be bound by the political vision, mission statements, and procedures of a single AFI, a class of civil society groups, or indeed any particular discourse. Even the triumphalist neoliberal ideology took a battering when the 2007-8 financial crisis hit, resuscitating (albeit briefly, and in a shallow manner) the ghost of Marx and social democracy. Following William Connolly, there are very good reasons to emphasize the “contemporary fragility of things,” the multiple interacting systems upon which the political economy relies.<sup>484</sup> This includes

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<sup>484</sup> William E. Connolly, “Steps toward an Ecology of Late Capitalism,” *Theory & Event* 15, no. 1 (2012).

ecological, financial, and social systems whose own processes are highly variable, and whose interactive effects may produce any number of outcomes.

On the other hand, one may look at long-term economic indicators and note a distinct stability about the political economy, one that has over three decades nearly eliminated the labor strike in the United States, has stagnated the median American income, and sparked the dramatic gains of the economic elite.<sup>485</sup> Furthermore, one may note the coalescence of the Democratic and Republican parties around free trade, deregulation, and the like. Finally, one may note that unlike the Great Depression, the Great Recession did not disrupt the underpinnings of the political order, neither ushering populism nor social democracy into Washington.

Are these continuities and agreements purely a product of neoliberalism? My claim is not that idealizations of place and nature, farmers and rural communities and roots and heritage, local economies and ecologies, themselves hold together neoliberalism, but that these discourses are largely silent when it comes to the structures of capitalism that undergird its politics. They fail to identify and engage the ways in which a system premised on private property and competitive markets externalizes concerns for place and nature. To put it another way, to the extent that markets determine how we interact with each other and the land, it ensures that these interactions are protected by the private property regime and guided by the profit imperative. Activists fail to identify or problematize the political structures erected to oversee this economy, ones which impede the introduction of non-economic logics into economic governance. This is particularly the case with place-

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<sup>485</sup> For strike data, see <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.t01.htm>

based politics: the ends announced in localist rhetoric (community, participation, democracy, ecology, security, tradition) cannot possibly be met by localized efforts, given no locality stands outside the forces of the market and state. Despite the claims that local small businesses are community oriented, more involved in local governance, and take better care of their workers, the logic of the market (competition) and its requirement (profit) penetrate all localities and businesses.<sup>486</sup> And with regards to the state, all localities must contend with neoliberal hegemony, which makes economic reason commonsensical and ulterior logics seem as insurgents.

In other words, within localities we find not “community” but a diverse array of actors, disparate interests and eco-social relations, asymmetries of power and material outcomes. Problematically, these discourses *presume* the local place to be the site of community, ecology, and moral agents, and, as such, activists pay scant attention to the political economic structures that divide and shape localities. For instance, one oft-mentioned goal—equitable participation in the food system—would require a transformation in labor relations and property ownership, the very fundamentals of the food economy. These are issues which American activists do not problematize, by contrast to agri-food movements in other parts of the world. The idealism of localist and agrarian narratives spurs American activists to seek (very) partial solutions to structural problems, leaving those structures intact.

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<sup>486</sup> David Hess, a scholar-activist working to build local economies, asserts, “the call to ‘buy local’ may be the hook that brings in the local independent business owner, but once owners have joined an independent business association they may discover that they are not just small businesses but stewards of their communities with a variety of social, economic, environmental, and political benefits to offer the customers and citizens of a region.” Hess, *Localist Movements*, 62.

To conclude, those critical of neoliberalism need to widen their lens to account for ulterior discourses that may reinforce the status quo through their idealisms and inattention to economic structure. The stability of neoliberalism may not solely be a matter of state capture or governmentality, but also an outcome aided by the fact that discourses popularly considered to be alternative or oppositional do not in fact identify nor oppose these structures. This failure may have something to do with the commonsensical status of capitalism, but it also has a lot to do with the assumptions and idealizations characteristic of the discourses in question. Conversely, those who strive to erect an America operating under different values, with different eco-social outcomes, need to centralize the structures of capitalism and the politics of neoliberalism within their worldview. Indeed, prior to a change in practice we might assume a change in ideas and values. But if activists do not connect the values they deplore (e.g. productivism) to the structures of capitalism and the politics of neoliberalism, and instead route activism down avenues that do not challenge those structures, it seems to guarantee the perpetuation of the same negative outcomes.

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