



Beyond the market? New agrarianism and cooperative farmland access in North America



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ABSTRACT

As land and wealth are increasingly concentrated in North America, grassroots organizations are calling into question longstanding norms about the relationships between private property, sustainable agriculture, land governance institutions, and ongoing processes of agrarian transformation. In response to challenges faced by new entrants to agriculture in accessing farmland oriented towards localized and alternative food systems, advocates for farmland protection and cooperative land access point to the potential for community-based land reform to support sustainable land use while promoting social and political equity – areas where they argue an economic system based on individual ownership of farmland has failed. Based on the principles of “new agrarianism,” community-based farmland access initiatives are experimenting with new forms and practices of cooperative and shared land tenure, as an alternative to a state-led model of redistributive land reform based on individual property rights. We analyze here the results of a participatory research project conducted with a cooperative and community-based land trust and land access program in British Columbia, Canada. We assess the efficacy of the community farms program as a potential mechanism to spark a new phase of agrarian transition that can reverse farmland consolidation and support socially and ecologically embedded land relations, as a structural context for food sovereignty in North America. Specifically, we argue that the community foodlands trust movement can be viewed an insurgent – but fundamentally constrained – “people’s enclosure” within a corporate land regime.

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1. Introduction

In the historically “new agricultural economies” of North America, agrarian colonization dispossessed indigenous communities from lands used for traditional food cultivation as well as extensive land areas used for hunting, fishing, and gathering. Following this original enclosure and the establishment of a commercial agricultural sector comprised of settler farmers primarily from Europe, a second wave of agrarian transition, particularly since the mid 1800s, has involved state-led land distribution designed to support the integration of commodity food production into the global networks of transnational capital, with a resulting further consolidation of farmland (cf. Desmarais et al., 2015; Qualman, 2011; Smythe, 2015). Alongside these processes,

urbanization and industrial development has resulted in the loss of more than one million acres of previously cultivated farmland per year in the United States alone. Farmland loss and concentration contributes to the loss of local food production and jobs in agriculture as well as the losses in provision of ecological services, open space, and other rural amenities. These dynamics have also resulted in a historic decline in post-colonial North American farming populations, with farmers as an economic class comprising less than 2% of the total population in both the USA and Canada. As a result, the dominant trend of farmland concentration in North America is both part of a long history of ecological and financial dispossession among rural indigenous and farming communities and a struggle for succession planning among remaining agricultural communities. Within this context, up to 70% of farmland in North America is likely to transfer hands in the next two decades (Ruhf, 2013), raising questions about “who shall farm the land and to what socio-ecological end?” (McMichael, 2013).

Food sovereignty, or the rights of communities to have control over their own food systems (Wittman, 2011), is fundamentally

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predicated on the right to access land for ecologically based subsistence and social and cultural reproduction. The food sovereignty movement in North America, in conversation with global movements for food sovereignty, highlights the role of neoliberal capitalism in consolidating both land ownership and control over systems of food production, distribution, and consumption (Alkon and Mares, 2012; Desmarais and Wittman, 2014). As a pathway to resist or even reverse further capitalist accumulation of farmland and to respond to increased demand by urban consumers for access to healthy and ecologically produced food, several new and young farmer agrarian networks across North America have emerged with specific mandates to create new structural conditions for farming. These movements promote models for ecologically sustainable farming and advocate for increasing support for independent family farms, in organized local production networks serving local consumers within their communities, towards what Tom Lyson framed as “civic agriculture” (Lyson, 2004, 2005). Some of these movements identify explicitly with the global food sovereignty movement, while others express priorities and goals that are discursively aligned with aims of food sovereignty. As such, some community based and agrarian movements in North America have begun to mobilize for what Borrás and Franco (2012a) call land sovereignty, or “the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over the land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape” (p. 6). Land sovereignty can involve both a defensive struggle by ‘civic agrarians’ against farmland consolidation and land grabbing within a corporate food regime, and a proactive assertion of community control over land and the means of production, as a form of people’s enclosure (Borrás and Franco, 2012b; White et al., 2012).

For example, in the USA, the National Family Farm Coalition “envisio[n] empowered communities everywhere working together democratically to advance a food and agriculture system that ensures health, justice, and dignity for all” (National Family Farm Coalition, n.d.). In Canada, organizations such as FarmStart, the Young Agrarians, and the National Farmers Union Youth aim to stimulate interest among urban populations to take up farming as a livelihood, and to generate community support for new models of farming and farmland access that promote the principles of land and food sovereignty, including equitable access to land for local food cultivation, social justice, respect for indigenous food sovereignty, and a transition towards ecologically sustainable production methods (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014). The Young Agrarians, for example, identify themselves as a social movement aiming to ‘rebuild’ a broken agricultural system through farming and locally-oriented ecological agriculture.

The Young Agrarians are the movers and shakers of a new agrarian movement: young agriculturalists, farmers, urban farmers, market and community gardeners, community groups and academics, organizations and the public who want to ecologically rebuild, promote and inspire the agriculture of our country (Young Agrarians, 2013).

Similarly, the Canada-wide National New Farmers Coalition formed in 2014, arguing that

Canada’s agricultural policies are failing not just farmers, but the Canadian public as well. We need a new, comprehensive approach to agricultural policy: a move away from market fundamentalism and towards food sovereignty (Fenton, n.d.).

However, in a context of neoliberal consolidation of farmland, the particular ways that individuals and communities access land

for food production influences not only the organization of people and land, but also relations of power, identity, security, and citizenship (Arendt, 1998; Rose, 1994; Singer, 2000). Access to land, along with the multiple rights, responsibilities and interests that access to land entails, also shapes relationships between social systems and the biophysical world (Davidson, 2007; Freyfogle, 2003, 1998; Penner, 1997). As such, in the face of farmland consolidation and an aging farm population in North America, a ‘new’ and ‘critical’ agrarianism is emerging in conversation with movements for rural social justice and food sovereignty. This critical agrarianism builds from the roots of land-based and agrarian citizenship, whereby relationships between people (as both producers and consumers of food) and nature are characterized by a socio-ecological metabolism that is mediated by, but not limited to, access to land and political power. Critical agrarian movements aim to ‘repair the metabolic rift’ by reconnecting urban movements for environment and food security with rural movements for agrarian justice aligned with the food sovereignty movement (Carlisle, 2014; Wittman, 2009a, 2009b). Today’s new agrarians include urban members of community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, citizen groups for watershed restoration, greenbelt protection and recreational trails through farming communities, and advocates and practitioners of sustainable farming and urban agriculture (Donahue, 2001; Freyfogle, 2007). These contemporary agrarians move beyond an older, Lockean conception of agrarianism in which the act of working the land for food production was both the basis of private property rights and a mediator of citizenship. Rather, they seek to enact new forms of land relations to achieve broader social and ecological goals, rights and responsibilities within the food system, in a model that recognizes the stewardship of agricultural land as a core common and public good (Carlisle, 2014; Smith, 2003; Wittman, 2009b).

As a lens to explore how (and to what extent) these new social actors are constructing diverse, socially just, and ‘beyond the market’ land economies as ‘contested and contingent spaces’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006), this paper considers the case of a community-based land access initiative in North America. This case is particularly instructive as an example of an insurgent alternative to previous models of land distribution associated with agricultural colonization that resulted in the entrenchment of private property relations in the countryside and the eventual consolidation of agricultural power within transnational agricultural commodity networks. We first review the literature on farmland protection and new agrarianism as two sides of an emerging social valuation of land and agriculture based on a re-embedding of social, ecological and cultural values. Then, through discussion of a participatory action research project with the Community Farms Program in British Columbia, we investigate the development of new community and cooperative land relations in North America as a form of ‘land reform from below’. We describe the structural constraints to community-based land access for food production, and the motivations, willingness and ability of participants to develop and engage with new models of land tenure in response. As new agrarian movements consider what new land relations are possible – or even desirable – within a land regime characterized by capital accumulation, environmental degradation, and farm consolidation, we assess the extent to which community-based land reform and land access initiatives can address underlying issues of food and agrarian justice.

2. Farmland protection, a new agrarianism and community based land reform

Since the mid 20th century, North American farmers groups, environmental movements, local and state governments, and other

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