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“Occupy the Farm” movement at the Gill Tract in Albany, CA

This Land is Whose Land? Dispossession, Resistance and Reform in the United States

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Introduction: Land, Race and the Agrarian Crisis

The disastrous effects of widespread land grabbing and land concentration sweeping the globe do not affect all farmers equally. The degree of vulnerability to these threats is highest for smallholders, women and people of color—the ones who grow, harvest, process and prepare most of the world’s food.

International market forces have invaded every aspect of economic and social life. The wholesale privatization of public goods has concentrated immense power in the hands of global monopolies and introduced new layers of inequality into our food systems. The destruction of smallholder agriculture in the Global South has sent millions of rural people on perilous migrations in search of work where they often enter low-paying jobs in the food system. They are pushed to underserved neighborhoods of color where labor abuse, diet-related disease and food insecurity are the norm.

At the same time, despite record agricultural profits, farming communities in the US heartland

are steadily emptying out, reeling from unemployment and the environmental consequences of 70 years of industrial agriculture.¹ Though surrounded by former peasant farmers (now turned farmworkers), many older farmers wonder who will farm the land when they are gone. But young, beginning and immigrant farmers find it too costly to access land.²

Big farms in the US are getting bigger. Small farms are getting smaller. The same structural adjustment policies and free trade agreements that devastate the livelihoods of farmers in the Global South are steadily reshaping the agrarian landscape of the United States.

Land Grabs and the New Agrarian Transition

2 The land grabs occurring in the Third World are the tip of the iceberg of a long process of capitalist reconfiguration of land and resources known as the *agrarian transition*. At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, this meant mobilizing resources from the countryside to the city to subsidize industry with cheap food and cheap labor—largely accomplished by destroying the commons and dispossessing peasant farmers. The agrarian transition has gone through many permutations since then, but generally kept its anti-commons and anti-smallholder thrust.

Today's agrarian transition is about the countryside's role in the rise of agri-food monopolies, the intensification of extractive industries and the emerging dominance of international finance capital. A commodities boom within



Immigrant farmer. Photo by ALBA, Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association

the industrial grain-livestock/agro-food complex³ coupled with a global crisis of capital accumulation (too many goods and too few buyers) have made land a hot investment offering global investors an opportunity to treat it “like gold with yield.”⁴ Land is concentrating in fewer and fewer hands, dispossessing millions as it pads corporate portfolios.

The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and trade agreements like the North American and Central American Free Trade Agreements and the Trans Pacific Partnership and Trans Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (under negotiation) facilitate the modern agrarian transition on a global scale. The USDA, the Farm Bill, the deregulation of finance capital and the gutting of government anti-trust laws are bringing the agrarian transition home to the US.

Land Dispossession in Historical Perspective

Historically, by the time land is lost, a process of political and economic restructuring has already destroyed much of the public sphere. Farmers’

room for maneuver is greatly reduced, thus giving free reign to those with market power to bring land under their control. Land is lost after civic and human rights have already been systematically trampled upon. Dispossession then takes place through a combination of coercion and the market.

Military force opened the door for white settlers across the North American continent. Before being dispossessed of their territories, Native Americans were disenfranchised of their human right to life. The disenfranchisement and ensuing loss of land for farmers of Mexican origin following the Mexican-American wars, and the appropriation of Japanese-American land through mass internment during WWII are further examples of coerced land grabs.

After the US Civil War, the Reconstruction Amendments (13, 14 & 15) and the Freedman's Bureau helped usher in a remarkable period of civic participation and agricultural prosperity among former slave communities. But Klan violence and the Jim Crow laws enacted in southern states

The New Face of US Farming

According to the USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture, of the country's 2.1 million farmers only 8 percent are farmers of color (Native American, Asian, Latino or African American), though their share is growing, particularly among Latinos, who now number over 67,000 farmers. The percentage of women farmers is 14 percent. Three quarters of them earn less than \$10,000 in annual sales. Seventy-five percent of farms in the US have sales of under \$50K, but the numbers of high-income mega farms are increasing. The percentage of farmers under 35 years old has declined 8 percent since the last census while the number of older farmers has increased. The average age for a farmer in the US is now 58 years old. While these statistics paint the picture of a stereotypically white, male, aging farmer, they belie a growing movement of young, predominantly female and non-white beginning farmers.

disenfranchised African American farmers, forcing many into chain gangs, sharecropping and wage slavery. In spite of this, by 1910 they had acquired 15 million acres “without benefit of the Homestead Act and in the face of great hostility and violence.”⁵ As agriculture modernized, the USDA consistently denied Black farmers “loans, information and access to programs essential to survival in a capital intensive farming structure.”⁶ This left them unprotected in the face of cyclical economic crises, leading to massive land loss in the 1960s. They were the first farmers to lose their land in the farm crises of the 1970-80s as well. The 1999 *Pigford vs Glickman* class action lawsuit filed against the USDA testifies to the ongoing discrimination against African American farmers who now farm less than a million acres of land.⁷

The Green Revolution is a classic case of market-based dispossession affecting Third World and US farmers alike. This publicly-funded campaign to “feed the world” took the genetic material from traditional varieties developed over thousands of years to produce commercial hybrids. Farmers in the Global South took out credit to buy back their repackaged

genetic material, as well as the fertilizers and pesticides needed to grow these crops as monocultures. The Green Revolution gained momentum in the 1970s just as US farmers were encouraged to plant “fencerow to fencerow” to save the world from hunger. The result was global overproduction, the fall of commodity prices and staggering debt in the Third World as well as in the US farm sector.⁸ Consequently, millions of farmers were forced out of farming.

Land Justice: From Access to Reform

Today, family farmers are fighting to hang on to their farms and aspiring farmers are struggling to access land. Their prospects could not be worse. Unregulated market forces—in commodities and land—are both a means for dispossession and a barrier to entry. Because of the structural racism in our food system, immigrants and people of color are at a particular disadvantage.

New rural and urban initiatives for farmland access, farm protection and sustainable, equitable food systems are springing up across the US. They provide hope that another food system is possible. But do they have the potential to confront the

modern agrarian transition?

The movement for sustainable agricultural land trusts is gaining ground. Over 1,700 state, local and national organizations manage 47 million acres in trusts and easements. Over 60 percent conserve agricultural land.⁹ “Farm incubators” provide training and services to help new farmers enter farming. Promising state legislative proposals seek to protect farmland from urban sprawl. Farm cooperative federations and legal services foundations in the southern US are working to protect African American farmers. Stock sharing options and ownership transfer programs are putting farmworkers in control of the land they work. Community land trusts are beginning to address urban agriculture. Many food policy councils work to make idle urban and peri-urban land available for farming. Following the Occupy movement, small land occupations are spreading. Indigenous and rural resistance to fracking and land-grabbing projects like the Keystone pipeline is growing.

Set against the powerful array of international markets, monopolies and institutions of the agrarian transition, land trusts attempt to

carve out “niches” in the global land market. However, very few work with underserved communities. While they serve as important sociopolitical and environmental references, ensuring equitable land access and viable rural livelihoods in the United States—by definition—is beyond the scope and the pocket book of niche markets. Rather, structural changes are needed in order for these important efforts to become the norm rather than the alternative. Their future depends on *agrarian reform*.

The call for agrarian reform is not new in the United States. In 1973 the National Coalition for Land Reform held the First National Conference on Land Reform.¹⁰ Participants from Appalachia, the South, the Northern Plains, Midwest, New England and indigenous lands, as well as from the organic farming sector, the coops, the land trusts and farmworker

organizations, called for land reform. These diverse actors discussed the creation of a National Land Reform Act to address poverty, privilege and the racial and class inequities determining land distribution. They proposed a progressive land tax structure, public land banks, trusts and funding mechanisms, as well as supporting institutions for new farmers. In short, the Act demanded a set of accountable *public* policies and mechanisms to support all of the things that today’s land niche initiatives struggle to do privately.

Overcoming the injustices of the agrarian transition will hinge on whether or not today’s disparate efforts can move the land struggle from the global market to the public sphere. It will also depend on whether or not they can collectively address the inequities that hold the present system in place. It requires building a broad-based, national movement for land justice.



Young girl in Oakland’s Tassafaronga Farm. Photo by Acta Non Verba

NOTES

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