Farmer and non-farmer responsibility to each other: Negotiating the social contracts and public good of agriculture

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If farmers expect society to help protect them against the crushing effect of surpluses, they must be prepared to protect society by working out permanent arrangements for storing of reserve food supplies. Both farmers and non-farmers have a responsibility to each other, and any dodging of this responsibility by either group is likely to end in disaster. — U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace (1936a, 1936b:14).

1. Introduction

1.1. Farmer & nonfarmer responsibility to each other

What do farmers and non-farmers owe each other? And what does this framework of mutual responsibility mean for agricultural governance, particularly in the United States? At the nexus of this mutual dependence is a tenuous contract, straining against the chronic crisis of commodity crop overproduction. U.S. agricultural policy originally aimed to be a social contract between (white, male, landed) farmers and non-farmers. This eroded, erasing the original, ongoing problem of oversupply. This old secret crisis of surplus, coupled with the crisis of its own invisibility (hidden by assertions of scarcity), and the new enclosures and profits created in the wake of glut’s destructive impacts, all comprise the engine of late agro-capitalist expansionism. A century after supply management first erupted into federal policy priorities, rumblings for “parity”—farmgate prices that amply cover costs of production—return: the multifunctional public good of agriculture necessitates negotiating fair social contracts, between food providers and those provided. Many questions ensue, regarding land ownership and tenancy, farmlabor and conservation compliance, as well as the general need to keep food prices affordable—particularly amidst the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, more research is needed to inform negotiations about agricultural governance that curbs overproduction so as to provide equitable price floor for a diverse and expanding sector of farmers, ranchers, fishers, and food providers.

This paper serves as a preliminary farm policy analysis to help ground this research agenda. Drawing upon archival research at the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Archive Library Special Collections, secondary analysis of USDA Economic Research Service data, literatures on social contract theories, and critical agrarian studies, this paper chronicles the origin of this framework of mutual responsibility, which forms the basis of the US Farm Bill. I researched all Farm Bill related documents in the USDA Archives that chronicled farmer engagement, farmer organization advocacy and influence and impact, from 1910s through early 1940s.\(^1\) This social contract between farmers and non-farmers was leveraged through the federal government but was compromised from the beginning by the original appropriations and disposessions of U.S. agriculture—all racialized and gendered in cause and effect (Graddy-Lovelace, 2017). It was also compromised by the individualized premise of the social contract itself, with its gendered (Pateman, 1988) and racialized (Mills, 1997) assumptions and exclusions. But scholars critiquing the social contract’s colonial origins argue for reclaiming the concept; Pateman and Mills (2007) contend that a collective agreement can help protect marginalized communities from further exploitation. How would this apply to agriculture? Certainly the labor exploitations of farm work require restitution, and the extreme land tenure disparities beg questions of reparation and redistribution. But, even the farmer and non-farmer relationship could be clarified and

\(^{1}\) The period from the first to the second World War established a telling foundation for US farm policy—with the central contradiction of wartime overproduction and emergency supply management; this period merits close attention and critical analysis accordingly. My discourse analysis of USDA archives from this interwar period serves as the core data for this paper; from here I apply, critique, and expand the social contract framework to agricultural governance. Though, more research is needed contextualizing the AAA within broader New Deal legislation (Patel and Goodman, 2020). After WWII, farm policy shifted to surplus deployment as food aid and then food trade, with Cold War geopolitical ambitions therein. That time period deserves close attention and critical analysis as well, but falls beyond the purview of this paper. This paper does however reference the 1980s farm crisis as well as the 1996 Farm Bill—as key moments in the broader trajectory of US farm policy’s convoluted relationship to commodity crop surplus.

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strengthened through the framework of a collective, emancipatory social contract. Importantly, this contract would serve deliberately to expand and diversify who farms and who can make a living farming. Though this paper focuses on the US contexts, the issues of supply management and price floors upend neoliberal trade regimes, with far-reaching international relevance if not urgency.

Forging a collective social contract between (diverse) farmers and non-farmers acknowledges a shared fate and mutual responsibility in ensuring nourishing, viable, resilient, just agri-food systems. The multifaceted potential public good of agriculture mirrors the myriad negative environmental, public health, and labor impacts of the dominant agri-food system. This paper explores how negotiating an equitable social contract for agriculture necessitates research, dialogue, and deliberation on how to update supply management and price floor programs for racial and gender equity and for food system resilience—resilience to climate, financial, and public health shocks. The paper ends with a coda on the COVID-19 pandemic, which lays bare the vulnerabilities and injustices of the dominant US agri-food system, while exacerbating them. Agribusiness monopolies lead to supply chain disruptions and bottlenecks; decentralizing and coordinating supply requires managing cycles of commodity crop oversupply. What responsive, collective social contract could curb glut and its corollary, concentration? How could collective social contracts support diverse growers in the crucial work of providing food and ecological services?

What do farmers and non-farmers owe each other?

1.2. Social contract

As farmers destroy millions of crops, child hunger soars in the United States, and federal responses bungle, there is a pressing need to revisit this framework of farmer and non-farmer mutual responsibility and dependency. Though it applied to white, landed, Protestant men—and served to solidify their political dominance—nevertheless, the reciprocal interdependence at the heart of this framework spoke to a biophysical and social honesty far more ancient and universal than settler colonialism. Arguably, it still does. Though there are fewer farmers today—because there are so few farmers today—the farmer-nonfarmer axis requires attention. It has become even more accurate than ‘producer-consumer’ and ‘urban-rural’ dichotomizations; producers consume inputs now more than ever, while urban agriculture grows. Other professions crux to social good—from doctors to nurses to teachers to fire fighters—earn salaries, health insurance, paid sick leave, and retirement pensions (though arguably not enough). The profession of farming remains unprofessionalized in this regard—with livelihood hinging upon a volatile and secular decline in farmgate prices. Farmers remain price-takers—with neoliberal agriculture trade rules enforcing the taking.

The contract framework acknowledges mutual need and the public goods of agriculture—but it also carries its own baggage. This paper applies the social contract framework to help recover and update the farmer and non-farmer alliance, while broadening and decolonizing the yeoman farmer referent. What is gained and lost in the social contract concept and imaginary? Carole Pateman’s 1988 The Sexual Contract launched a second-wave critique of the longstanding gendered subjugations of the liberal contract doctrine. Charles Mills’s 1997 book The Racial Contract draws on Pateman’s critique to trace the colonialist and racialized origin of social contract theory. He shows how social contract logic drove and justified the white supremacism of Eurocentric political liberalism. The repercussions extend across legal, political, social, and psychological realms. Virginia Held, in another feminist analysis, concludes: “Contemporary Western society is in the grip of contractual thinking” (1993: 193). The liberal assumptions of social contract theory—the individualized self—comprise the foundation of policy and even political debates. Pateman and Mills combine their analyses in their 2007 compilation Contract & Domination, to emphasize how classic social contract theorists and interpretations are premised on white supremacist, patriarchal self-conceptions that are “so thoroughly, and misleadingly, informed by notions of individual freedom and equality” (CP & CM, 2007: 2). Pateman traces how contractual frameworks carry on Hobbes’ assumptions of atomized, antagonistic individuals entering into contracts with each other—and then, begrudgingly with Leviathan governor/government. With no existing moral or social relations with each other, humans connect with each other only through utilitarian contracts that go “all the way down” (Pateman, 1988: 14); this reductionism has informed social contract theories of Kant, Locke, Rawls, and thus major strands of dominant political philosophy and policy-making. Governance retains male-head-of-households as core unit of societal citizenry. Within agricultural governance, settler colonial patriarchy worked to appropriate, subsume, and erase female (and non-binary) agency into the side-kick role of farmer’s wife (Sachs, 1996).

After laying out the subjugations that drive and emerge from social contract paradigms, Pateman and Mills point, however, to emancipatory potential. On one hand, “a clear precedent exists in the Western contract tradition for the idea of an exclusionary manipulative contract deployed by the powerful to subordinate others in society under the pretext of including them as equals” (Mills, in Pateman and Mills, 2007: 82). Yet, on the other hand, such Domination Contracts can be flipped and leveraged to counter and evade domination. Mills draws from the class consciousness of Rousseau’s analysis: political contracts have served as ideals of liberal egalitarianism and even revolutionary purposes: “Far from being necessarily bourgeois or necessarily sexist or necessarily racist apparatus, contract theory has a radical potential barely tapped, and can serve as a vehicle for translating into conventional discourse, more, if not all, of the crucial claims of radical democratic political theory. The key conceptual move is simply to strip away the assumptions and corresponding conceptual infrastructure of an individualism once restricted to bourgeois white males and still shaping the contract’s features today, and replace it with an ontology of groups” (Mills, in Pateman and Mills, 2007: 104).

An emancipatory social contract paradigm emerges from and advances collective struggles, communities, and coalitions, brought together through recognition of intertwined conditions. This paper applies the emancipatory social contract paradigm (Pateman and Mills, 2007) to historical, contemporary, and potential agricultural governance.

2. Historical crushing effects and subsequent governance

2.1. Food feeds war

My archival inquiry into the origin of the Farm Bill brought me to the 1910s, where I began in-depth investigation of USDA National Agricultural Library Special Collections. In the midst of World War I, the United States government aggressively incentivized the expansion of wheat production across the vast prairies. Farmers plowed under tens of millions of acres of deeply rooted perennial plants to plant amber waves of grain to export to warring Europeans. Deploying the new agricultural cooperative extension service through the new County Farm Bureaus, the federal government pressured farmers to maximize production. In the ‘Food Will Win the War’ campaign, the Federal Extension Bulletin declared: “More Farm Bureaus needed to Federate Agricultural Forces for National Defense” (O’Neal, 1939: 6).

Prices were good, so farmers kept plowing. Production was good, thanks to over a foot of ancient fertile topsoil. Then European survivors crawled out of the trenches, back to their fields. The world market groaned at the bounty, depressing prices. Farmers organized, suffering the consequences of unfettered competition. In a 1920 letter, Mr. Mellon of the Iowa-based American Society of Equity (“An Organization That Teaches Co-operation Among Farmers”) wrote: “The development of producer co-operation among farmers is, more or less certain.” Conditions forced cooperation, with the rapid increase in tenant farming: 54% of farmers in Iowa were tenants, and “many of the rest only own a
portion of what they till ... From this I glean that there is going to have to be some tall hustling done on the part of our farmers to make ends meet. I am afraid that the teaching of increased production won’t solve the problem.”

According to a 1920 US Department of Agriculture internal overview, a whole spectrum of farmer organizations emerged, from the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry to the Farmers Holiday Association, which called on farmers to stage a general strike to resist Depression farm foreclosures. Crowds of desperate farmers losing their land turned away bank officials. The National Guard was brought in during farm auctions. The United Farmers League comprised “the extreme left wing of the farmers’ movement, [and] sought to organize small farmers against rich farmers, land bankers, and New Dealers” (20), while the Farmers’ Educational and Cooperative Union of America began in 1902 as agrarian radicalism. The National Farmers Union called for “three-year moratoriums for farmers facing foreclosure and eviction; legislation forcing middlemen who purchase farm produce to pay minimum prices based on costs of production; a complete embargo on all farm produce that would compete with domestic markets” (15; see also Wubnig, 1935 and Kolley, 1990 for this history).

Farm-gate prices plummeted in 1920, driving farmers further afield for more land to plow and plant, thereby further collapsing prices. The stock market crash, Dust Bowl, and Great Depression ensued. Throughout the 1930s across the Southern Plains, severe droughts whipped up eroded topsoil on tens of millions of acres, leading to deadly ‘black blizzards’ of wasteland. Despite extreme political differences, many organizations forged alliances out of necessity, and became known as the Farm Bloc. The Farm Bloc successfully established the Grain Futures Act and the Packers and Stockyards Act to counter collusion in the notoriously corrupt and consolidated meat industry. Farmer leaders demanded “parity” to bring domestic prices up to the “ratio-price” based on the pre-World War I purchasing power of agricultural producers. The National Grange advocated for the 1928 Export Debenture Plan to mitigate the imbalance of buying from a protected market (high, retail prices) and selling on a world market (with low farm-gate prices) (Davis, 1929). The Farm Bloc fought for the 1928 and 1929 McNary-Haugen Acts, which aimed to raise farmgate prices through government purchase of surplus. Though vetoed, the McNary-Haugen Acts dominated farm organizations debates and coalitions between 1924 and 1928, according to the USDA NAS archives (see also Porter, 2000).

Cotton farmer and general manager of the North Carolina Cotton Growers Cooperative Association Benton Blalock testified before Congress in 1933 about the poverty ensuing from postwar overproduction: “It is absurd even to think of still following a policy of Letting Nature Take Its Course”—meaning laissez-faire economics (3, underlined and capitalized in original). Likewise, the National Cooperative Council decried and analyzed “the Farm Problem”: “What are the reasons for this low purchasing power of farmers? The principal factor responsible for this condition was the war and the great need of developing a food supply for the allied armies” (1936: 5), leading to egregious soil erosion and price collapses.

Applied to agriculture, radical democratic political theory would need to address land and labor head on. Concurrently, however, the contract framework would also apply to farmers groups, working together to stave off self-destructive overproduction and price falls.

2.2. Partners for parity

Shortly after the 1932 Domestic Price Adjustment Plan, the idea of prewar purchasing power, “parity” became the consensus objective, with production control deemed necessary, and domestic allotments as the chosen means. The meeting that solidified the plan for the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (the first Farm Bill) or “the magna carta of American Agriculture ... was the most harmonious farm meeting I ever attended” (Gregory, 1935) with the AFBF, National Grange, NFU, and diverse range of groups all in back-to-the-wall consensus, out of necessity. Supply management entailed a number of mechanisms to limit production so as to support a viable price floor including grain reserves, idling lands, non-recourse loans,” and domestic allotments (Goldstein, 1989). “The Farm Act calls for cooperation with a new promise – the promise that from now on those who cooperate will get the main benefits, and those who do not co-operate will have to take their chances and stand the loss,” the American Farm Bureau Federation wrote in 1933: farmers “strong desire for speedy action and a determination to fully cooperate if the way of cooperation is made plain to them” (AFBF, 1933: 2).

But, in early 1936, the Supreme Court majority (in US vs Butler, 1936) invalidated the processing tax provisions of the AAA and stopped production control programs. Within days, hundreds of farm organization leaders convened on Washington. Long before commercial flights and internet, the group response was remarkable. On January 14, 1936, over the National Broadcasting Company’s National Farm and Home Hour radio show, USDA Secretary Henry A. Wallace commented: “It seems to me significant that they [some 70 farm organization folks] were able to complete agreement on recommendations [to the USDA and Congress] in less than two full days. In so doing, they displayed once more the spirit of farm solidarity which characterized the conference on March 10, 1933” (Wallace, 1936a, 1936b), when farm leaders had first formulated the AAA. Within three months, farmers across the country had deliberated, decided upon, and proposed what became the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 and the 1938 Agricultural Adjustment Act: effectively, the second Farm Bill. Here, foregoing processing taxes, Congress would pay producers for limiting production of surplus, soil-depleting crops, and/or switching them to soil-conserving crops and rotations. Benefit payments stave for “not only parity in prices but also parity in income between agricultural and nonagricultural producers” (Goldstein, 1989; 45). AFBF president Edward O’Neil, who wielded significant influence in these Acts, framed the policies as escape from the well-known disasters of glut: the farmer “remembers what happened to agriculture after the World War period. He has not forgotten how his unsaleable surpluses accumulated during the years when industry was most prosperous” (O’Neil, 1936:1). In its own self-archiving, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has chronicled how the risks of overproduction were such an obvious threat that they catalyzed a veritable force in politics and policy.

No statement by anyone can warp the thinking of the man on the land about the ill-effect of farm surpluses on national prosperity. He discounts the statements of those who say that, to restore the purchasing power of the people of the United States requires maximum production of food and fibre and maximum consumption of that products of the farm. He is not misled by the statements of those who say that if we could return to the 1925–29 period of urban prosperity consumers would buy all that farmers can produce at fair prices ... But the very fact that huge mountains of surpluses were accumulating was also the cause for ruining farm prices at home ... [he] remembers the distress which came to him and his neighbors because the price of farm products went down, frightfully depressed by mountains of surpluses. (O’Neil, 1936: 2).

In a vividly Polanyian moment of social protection against marketization, the first Administrator of the AAA, H.R. Tolley addressed the AFBF in 1936:

There are those who say that it is somehow wrong for farmers to cooperate in any program to overcome such dangers. These people contend that the free play of economic forces, with unlimited 2 Nonrecourse loans from the 1930s Farm Bills were a mechanism of price supports; the farmer borrowed against the harvested commodity crop at the loan rate, which at the time was based on a ‘parity’ formula delineated by Congress and implemented by USDA. If prices fell below the loan rate, the government took the commodity crops—not the farmers’ land—as the collateral.
competition for farmers, are enough to solve the problem. But although these rugged individualists may now know it, the tide of progress has passed them by. The day has gone when farmers can be denied the opportunity to join together for their common good. The day has gone when they are content to come to grips single handedly with cruel forces of nature such as drought, or with economic forces just as cruel. In our time, farmers are learning to work together to moderate these forces. So I say that I believe we are determined to keep on fighting to overcome or minimize the two greatest dangers to agricultural security—the double threat against farm income through crop failure and through price collapse. (4).

In an address to farm organization leaders at the USDA on February 8, 1937, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace summarized the concerns of farmers: “For many years those who have profited at the expense of agriculture have labeled as ‘impractical’ every proposal that threatened, while helping agriculture, to interfere with their liberty to exploit. Farmers know now that programs to improve farm income and stabilize supply and price can be made to work” (Wallace, 1937: 2). Policy unfolded accordingly with a tiered solution, starting with commodity loans, grain reserves, then payments in kind, then ‘storage-in-the-ground’ soil conservation as last resort (5). The prioritization of agrarian viability on the domestic front led to a protectionism that is remembered as isolationism for its short- and long-term impacts on the nation’s trade policies (Goldstein, 1989), but that paved the way for the “second food regime” (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 2005), which lasted from World Wars through the mid-70s food price crisis. In these decades, the U.S. led a global food regime of mercantilist agro-industrialism and developmentalist food aid. The country rose to super-power status through geopolitical deployment of surplus wheat, which seeded strategic alliances—and dependence on US benevolence. Though protectionism did not cause overproduction, it aimed, though unsuccessfully, to stem it (B. Wilson, 2018; Graddy-Lovelace and Diamond, 2017).

Farmer cooperation—though along racialized and gendered lines of white supremacy and patriarchy—congealed at this time (Kelley, 1990), out of necessity:

An individual farmer who wanted to reduce his acreage in cash crops had no assurance that other farms would do the same. Lacking such assurance, he felt it necessary to work his land to its maximum production, in order to bring his unit costs below low prices. Thus the vicious circle continued, high production swelling surpluses to larger proportions, larger surpluses depressing prices to still lower levels, and lower prices causing farmers to make still greater use of their lands … All these readjustments should make for saving instead of wasting the surplus wealth of the land, for re-investing surplus wealth in improved living for the people. (Wallace, 1936: 6,15).

A social contract framework—albeit with racial and gendered dominance—had made its way into farm policy.

### 2.3. Concerning consumers

Allegedly, this consensus on the ecological and economic disasters of overproduction for farmers—a consensus that saturates USDA Special Collection National Archives from the inter-war period—extended to the impacts on consumers. “Did the surplus help the consumer? Far from it. As farmers quit buying and factories shut down, the breadlines grew longer and longer. Not until the government itself stepped in, bought surplus food and gave it to those on relief was the gap between surplus and hunger finally bridged,” Tolley concluded in a 1936 address (11). O’Neill echoed the benefits of supply management policies to non-farmers: “they ‘preserve for the benefit of both city and country the greatest national resource the country possesses … the conservation and restoration of the source of all basic wealth, the soil” (1936: 4). The Dust Bowl drove home the shared ecological fate of farmers and non-farmers—a shared fate that has deepened since, with climate change, groundwater depletion, and air and water pollution. Hunger, malnourishment, and other public health crises—from agro-toxins to antibiotic resistance—now divulge more layers of shared fate.

But, even as World War II loomed, Wallace reiterated the mutual benefit—and interdependency—of farmer and non-farmer well-being, though this contract become consumed in nationalism and imperialism: “farm solidarity is more than ever essential. If you allow yourselves to be broken up into discordant groups, the enemies of agriculture who always have opposed any workable farm program and will oppose any such program will have their way. But if you ‘stand with your neighbor,’ you cannot fail … The nation need always guard its agriculture, so that agriculture can always guard the nation” (Wallace, 1939: 16–17). Meanwhile, an array of technologies were being deployed to ramp up yields: from hybrid corn seeds (Fitzgerald, 1990; Kloppenburg, 2005) to associated mechanization of tilling, planting and harvesting. The paradox of productivity—its modernist momentum, alongside its economic and ecological dangers—was becoming acute. At that point, years of contradictory government support for farmers had drawn a few raised eyebrows among urbanizing populations. Testimony in a Congressional Hearing sought to ally urban concerns of by re-emphasizing the crux of the contract:

So far as the matter of making such payments to agriculture, which someone from city districts without full information might, perhaps question, it seems to me that we have every justification to ask for this aid to agriculture. We now have a law on the statute books fixing minimum wages and maximum hours for labor. Industry has long had price control and governmental aid … And all the farmers have ever asked for—at leader all that our organization has ever asked for—is the aid of the Government to help bring them to a parity position. We do not ask the help of the Government to bring us any higher than parity … Even at parity prices, agriculture will be getting far from her proper share of the national income. This is due to several causes, among which are the monopolistic price controls in industry (Ogg, 1939: 1691–2).

In making the case to non-farmers, farm leaders and policy-makers originally emphasized the shared foes of monopolies, which captured undue profits across town and country. This frustration had long driven the radical agrarian populism of late 19th and early 20th centuries. The early 20th-century agrarian populism—much less radicalism—was subsumed by a more paradoxical, fraught populism, led by the farmer elites through such farmer lobbyist powerhouses as the American Farm Bureau Federation (McConnell, 1957; Berger, 1971; Vogeler, 1981; Berlage, 2000; Graddy-Lovelace, 2019). Nevertheless, in the 1920s and 1930s, vestiges of the turn-of-the-century radical anti-monopoly movements anchored farmer organizations’ overtures of solidarity with non-farmers. The USDA archives preserves numerous speeches, radio show transcripts, pamphlets, legislation, and journal transcripts of radical farmer organizations’ aversion to monopolies—be they railroad, meat packers, grain dealers, or processors—as well as their wariness of commodity future exchangers. The radical agrarian movements, though weakened by the 1930s, maintained a fight against speculation that even the AFBF upheld. Summarizing the AFBF’s early 20th century support for the Commodity Exchange Bill, its president O’Neill asserted:

“... The man on the land asks this question: ‘Why should not the commodity exchanges, upon which futures are bought and sold, be subject to regulation by the Secretary of Agriculture, so that wild speculation in the commodities themselves or in the future of those commodities, can be prohibited? … We are indeed on our way to eventual success in eliminating speculation in foodstuffs’” (1936: 6).

Nevertheless, these policy goals have changed drastically over the 20th century. The AFBF exemplifies this shift away from antitrust ethics

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3 More research is needed (beyond the USDA archives) on how and why the radical agrarian populist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries dissipated.
and toward agro-industrial financialization. Relatedly, these changes have encompassed a major move away from supply management in both policy and political debates (Ray et al., 2003: 1; B. Wilson, 2011). As corn and soy glut piles higher, factory farm meat production benefit off the cheap feedgrain and industrial processors capitalize on cheap grain fodder. These deployments of surplus commodity crops have impacted diets, raising alarms by public health analysts and advocates. An updated and expanded collective social contract would need to demonstrate to non-farmers the multifunctional health and environmental benefits of agriculture as well as the multiple shared fates and foes amidst political economic monopolies.

2.4. Price scissors

Where do other industries and sectors fit in to a farmer/nonfarmer alliance? In the Russian industrialization debates and later in the Global South development discussion, divergent terms of trade were often called “price scissors” (Sah and Stiglitz, 1984). Calculating the price scissors tracks the price-ratio between agricultural and industrial sectors; it determines the quantity of farm products needed to be sold in order to buy an industrial product or service input for agriculture. What are the consequences of changing the terms of trade between agriculture and industry? Small and medium size farmers and ranchers feel and suffer a price squeeze between input costs/costs of production; farmgate prices suffer secular declines; farmers race along a treadmill of economic pressures and debts. These processes and cycles correlate with broader trends toward agricultural intensification (Rudel et al., 2009), the decline of the mid-level farm (Lyon et al., 2008), farmer crisis (Lobao and Meyer, 2001), corporate agricultural dominance (Lyon et al., 2005), and community impacts thereof (Lobao and Stoffrahm, 2008). These struggles impact non-farmers in multiple ways, with multiplier effects across and beyond rural communities. They also parallel struggles of industrial workers who are themselves feeling and suffering a price squeeze on their own costs of living and declining purchasing power of wages (particularly amidst a gig economy).

More research is needed on how exactly a collective social contract framework could ameliorate these price scissors pressures, region by region, crop by crop, market by market. Locating the farmgate price as the fulcrum of the social contract establishes a floor that amply covers costs of production, even as it establishes the ask of farmers: that they grow, raise, catch nutritious foods while paying their own workers fairly and while stewarding natural resources.

2.5. Disappearing family farmer

World War II brought renewed calls to ramp up production, and increased political power of agribusiness monopolies. But by then, input costs had risen—as had overall risks for small and medium-scale farmers. Higher yields required higher consumption of inputs (by farmers) and outputs (by consumers), amidst cycles of credit, debt, and foreclosure risks. “Parity agitation entered an all-time high” in 1942, when the federal government pursued vigorous anti-inflation measures (Saloutos, 1947: 319). Farm labor prices had risen with the onset of the War, and Farm Bloc leaders strove to review the parity price formula to include labor costs. With increased industrialization, the “role that farmers performed as consumers had grown as commercial agriculture had expanded” (Saloutos, 1947: 322), but their purchasing power decreased as their farm-gate prices decreased and farm inputs increased. Already the overall number of farmers were careening to late 20th century lows, while the overall average size of farms increased exponentially (Dimitrri et al., 2005).

The category of ‘non-farmer’ may seem too nebulous to include in a collective social contract, but the multifaceted public goods of agriculture—from nourishment to freshwater to agricultural biodiversity—demand holistic governance. The first Farm Bills emerged from an honest acknowledgment of the shared ecological and food-system fate of (white, male, landed) farmers and non-farmers. Though striving to stave off farmer bankruptcies, the AAA program benefits largely upheld race, gender, and class hierarchies and thus ended up exacerbating consolidation and rural, racialized class disparity (Grubbs, 2008; Winders, 2007). As the overall numbers of farmers declined, Black farmers bore the brunt of the agrarian crises, as they endured or fled racist terrorism in the deep South (Kendi, 2016). By the late 20th century, after generations of racist farm policies (USDA, 1997; Gilbert et al., 2002; Orozco et al., 2018; Figandes et al., 2019; White, 2019), farmer demographics had skewed even whiter and richer. As a result, the category of ‘farmer’ reflects less people; it conjures a ‘they’ more than a ‘we’ for a majority of people in the US. But a key goal of a collective social contract between farmers and non-farmers would be to open the way for a broader, more diverse realm of farmers as such.

Many scholars of rural studies have chronicled how the family farm works as a powerful convulsed myth: as actual numbers of family farms decreases, the political potency of the rhetoric of family farming stays strong (McConnell, 1957; Vogeler, 1981; Appleby, 1982; Dixon and Hapke, 2003), but the policies enable further concentration and further declines in small and medium-size farms (Ritchie and Ristau, 1987). As food regime and world-ecology literatures have chronicled, 20th century states namely the United States governed through cheap food, to quell unrest in the cities and enable dependence abroad. This unfolds alongside cheapened wages for workers and cheapened resources to grow the food (Patel and Moore, 2017). This cycle of cheapened life and natures entrenches the tension that farmers need higher farmgate prices while consumers—largely underpaid for their jobs and non-paid for their social reproduction work—need low prices. The farmer-nonfarmer responsibility to each other encompasses, on a broader level, adequate incomes and safety nets for nonfarmers as well as farmers. The multiple, cascading societal-nutritional-ecological benefits of agroecological farming demand a particular analysis of the farmer-nonfarmer shared fate.

Family farms disappearance has worked to obscure the trauma of farm loss. As farmer plights compound, latent alliances exist for rural-urban solidarity (Graddy-Lovelace, 2017), around the question of how to support viable, diversified agricultural livelihoods for diverse growers and agricultural communities.

3. Social contracts in agriculture

“I want to say something about the decline, the virtual ruin, of rural life, and about the influence and effect of agricultural surpluses, which I believe are accountable for more destruction of land and people than any other economic factor.”—Wendell Berry, The Art of Loading Brush (Berry, 2018)

3.1. Contemporary crushing effects of glut

Farmgate prices for commodity crops remain below their reference prices (USDA ERS, 2019). Among all family farms, 45 percent of principal operators and spouses have had to secure a job off the farm to obtain health insurance and to counter the financial risk and stress of low commodity prices (Whitt and Todd 2020). According to USDA ERS 2018 statistics, 82% of farmer household income from off-farm sources, with net farm income forecast to decrease $4.3 billion (6.7%) to $59.5
billion in 2018: the lowest level in nominal terms since 2006" (ERS, 2018). Slightly more than half of farm households continue the recent trend of negative farm income. Ongoing cost-price squeezes continue to churn surviving farmers into bankruptcy and foreclosure. The boom-and-bust cycles were exemplified in late 2000 ethanol price rise due to Renewable Fuel Standard (Lehrer, 2010). Producers were incentivized by banks and policies to invest in larger combines, more acreage, increased inputs (Shields, 2010). A few years later, commodity and dairy prices have fallen precipitously.

Consolidation proceeded throughout the 20th century despite supply management programs but accelerated in the 1980s. Remaining farmers have grown richer, thereby obscuring the agrarian crisis itself. Since the 1980s, mean farm size has remained steady, but this average hides major, continuing shift of cropland and production to larger operations (i.e., operations with at least 2,000 cropland acres), a sharp decline in midsize crop farms, and an increase in the counted number of very small farms with very limited amounts of land and production (i.e., farms with fewer than 50 cropland acres) (McFadden and Hoppe, 2017: 20; MacDonald et al., 2013). The midpoint acreage of this average increases each year, especially in sectors with extreme economies of scale pressures, like livestock and dairy. From 1991 to 2015, large farms—those with gross cash farm income before expenses of $1 million or more (in inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars)—increased their share of agricultural production from 23 to 41% (ERS, 2016: iii).

Rural sociologists and community leaders have attempted to show causal correlations between agricultural consolidation and rural problems: surveying 51 studies investigating the effects of industrialized farming on community well-being from the 1930s to 2007, Loboa and Stofferahn found that “Adverse impacts were found across an array of indicators measuring socioeconomic conditions, community social fabric, and environmental conditions. Few positive effects of industrialized farming were found across studies” (2008: 219). A decade later, the opioid epidemic claimed 64,000 overdose deaths in 2016, double 2006 rates; Edelman compiles the myriad cascading effects of rural economic and health downturns “hollowing out the Heartland” (2019). When the cooperative mailed its farmer-members their milk check in February 2018, it included a USDA Economic Research Services forecast for 2018 milk prices forecast, and a list of suicide prevention hotlines (Smith, 2018). Within months, the USDA had relocated ERS itself, in a retaliatory move against such damning reports, according to some at the beleaguered office (McCrimmon, 2019). By summer 2018, the long-standing Farm Aid organization warned of increased calls to its farmer emergency hotline, amidst “incredible financial, legal and emotional stress” upon farmers, tenant farmers, and farmworkers: “Bankruptcies, foreclosures, depression and even suicide are some of the tragic consequences of these pressures” (Farm Aid, 2019). By 2019, throughout much of Midwest, farmers filed for Chapter 12 bankruptcies protections at remarkably high levels, according to Wall Street Journal (Newman, 2020).

By 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt further blows to a farm economy already reeling from trade battles, lost exports, and climate-induced natural disasters. The AFBF reports that farm bankruptcies had increased by 23% as of March 2020—even before the pandemic’s destructive impacts took root (AFBF, 2020). Meanwhile, on a treadmill of credit and debt, with storage bins filled with last year’s harvest oversupply, farmers keep planting vast fields of non-edible commodity crops—crops that still have no clear market or outlet. Mike Peterson, a farmer in southern Minnesota, summarized the predicament to a local journalist: “The problem of corn oversupply can’t be solved by any one farmer... it’s economic suicide to try to fix the supply issue yourself” (Belz, 2020). What would incentivize farmers to invest in a massive shift of crops—toward edible foods to nourish local communities and build regional markets?

3.2. “Aid”

Agricultural policies, attempting to help, keep enabling the trend, with Land Grant Universities, agricultural research apparatuses, and cooperative agricultural extension geared increasingly toward high-input high yield production, and federal supports going to the farmers still in the game, i.e., wealthier ones. Commodity program payments, most conservation program payments, and crop insurance indemnities have shifted to larger farms following consolidation trends—and thus to higher income households (McFadden and Hoppe 2017)—and corporations. A vicious financial, political, and socio-economic cycle ensues. Larger farms can handle vagaries better than smaller ones, but the larger vagaries also cause instability and risk for large operations, which have much to lose. Mergers compound the trends: consolidation as a phenomenon results from and causes more consolidation. Insurance, in attempting to mitigate this, exacerbates it: “Since commodity program payments are based on current or recent historical production of programs commodities, payments will shift to larger farms as they consolidate acreage receiving payments for currently produced or historically produced crops” (ibid: 24): In 1991, farms with at least $1 million in GCFI (in 2015 dollars) received nearly 11 percent of commodity program payments; by 2015, their share had increased to 34 percent. In 1991, 61.3 percent of commodity program payments went to small operations with less than $350,000 in GCFI, but that share fell to 30.2 percent by 2015. Likewise, data for Environmental Quality Incentive Program show a marked shift away from smaller operations in 2006–15 and toward midsize and large operations, with a significant shift of working-land payments to farms with higher household incomes (ibid: 32). Meanwhile, as of 2016, only 7.8 cents of every food dollar, on average, went to farm production (USDA ERS, 2017), and in 2018, the median net farm income was a loss of $1,548 (USDA ERS 2018).

With the country’s family farmers having “approached endangered status,” Farm Aid sounds an alarm—but an alarm that remains muffled, particularly amidst the vast sums of money deployed in Trump’s $33 billion dollar bailouts to farmers to offset the impacts of trade battles and what the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy has termed “ tariff tantrums” (IATP, 2019). In 2018, the USDA allocated $12B to farmers for “unjust trade retaliation from foreign nations”—as of July 2019, $8.59B had been paid to 600,000 (mostly soy) producers (USDA MFP, 2019). In July 2019, the Department of Agriculture confirmed that another payment—this time $16B—would be paid out by the Farm Service Agency, under the authority of the Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act—ironically, a vestige of the old New Deal and original Agricultural Adjustment Act Farm Bill. It would be distributed primarily through the Market Facilitation Program, through $14.5B of farm aid payments to commodity crop producers, as well as through the Food Purchase and Distribution Program and the Agricultural Trade Promotion Program (USDA, 2019). Meanwhile, USDA and Congress have allocated an additional $3B for disaster aid for farmers impacted by midwestern floods. Congressional and think-tank criticism of the “subsidies” pointed to their inordinate flow to wealthy land owners and even Brazilian agribusiness as well as their noncompliance with World Trade Organization rules or their role in public health (Guthman and Peet Robbins, 2011); yet coverage of the “bailouts” largely overlooked the foundational agrarian crisis of overproduction itself. On one hand they retained the aid/charity presumption, critiqued for its patronizing crassness of crisis of glut and dumping (Naylor, 2011). Overall, the crisis of overproduction and dumping catalyzed the WTO (Murphy and Hansen-Kuhn 2019), but ultimately has been enabled and obscured by the WTO (Potter and Tilzey, 2007): any analysis of how to update price floors and supply management would need to address the contradictions of global agricultural trade rules—as well as the US’ contradictory and
contract agreements with notoriously low pay, undue risk, intimidation and retaliation industry in particular has used and abused the contract employment in the generation since, and in the United States acutely). The poultry 2017, half of the value of livestock production was produced under for farmers from the U.S. (Gisolfi, 2017) to Kenya, India, and beyond. In Watts and Little, 1994; this dynamic of exploitation has only sharpened indigenous, immigrant, Latinx, and female farmers were crushed more agriculture, the first and most literal issue of exploitative contract "regulation," We need to bring farmers and miners into the conversation about realms, has led to reactionary backlashes against urban biases and lack consumer-producer divide, predicated on dichotomized urban and rural journalism. Congresswoman Cheri Bustos (D-IL) launched a 2018 of understanding of agricultural struggles in mainstream politics and from the Heartland political pamphlet on the steady Democratic losses "We need candidates that have backgrounds in central problem of unfettered competition, overproduction, and subse Kleinman penned a Backgrounder linking the Green New Deal to a stronger. Food First executive director Eric Holt-Gim urban-rural dichotomizations that hierarchize the former over the latter: "Don’t Give Up on Rural" (Bustos, 2017). A key challenge of a farmer/non-farmer collective social contract framework would be avoid generalizations rampant in food and farm politics: neither producers nor consumers constitute a monolithic entity; rural is not white; those still farming do not represent all who have farmed, want to farm, and would again if they could. Though AFBF and commodity groups continue to dominate USDA policies, grassroots agrarian organizations are working hard to forge coalitions of advocacy, from the National Family Farm Coalition and Rural Coalition—both longtime advocates for agrarian justice through, in part, fair prices for farmers—to the National Farmers Union and the National Young Farmers Coalition. The NFCC’s 2007 Food from Family Farms Act asserted it is “time for a new farm bill that acts as a consumer-farmer economic bill of rights” (1). The US “must take the lead in promoting international commodity agreements aimed at setting floor prices and equitable sharing of responsibility for international reserves and supply management, thus eliminating the destructive practice of dumping” (4), through a proposal for a Market Driven Inventory System and Market Price Supports, established through Commodity Credit Corporation nonrecourse loans for key commodity crops. All the while, the neoliberal erasure of the crisis of surplus cracks open. In a 2018 op-ed from Times-Republican newspaper, farmer advocate Larry Ginter asks why Iowa has budget problems when its farmers produced over 2 billion bushels of corn and one billion of soybeans. Policy-makers remain “ignorant of Iowa’s history and how they helped to undermine the diversified independent family farm system in favor of giant agribusiness monopolization and their capture of farm gate profits,” first by dismantling the price support system, and then enabling neoliberalized race to the bottom in deregulated world market prices: “the battleground has always been between the Blue Jeans — voices from the land standing on their historical knowledge and economic experiences, and the Suits — voices reflecting Milton Friedman’s theories from the elite schools of economic thought. So far, the Suits are winning the battle, and farmers and workers are losing. It’s time for a farmer and worker alliance, perhaps even a Farmer-Worker political party” (Ginter, 2018).

A year later in Iowa, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, having been briefed by George Naylor, Patti Edwardson, and others in the National Family Farm Coalition, released a sweeping agricultural and rural plan to dismantle agribusiness monopolies and advance farmgate price “parity system” which “means setting price floors and matching supply with demand for farmers are guaranteed the cost of production and family living expenses (Naylor, 2011). NFCC President Jim Goodman co-authored an essay with Raj Patel on “A Green New Deal for Agriculture” calling for alliance between climate justice and rural producers through “parity pricing” tied to sustainable agriculture.

The language of agricultural social contracts has persisted, growing from the margins. Farmer organizations in the US and around the world have explored financial contracts with purchasers as a means of countering the downward pressure on prices brought by ‘globalization’ of neoliberal policy push in the late 20th century (Wu and Babcock, 1996; Giovannucci and Ponte, 2005). A decade ago, Roots of Change, a California-based “think and do” tank presented to the Farm Foundation Roundtable on the “emerging social contract between agriculture and the public” (RoC 2010)—a social contract for survival. On the farmer and rancher side, this entailed moving from “an industrial model of production to a biological model,” with a focus on diversification, reducing agro-toxins and fossil fuel dependence, as well as ending farm labor exploitation, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), and corporate consolidation. In exchange, farmers would receive a better “safety net,” though with “price supports” mentioned only in passing. More recently, the correlation of social contract and fair prices grows stronger. Food First executive director Eric Holt-Giménez and Hilary Kleinman penned a Backgrounder linking the Green New Deal to a
“social contract for justice” (2019): “The first New Deal established a social contract between the banks, big industry, farmers and laborers, to pull the country out of the Depression and save American capitalism. It provided a bigger share of the economic pie to the working class until the introduction of free market policies that drove a steady march to the ‘privatization of everything’ under neoliberalism. Essentially, the Green New Deal is proposing a new social contract to roll back global warming and establish economic equality. … Bringing this new social contract into existence is only possible if the Green New Deal puts the voices, the concerns, the leadership, and the indomitable hope of the social justice movements firmly at its core.”

4. Updating and renegotiating parity

“We have a food system that has largely been built on the backs of people who don’t have a lot of rights and access to our public policy infrastructure”—LaDonna Redmond

### 4.1. Seeking the public good of agriculture

The scalar contradictions of America First agriculture (Graddy-Lovelace, 2019) emerge from its indigenous erasure and racialized land and labor appropriations. Seeking the public good of agriculture requires interrogating who the public is. Negotiating emancipatory collective social contracts necessitates more people negotiating all together, and in equitable fora—a largely unprecedented direction for US agricultural policy.

Yet, deep within the USDA’s self-archiving, one can find telling instances of the long-obsured need for a social contract between farmers and non-farmers, collaborating out of acknowledged necessity. Henry Wallace spoke of this eighty years ago as the need to protect society by working out permanent arrangements for storing reserve food supplies and conserving soil. What would such a contract look like extricated from the exclusions and appropriations of this original 1936 context—to radically expand the ‘we’ and scale of reference, to shed the patriarchy and white supremacism? Could a social contract limited (even predicated) by whom it excluded be expanded demographically as well as to include public goods of land and water care, cooperative and collective land tenure, fair wages for workers, and the cultivation of nourishing foods, with scale-appropriate food safety protocols and agricultural biodiversity?

In addition to scouring history, searching for international parallels also sheds light. The European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has operated with a notion of social contract, following in part the French Farming Orientation Law of 1999 which introduced contrat territorial d’exploitation—territorial farm contract—for sustainable agriculture (Gafsi et al., 2006). Though critiqued for enriching wealthy landowners (Sheingate, 2000), the CAP does at least defer to the multifunctionality of agriculture as documented rigorously by the landmark, though largely overlooked IAASTD report (IAASTD 2008; Scoones, 2009). Though some CAP policies aim to correct race-to-the-bottom price pressure through such initiatives as geographic identity and territorial farm contracts, it is unclear to what extent the CAP can be seen as a social contract between the banks, big industry, farmers, and laborers.

### 4.2. Land & wrap-around coverage

Once the parallel crushing effect of glutton is recognized by farmers and non-farmers alike, effective and equitable negotiations can begin. What would these entail? First, land. The National Young Farmers Coalition 2017 survey listed unsurprisingly land as the number one challenge for young farmers and ranchers face. In the next five years, nearly 100 million acres of US farmland (10% of all farmland and 25% of all rented land) farmland will shift owners (Ackoff et al., 2017). Land access remains the chief obstacle to beginning and marginalized farmers and needs to be addressed directly and immediately as such (Figueroa and Penniman, 2020).

In addition to land itself, farmers need a whole range of expanded supports via “wrap-around coverage” of assets, access, and assistance, especially for new entry sustainable farmers, so as to proactively “grow our agricultural workforce” (Carlisle et al., 2019). In addition to affordable health care, farmers need free legal advice, by such entities as Farm Commons. According to a NYFC survey, student loan debt has become “a major obstacle holding young Americans back from entering farming and maintaining successful agricultural careers” (2018); they lead the fight for a Young Farmers Success Act (H.R. 2590) to include farming in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program.

Such comprehensive support systems would necessitate accessible, affordable health insurance and health facilities to respond to the physical risks and strains of farming, as well as the emotional and mental health needs. Responding directly to current farmer bankruptcies and suicides, the 2018 Farm Bill’s “Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network” funded a program that was authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill but left unfunded. The re-authorization and allocation of $10 million in annual funding from 2019 to 2023 helps provide grants to extension services and nonprofit organizations that offer “stress assistance programs” to those farming, ranching, or engaged in other agriculture-related occupations. Meanwhile, farmers and ranchers of color face heightened pressures amidst systemic racism in lending, insurance, and USDA program outreach—though the 2018 Farm Bill’s Farmer Outreach and Training Opportunities makes modest headway in redressing such inequities. In short, though farmgate prices that amply cover the costs of production could serve as a fulcrum for collective social contract in agriculture, but the broader social contracts would necessitate broader social supports.

A more expansive understanding of wrap-around coverage emerges from Black agrarian movement history as well as the current scholarship...
on it. Monica White introduces the theoretical framework of “collective agency and community resilience” in her 2018 book *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Chronicling the land and food sovereignty movements led by Fannie Lou Hamer, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, and others, White shows how the scale of reference for these struggles was and remains collective: from specific southern Black communities to African diaspora liberation movements at large. The leveraging of agency and the goals of resilience were not and could not be individualized or reduced to isolated social contracts with the government (White, 2018). Such individualization would mean succumbing to white supremacist myths undergirding domination contract paradigms. White’s theory of collective agency and community resilience serves as a key framework from which to reclaim and remake contract paradigms regarding farm justice, agrarian livelihoods, the public good of agriculture, and the fulcrum of fair prices. Centering the collective and community aspects of farm justice also necessitates centering Black agrarian histories and resurgence. Negotiating a collective social contract for agriculture entails foregrounding racial, gender, and class justice in agriculture and its public goods.

4.3. Conclusions

In general, these diverse needs and piecemeal supports and demands for support beg larger questions: What is the role of government in turning the public bad of current overproduction to a public good of sustainable, nourishing, fair agri-food systems? What is the role of the government in updating and renegotiating an agrarian social contract? This is not a new question, though it breaks forth anew with concurrent news of direct payments to wealthy landowners amidst cuts in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program supports, and with the COVID-19 pandemic food supply crises. A century ago, amidst desperate bread lines, farmer destitution, and a continental soil erosion Dust Bowl, popular/populist consensus converged: the chief role of government was to help stave off commodity crop surpluses. Such a task may now exceed the authority of the original New Deal legacy of the Farm Bill; such a fundamental governance need may require multiple, dialogic scales of collective self-governance and multiple forums for equitable, collective negotiation.

The few agricultural economists who retained the recognition of the need for supply management have come to argue for the wholesale de-commodification of staple foods (Schaffer and Ray, 2018) even as other leading scholars conclude on a Right to Food framework (Anderson, 2018). But for the layers of the food system still circulated via monetized markets, agricultural parity would mean viable farm-gate prices that amply cover costs of production, in exchange for producing nourishing foods, while stewarding land and water through agroecological conservation compliance, while ensuring living wages for any farmworkers. With no price floor, such asks remain improbable, and could backfire into further urban-rural dichotomizations and political backlash. Such responsive supply coordination and oversupply management would by definition need to unfold at multiple scales: in city councils, county boards, tribal customary governments, as well as in state legislatures and federal branches of judicial, legislative, and executive governance, ideally checked and balanced. Because these questions of price floors and supply management flout the dominant neoliberal trade regime, these negotiations would also necessitate international bilateral, multilateral agricultural trade negotiations and paradigm shifts, again grounded in multiple, collective social contracts aiming for supranational public good.

Farm justice price parity remains an idea on the horizon, but one worth listening and attending to, so as to update and adapt it, crop by crop, region by region, market by market. NFFC leaders and coalition allies—from IATP to FarmAid, from Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund to Family Farm Defenders—remain thought-leaders on this crucial, often misunderstood governance tasks and challenge: the late Kathy Ozer, Brad Wilson, and Ben Burckett have been diligent in their archiving of farm justice history and advocacy for fair farmgate prices. Previous NFFC president George Naylor has consistently been explicit about the need for robust, dynamic supply management programs (2011); such parity means “the farmer would be treated with economic equality prices would be adjusted for inflation to remove the destructive cost-price squeeze and the need for farmers to overproduce their way out of debt and poverty. It was understood that the farmer’s individual ‘freedom’ to do whatever he or she wished with the land would be tempered for the good for farmers and society. A social contract was established” (Naylor, 2018: xxi). Current NFFC president Jim Goodman argues such governance must be at federal level, like single-payer health care (Nargi, 2019). Dairy Together and the Wisconsin Farmers Union have proven that dairy has long served as the doorway to questions and urgency of supply management.

The COVID-19 pandemic leaves farmers grappling with commodity crop oversupply—while over a fifth of US children face food insecurity (Brookings, 2020), and a third of US households reported not being able to afford the food they needed (Callen, 2020). Farmers face financial ruin, with the small- and medium herd dairy sector facing a collapse. A once taboo topic erupts anew. Agrarian politics scholar-activists have taken up the cause with gusto, namely Holt-Giménez and Food First: “Imagine a contract in which a farmer is ensured a parity price if their farm uses agroecological methods and does not overshoot environmentally sound levels of production—does not mine the soil, pollute the air and waterways, or extract more water and resources than can be seasonally replenished. These farmers would not have to overproduce to stay in business” (2019), and could engage in agroecological production and equitable working conditions for farmers—fair asks following fair prices, the logic goes.

A framework of collective, emancipatory social contracts—between diverse farmers and diverse non-farmers—has the potential to overcome the gendered and racialized origin of contract doctrine. It could overcome agroindustrial contract farming that isolates and exploits poultry and other contract growers. What would pull farmers and nonfarmers together? Recognition of shared fate and mutual dependence—materially speaking, via political ecological ties of soil and gut bacteria, and political economic ties of countering consolidation. The seemingly simple subject of fair farmgate prices strikes at the heart of the engine of overproduction and the profits captured therein. With this as a starting point, farmers and nonfarmers have the opportunity to negotiate collective social contracts that uphold and actualize the multifunctional public good of agriculture, while diversifying and expanding those who make a living farming. Perhaps the recognition of shared fate, interdependence, and mutual responsibility could ground a social and political solidarity strong enough to counter the deeply entrenched appropriations and disposessions of contemporary land tenure, farm labor, and food and farm injustices.

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