THE NEW AGRARIANS: FORMING AND FARMING A POST-CAPITALIST LIVELIHOOD ETHIC IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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Abstract

In contrast to the dominant mode of industrial farming, new agrarians seek a more ecologically- and socially-embedded form of agriculture, where soils are managed through regenerative practices and food is delivered to local or regional populations. In doing so, they challenge the cultural, economic, and political assumptions that have driven agricultural policy in America – mechanization, economies of scale, migrant farm labor, etc. More generally, they reject the accumulation logic of capitalist culture, and in doing so generate alternative means of creating value, meaning, and livelihood through agriculture. Whether the local food movement is a challenge to conventional food systems, it cultivates new agrarian subjects with ethical commitments that run counter to the rigid individualism and self-interest of the neoliberal subject. This dissertation details the formation of this agrarian subjectivity, which I term the livelihood ethic, and community economies as they are formed through agrarian training centers and networks in Northern California.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ian Bailey was born and raised in Mountain View, California. He earned his BA in Environmental Studies and Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He earned an MS and PhD in Development Sociology at Cornell University. He has worked for a number of food and agricultural organizations, including the Community Agroecology Network, United Students for Fair Trade, The Institute of Food and Development Policy / Food First, Living Lands Agrarian Network, Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Finger Lakes LandLink. He is now a Sociology instructor at Southwestern Oregon Community College and directs the student sustainable agriculture club. He is also an avid tennis player and coach.

For Sara

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CHAPTER 1:

CONTEXTUALIZING LOCAL FOODS AND BEGINNING FARMERS

Winding out of Nevada City towards Bridgeport along the Yuba River, the road twists and turns with the contours of the oak covered hills. There is no cell phone reception, and I pull off the road to look at my hand-written directions. Oriented, I carry on. A mile up the road I turn onto a nondescript gravel road, following along slowly until splitting to the left at the fork. I pull up to a gate. A handful of sheep look up in the pasture as I jostle the gate open, the sun beating down with mid-summer intensity. I continue along the gravel road, passing an area of raised vegetable beds, a green house, eventually spotting an old trailer with tan and brown stripes along the side and a rigged-up chimney protruding from the roof. Amie and her dog come walking down from the trailer. Amie is tall and slender— long blond hair, jeans frayed, boots dusty, skin tanned a light golden brown. She greets me with a welcoming smile and invites me to sit in the shade of an oak tree adjacent to her trailer.

Amie grew up outside of Chicago, IL, studied journalism and sociology at a liberal arts college in Vermont, and then moved to Philadelphia where she was a social worker. When office work grew tedious, Amie dreamed of a new career, one that would allow her to work outdoors and free from the rigid patterns of office life— she dreamt of farming. A WWOOFing (World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) opportunity was her chance to try her hand at farming and it brought her out west to a small five-acre farm in Humboldt County, California, where she worked for a couple of years and learned production techniques. She then moved to Nevada County in

search of land to start her own farm and a supportive farming community. She connected with the Living Lands Agrarian Network (a farmer training organization) which ran an online land bank. None of those available lands suited her interests, so she sent an email to the local food listserv in search for land to farm and received dozens of responses—many simply asking for produce in return for use of the land. "I was overwhelmed by the response from the community," she told me. She settled on a small piece of land near the river. Just shy of an acre in production, she aspired to earn an annual income of $10k from farming – enough to cover her modest needs. Amie ran a small CSA (12 shares) and she sold her produce at the local farmers' market and directly to a couple of restaurants in town. "I am at a sweet spot in my life," she told me, "I have no family, very few expenses, and I'm healthy. I don't need a lot of money." She had a relaxed spirit and did not appear overly stressed by the financial side of farming. She told me that she is learning as she goes, and this year she decided to take Tuesdays and Thursdays off to have a healthier work schedule. Being the smallest farm I'd visited, I asked Amie if she had plans to scale up. "No, I don't want to spread myself thin. I think I can do more with this piece of land. I want to improve on what I'm doing here." By any normative economic metric, Amie's farm went unregistered. Although she represented one extreme – a micro farm – hundreds and thousands of others are in pursuit of this independent farm life.

Farmers such as Amie reflect a growing trend in the United States of young people pursuing diversified local farming. Farmers markets and direct sales (including farm stands, CSAs, and U-pick) grew at breakneck speed during the first decade of the

century, with a 32% increase between 2002-2007 (USDA Census 2007). Although this trend has leveled off in the most recent agricultural census of 2012, food hubs (local food distributing organizations) and farm-to-school and other institutional sales have increased rapidly since 2007 suggesting that the local food movement is branching out into new markets (USDA 2012). Additionally, farm and food advocacy groups have also expanded tremendously and are a part of the effort to support local produce. While some markets may be reaching a saturation point—farmers markets for instance—my interviews, ethnographic experience, and anecdotal evidence suggests that the small farmers' movement is still drawing interest from young and second career people (Galt et al. 2016). Whether or not these new efforts will sustain the next generation of farmers or not is, in part, what this dissertation examines.

When aggregated, these trends are difficult to distill from the USDA agricultural census but are certainly part of the reason that small-scale farms (1-9 acres) grew by 30% between the 2002 and 2007 census – the most significant increase amongst all categories of farm size for that census year (USDA 2007: 2). Farms 10-49 acres in size expanded by 10%, while nearly all other categories of farms by size remained the same or declined (ibid). The overall small farm population declined in 2012 (by 20%), however, within that census category, small-scale vegetable farms increased by 30% (meat and dairy production decreased the most significantly among small farm operations). Young farmers most often start their agricultural ventures with diversified vegetable and fruit farms, partly because they rely on CSA start-up money and partly because they have an ethical commitment to this type of farming.

Local food production is just a sliver of national food production, a point that

some critics believe make the phenomenon irrelevant[1]. Yet this movement of people to small-scale farming, I will argue in this dissertation, is culturally and politically significant for the values and the form of political engagement it represents. Few within the movement would claim that it can or will transform the conventional food system, but some hold to an idea of the movement as a nascent alternative within the interstices of the conventional food system. *Whether or not the local food movement is a challenge to conventional food, it cultivates new agrarian subjects with ethical commitments that run counter to the rigid individualism and self-interest of the neoliberal subject*. The expansion of small-scale farms is driven by a growing number of first generation (and often young) farmers moving into agriculture. As of the 2012 agricultural census, 15% of all farms in the United States are principally operated by a beginning farmer (USDA 2014), and these farmers "account for about 10 percent of the value of U.S. Production" (Ahern and Newton 2009: 2). Not born into agriculture, these young people come to agriculture with different sensibilities and values, and in the process of becoming a new agrarian, learn ways of operating both within and outside the formal economy.

The surge in small-scale, beginning farmers counters a trend of an aging farm population and declines in intergenerational farm transfers – an issue that former USDA director Tom Vilsack noted in a call for 100,000 new farmers in the next

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[1] If one qualifies the US Agricultural Census, another picture of American agriculture emerges, and raises question as to what and who constitutes the category of farmer and farming. Much of the US agricultural production has shifted towards corporate farms, and contracted farming (Weiss 2007; Friedmann 2003). The commodity farms are tightly controlled by corporate food industries, delivering a constant supply of raw materials for animal protein conversion (Weiss 2012). This dynamic and the prevalence of corporate farms skews the production data and the significance of small scale farms, I contend. It also the question of whether the deskilled contractor constitutes a 'farmer' in the sense of the autonomy and management skills historically necessary—as opposed to the administrator of prescribed industrial inputs and outputs (McMichael 2012).

decade (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition 2010). Young and beginning farmers – who I refer to in this dissertation as "new agrarians" and "beginning farmers"[2] – want to transform the way agriculture has been traditionally practiced in the United States (National Young Farmers Coalition 2017). In contrast to the dominant mode of industrial farming, new agrarians seek a more ecologically- and socially-embedded form of agriculture, where soils are managed through regenerative practices and food is delivered to local or regional populations. In doing so, they challenge the cultural, economic, and political assumptions that have driven agricultural policy in America – mechanization, economies of scale, migrant farm labor, etc. More generally, they reject the accumulation logic of capitalist culture, and in doing so generate alternative means of creating value, meaning, and livelihood through agriculture.

Almost all of the new agrarians, in my study and nationally, are first generation farmers who have grown up in cities and suburbs and often obtained a university education (National Young Farmers Coalition 2017). They turn away from more lucrative careers for the labor-intensive and financially-constraining career of farming. All of these farmers go into agriculture knowing very well that there is little money to be gained in agriculture, and they face challenging barriers to entry including high land prices, start-up costs, price competition, and low profit margins, just to mention a few. As some farmers explained me, it is a life of "voluntary poverty." Yet they do it nonetheless for non-pecuniary reasons (Howley, Dillon, and Hennessy 2013). By all economic accounts, going into farming is irrational – when

[2] Beginning farmers is a term used by the USDA, defined as a farmer within the first ten years of operation.

one calculates the number of labor hours and the net profits, many of these farmers are making the equivalent of minimum wage or below (Galt 2013). In the formal economy, this is seen as self-exploitation, but viewed from another angle, young farmers' decisions to pursue agricultural livelihoods reflect an alternative system of calculation and valuation. That is, they value non-monetary rewards equally or more than financial returns. This, as I will explain through the concept of a livelihood ethic, is absolutely essential to the new forms of re-agrarianization we are currently witnessing in the United States. New agrarians are oriented toward local production and are committed to agroecology, permaculture, biodynamics, and other ecologically-oriented production methods. All of these production practices rely on intensive and creative land management, the craft of which is highly valued and rewarding in and of itself (Klitgaard 2017). Without question, new agrarians want better remuneration, but they are often aware that profit margins can only be stretched so far – even if their ethical values were put aside. Whether or not these farmers persist has a great deal to do with their capacity to navigate the financial and non-monetary challenges associated with small-scale farming, their ability to cope with financial stress and uncertainty, and the extent to which they can buffer such stressors through their social networks and community economies.

Critical scholars have pointed out that this phenomenon is partly reflective of class privilege – the ability to enter a vocation with little compensation is often alleviated by family support and the understanding that many new agrarians have other options due to their abundance of social capital (DuPuis 2011, Hinrichs 2003, Allen 2010, Guthman 2008). For many agricultural laborers, poverty is not voluntary,

and it is important to distinguish between farmers and farmworkers who are born into poverty or have no other livelihood options, and the new agrarians that are the focus of this dissertation. While class (and racial) privilege is a major characteristic of the new agrarian movement, I will argue that it should not be the singular frame of analysis. Many privileged youth seek to reproduce their privilege and accumulate wealth, but amongst the new agrarians there is a certain rationality – a substantive rationality (Weber 1968) – that values agrarian lifestyles more than the monetary compensation it brings. Withdrawing from the avenues of intergenerational privilege, I believe, is a political endeavor – whether explicit or implicit. New agrarians are committed to a lifestyle of frugality and minimal consumption and seek out a land-based livelihood that offers autonomy in their day-to-day existence and is socially meaningful in their communities. From the vantage point of value and rationality, new agrarians critique the alienating features of capitalist agriculture and the disenchantment of modernity. Farming offers an opportunity to restore some distance from these forces and offers solutions – albeit on a limited scale – of a more ecologically and socially rational agriculture.

Local Food Politics: Alternative or Neoliberal?

While on one hand food system localization is dismissed as neoliberal, on the other it is celebrated as a form of alternative politics (Kloppenburg and Hassanein 2006; Guthman 2007, 2008). I argue for a more nuanced analysis that addresses the dynamic tension between neoliberalization and alternative politics that is continually

negotiated in the everyday practices of farming[3]. In a special issue of *GeoForum* in 2008, scholars provided a critical analysis of food politics in California as embodying and reproducing neoliberalism. Pudup critiqued community garden projects in the San Francisco bay area, arguing that such projects create a "self help" subjectivity, which personalizes structural problems. In her view, such projects, which explicitly support the garden as a collective space for healing, unknowingly de-politicizes participants, shifting their activism from structural change to one of self-help. Guthman expands on this theme, suggesting that food activism in California reproduce neoliberal rationalities. She argues, "that agro-food politics as well as the scholarship that supports it have contributed to neoliberal subject formation, as demonstrated by four recurring themes in contemporary food activism as they intersect with neoliberal rationalities: consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement" (2008: 1171). All of these themes, she contends, shift the loci of politics from regulatory change to individual action. Consumer choice is the obvious example here, where the prevalent campaigns to "buy local" implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, equate consumer decisions with food system change. Such discourse runs the risk of offering local food advocates a false sense of political action that does not change the regulatory or structural conditions of the industrial food system. More generally, she continues, such consumerist politics pushes the movement as a whole away from more substantive legislative battles. Furthermore, such common local food refrains create a neoliberal governmentality "instilling the logic of choice, making citizens into consumers" (2008: 1172).

[3] Galt et al. 2014, also develop this line of inquiry via and analysis of urban agriculture projects.

The theme of entrepreneurialism is most pertinent to the subjects of this dissertation. Similarly, Guthman argues that the promotion of market approaches to change—farmers markets, CSAs, organics, etc.—shift politics away from the state and indicates a rollback of social services and programs. Instead of focusing on revitalizing state programs, local food activists promote green business, filling a public void with private enterprise. In this summation, community-based projects are part of an anti-politics, a false consciousness where so-called food activism is in fact deepening and strengthening the very economic subjectivities and policies that create the social and ecological ills of industrial food. Other articles in the special issue demonstrate how voluntary certification programs continue this disengagement from the state, neglecting structural changes for individual choice (Morris 2008; Harris 2008). The farmers and training centers I interviewed fit squarely within this milieu of Guthman's neoliberal thematic. During my interviews and interactions with beginning farmers, there were discussions about creating new innovative CSAs, farm stands, and different entrepreneurial endeavors. There were also discussions of increasing local consumption and creating a more robust local food market. However, few of these farmers saw these activities as an end in themselves, or were under any illusions of their transformational capacity. In contrast to these scholars' formulations, local food activism was not a zero-sum game, detracting from other forms of more institutional change. A few of the farmers I interviewed were part of a delegation going to Washington to fight for change in the Farm Bill. Others were involved in California food policy councils, or in efforts to ban GMO products. While analyzing the rhetoric and discourse of local foods can certainly give the impression of some utopian

consumerism, the practice of local foods and the experience of the very people producing such foods is much more complex. This is the difference that ethnography makes. In this dissertation, I attempt to illustrate the messy politics that come along with interstitial and prefigurative forms of politics. Beginning farmers, I demonstrate, are at once navigating the capitalist economy and distancing themselves from it through their daily farm practices and building of non-marketized social relations.
In an exchange early in this debate, Kloppenburg and Hassenein refute Guthman and Allen's characterization of farm-to-school program as a form of grassroots neoliberalization, suggesting that their lens prevents them from seeing anything outside of neoliberalism (2006). Instead they understand local food politics as prefigurative actions that may open possibilities for change.

Similarly, Harris draws on the work of Gibson-Graham, arguing for an ontological reframing where scholars "read for difference" (2009). Harris suggests that scholars who have dismissed local foods as producing neoliberal subjectivities ascribe too great an analytical weight to neoliberalism, and thus aggrandize it. Instead, reading for difference allows scholars to see other relations beyond the lens of neoliberalism or capitalism. Reading for difference, in contrast to the neoliberal lens, can open up a politics of possibility. I have built from these critical debates to elaborate how beginning farmers negotiate the tensions of the capitalist economy and the alternatives they are enacting.

Alkon and Mores in their analysis of food justice activism, argue that while such projects are constrained by neoliberalism, they often neglect to acknowledge or challenge it (2012). Specifically, utilizing market approaches for food justice and

security perpetuates exclusions, they argue. This is undoubtedly a problem that beginning farmers face and one that I address in chapters 3 and 4. Farmers make a significant portion of their livelihood through selling their produce, and as such are engaged in markets. However, it is important to qualify what is meant by market here. Farmers markets, CSA, and farm stands for instance, are not governed solely or completely by capitalist price dynamics. Farmers have some latitude to adjust prices and to engage in other forms of exchange, including bartering. These markets are often niche, nested, or differentiated from capitalist markets. Nonetheless, farmer livelihoods depend on obtaining a price premium, and as such exclude low income and poor people from participating in such markets. As I have shown, some farmers do try to address this price paradox, but it is part of a larger discussion about capitalism and inequality that is not easily or readily addressed by small scale farmers.

Other scholars have challenged such representations of local food politics as neoliberal (Harris 2009) and pointed out this more complex reality (McClintock 2013; Galt et al 2014). In his assessment of urban agriculture in Oakland, CA, McClintock argues that urban agriculture is at once a protective movement yet also reinforces some neoliberal tenets, and that such a contradiction is inherent to urban agriculture. Cautioning scholars whom focus on either extreme, he explains that "focusing on one function or the other… rather than understanding such contradictions as internal and inherent, we risk undermining urban agriculture's transformative potential" (2013:147). Similarly, I have interrogated some of the contradictory relations beginning farmers encounter as a way to illuminate the stickier instances of interstitial and prefigurative politics (Galt et al 2014). Prefigurative and interstitial actions most

vividly expose moments of structuring, or where the mutual conditioning of agency and structure is made visible (Abrams 1981).

Embodied in what I call a "livelihood ethic," beginning farmers create a space of maneuverability that complicates the dichotomy between neoliberal agrarianism and alternative agriculture; this space of maneuverability is precisely where first-generation farmers are experimenting with new forms of agrarianism, and indeed new kinds of social and economic subjectivities. As with any movement, however, there are plenty of internal critiques and politics within this new agrarianism. Beginning farmers are not homogeneous in terms of their political and social values (nor in their gender or racial/ethnic composition, see National Young Farmers Coalition 2017: 22-23), and these differences are apparent in the range of practices and motivations, defying simplistic generalizations. However, it is clear that at a minimum, this group of small-scale farmers adheres to certain principles that guide their conduct, including the search for autonomy and ecological integrity.

While lamenting the lack of monetary reward, most farmers emphasize the creative aspects of farming, juxtaposing their work as artisan or craft farmers to those of capitalist orientation. In part, they are restoring a part of their humanity that has diminished in capitalist production. As Galt et al. explain it,

> Capitalist production results in the alienation of a producer as a wage earner from the objects produced through her/his labour, as well as from the biophysical environment that s/he is metabolising through her/his labour. This undermines important parts of our humanity, including the self-provisioning and pleasure derived from "craftship", the unity of conception and execution in the production process (Mooney 1988), and the conscious understanding of our integrated relationship with the biophysical environment (2014:135).

Indeed, many beginning farmers are actively trying to distance themselves from the alienation and abstraction of the capitalist economy and trying to create

livelihoods that value self-provision, reciprocity, craftsmanship, and autonomy. Doing so in an advanced capitalist society poses distinct challenges, but reflecting J.K. Gibson-Graham's notion of a "post-capitalist politics" (2006), new agrarians tap into a latent and ubiquitous feature of our economy – the myriad relations (reciprocity, gift, volunteer, social reproduction, care, barter and trade) outside of, or not defined by, capitalism. For Gibson-Graham, capitalist relations represent the tip of an iceberg, while non-capitalist relations represent the much broader and widespread base of the iceberg (the economy). This metaphor aptly describes many of the practices that reproduce farm life. In the words of economic anthropologists, these non-capitalist relations are practices of mutuality—the substantive relationships that bond and support communities (Gudeman 2016; Pratt and Leutchford 2014). The balancing act required of beginning farmers between community economies and market economies, and the necessary enculturation process therein, are a central focus of this dissertation.

Research Approach

This dissertation, informed by 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nevada County, California, examines the values, practices, and politics of first generation farmers and how these farmers navigate the market economy and its cultural logics. I argue that the politics of the young farmers' movement is located in the everyday practices of farming – that young farmers are guided by a substantive rationality adhering to a meaningful livelihood above a profit ethic. In order to survive as small-scale producers, young farmers must necessarily engage in both commodified and non-commodified systems of exchange. I explore the making of these values and the

material and discursive factors that shape them amongst small-scale farmers in northern California.

Much of my research entailed participant observation. I routinely worked with farmers in the Living Lands Agrarian Network (heretofore referred to as Living Lands) – five farms on a weekly basis – and participated in weekly collective work days. Living Lands, as I explain below, is one of more than a dozen agrarian training centers in California. It formed in 2006 in Nevada County to train and support a new generation of farmers locally. I immersed myself among this group of farmers during the 2012 and 2013 growing seasons, engaging in informal conversations and structured interviews and laboring with them in their fields.

I was eventually asked to join the organization as a board member, which I gladly accepted. My participation in the organization allowed for a more intimate understanding the training ethos and practice, as well as the inevitable tensions that arose in regard to finances – both organizationally and at the farm level. We often engaged in the "existential discussions" common among agrarian training centers about the purpose and ethics of training young farmers for a life of voluntary poverty as it would be defined by societal standards. The work with Living Lands included the mundane day-to-day running of an organization – fundraising and event planning, for example. It also entailed many philosophical debates amongst the Board and farmers within the organization. This intimate engagement with the organization allowed for an affective experience, one that would be foreclosed to the more "objective," distanced observer. Certainly, such an approach raises limitations and challenges for the researcher – a sense of connection and affinity can cloud critical

judgement. However, the intimate relations associated with engaged ethnography offer a depth and richness to the researcher unavailable to the detached observer. Specifically, it allows for an embodied experience, one where the tensions and contradictions are not only observed but experienced by the researcher. Making sense of these contradictions, challenges, and tensions exposed me to some of the more nuanced and intricate realities of agrarian life and how people derive meaning from it. My experience, regardless of my embeddedness, was always as partial as it was temporary. I acknowledge this partialness as to recognize the impossibility of total immersion, and the inevitable partiality of the engaged observer. This awareness tempers my personal observations, constituting them as departure points – an entry and corroborative experience to the interviews and discussions of research participants.

In addition to my work with Living Lands, I interviewed forty-five other beginning farmers within Nevada, Placer, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma counties. These additional interviews outside of the immediate ethnographic site confirmed some of the general experiences of beginning farmers and illuminated the unique experiences of farmers within Nevada county[4]. For the most part, these interviews were conducted while participating in farm work. This type of interviewing was particularly useful because few farmers could take an hour or two away from their daily routines for an interview. Also, as mentioned earlier, participating in the labor was a form of embodied ethnography for me – albeit a small glimpse of the routines and labor

[4] In Nevada County, I did a systematic sampling of beginning farmers, utilizing a local farm organization that published tall the farms in the county for their Buy Local guide. In the other counties, I relied on my contacts with farmer training centers and used a snowball sampling method. After each interview, the farmer would suggest one or two more farmers for me to interview.

expenditure of most farmers. It also allowed me to develop a stronger rapport with the farmers.

I also interviewed ten farm trainers and/or directors of farmer training organizations. These interviews provided insights into the organization and practice of training beginning farmers. It illuminated the visions such organizations enact, and the function they play in the movement. Additionally, these interviews often revealed the angst and internal tensions of the food movement more broadly. The discussion of livelihoods and one's ability to achieve a stable income from farming featured prominently. Herein was a critical insight to the training and the ethos, which I call the livelihood ethic, amongst new agrarians and the training centers.

I also collected data from farm conferences, including the annual EcoFarm Conference and Nevada County's Local Food and Farming Conferences. Lastly, I analyzed the blogs, websites, Facebook pages, local food listserves, farmer discussion forums and other social media platforms to compliment my ethnographic and interview data. While such writings are often tempered or polished for general public consumption, they provided a useful backdrop or contrast to the interviews and ethnography. That is, they revealed the tensions between the 'front stage' and 'back stage' as Erving Goffman would describe it – the often contradictory relationship between public and private presentation. To analyze one without the other can lead to distortions, and as such I analyzed both as a way to identify the paradoxes and stresses of agrarianism. While many of the tensions were more or less identical amongst farmers in Nevada County and those from other parts of the state, it is necessary to elucidate the particulars of Nevada County. What follows is a brief contextualization

of my ethnographic field site.

Beginning Farmers in Nevada County, California

Nevada County stretches west to east in a narrow strip of land shaped like a pistol ending with the barrel at the Nevada state border. The pistol serves homage to the Wild West origins and mythology encompassed in the county – a frontier mentality, strong libertarian ethos, rugged individualism, and a resource-dependent economy. Nevada County was the heart of the gold country, producing $440 million in gold between 1850-1950 (Duane 1999; Walker 2003). As the mines declined, the economy turned towards timber. The remnants of these industries still scar the land, from the hydraulic moonscapes to the patchwork forests and bleeding landslides. Like all extractive economies, Nevada County boomed and busted, and residents were left with the remains. Whereas many boom towns deteriorate, Nevada County was partly revived by tourism, exurban migration and the rise of a lucrative marijuana economy (Duane 1999, Keene 2016, 2017).

While agriculture was never the largest part of the economy, it provided livelihoods during the gold rush era. Ranches, orchards, and truck farms supplied the mining community with food. Now, remnants of these old ranches and orchards dot the landscape, along with the old hydraulic mines and network of timber roads traversing the hills. The decline of these farms has as much to do with the decline of the gold rush economy as it does with the increasingly competitive, capitalist nature of California agriculture. As the mining industry collapsed and the population declined, so did the regionalized agriculture of the foothills. From the mid 20th century onward,

agriculture was little more than an afterthought in this region. The emerging agricultural industry 60 miles west of Nevada County in California's great Central Valley assured a steady supply of inexpensive foodstuffs, and a sense that the old ranchers and farmsteads were antiquated – a relic of a short-lived mining community. In spite of the proximity to this famed and highly productive agricultural region and its far superior soils, Nevada County has seen a phenomenal uptick in small-scale farming.

The last two USDA agricultural censuses provide a snapshot of the farm increases in the area.[5] While total farm acreage has decreased in Nevada County, the last two USDA agriculture censuses have registered a steady increase in small farms – a 6.9% increase from 2002 to 2007, and a 7.5% increase from 2007 to 2012. The smallest farms, those between 1-10 acres increased by 22% in this same time period. Additionally, the 2007 Census indicated that 38% of farmers in the county were beginning farmers, or those with less than 10 years of agricultural experience. In contrast to some other regions of California where local and organic agriculture has flourished, Nevada County is a relative newcomer with the first CSA farm established in 1997, and Nevada City's first Farmers Market established in 2007. There are now five such markets in the vicinity. During my fieldwork, new farmers had a significant presence in Grass Valley and Nevada City not just because of the frequency of farmers markets, but also because they were highly publicized by local organizations and the local newspapers.

The resurgence of agriculture in Nevada County has much to do with the

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[5] These figures do not include the many 'homestead' farmers. These are folks who buy land and try to grow all the food and fiber for their households, often while working part-time jobs. These farms do

efforts of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and '70s, amongst whom were some of the organic farming pioneers. While most found it difficult to sustain a livelihood on the land, they built up the infrastructure and knowledge base for the next generation to flourish in Nevada County. For instance, they created a food co-op (the Briar Patch), organic seed and farm supply company (Peaceful Valley), and started to catalog the knowledge in the form of books, brochures, magazines, radio segments and other media. A few of these original back-to-the-land farmers remain in agriculture today and serve as consultants of sorts to beginning farmers in the region – Amigo Bob being the most visible and vocal advocate.[6] The reputation of Grass Valley and Nevada City as being a counter-cultural hotspot certainly played a role in attracting young farmers to the region. Despite its small population, this area is known for its art, festivals, and outdoor recreation. The quality of life is very high and beyond attracting farmers, the region has attracted urban transplants from the Bay Area and Sacramento (another subset of clientele for the farmers).

The area is also home to a robust marijuana industry, which supports small-scale farmers in a number of ways. For one, many cash-laden marijuana growers are supporters of local food, participating in CSA, farmers markets, locavore restaurants, and other venues. Second, farmers and farm workers can supplement their incomes by 'trimming' marijuana during the offseason, which pays relatively high wages and in cash. Finally, some farmers grow their own marijuana – a cash crop that helps balance

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not sell much produce and therefore do not register in USDA statistics.

[6] Amigo Bob played a central role in establishing organic agricultural legislation in California and nationally. He was helped establish the first food cooperative in Nevada County as well as the Peaceful Valley Organic Farm supply store. He also founded the EcoFarm Conference where farmers and food activists meet annually to discuss all matters pertaining to organic farm production, politics, and inspiration.

the books of their organic farm. Rumors of organic farmers growing marijuana are common, but very few personally acknowledged their participation in the marijuana economy in interviews, for the obvious legal reasons at the time of research (recreational marijuana production had not yet been legalized in California). Additionally, marijuana production carries a particular stigma amongst organic vegetable farmers; pot farmers were often derided as people seeking a quick and easy profit without the ecological or social ethos of organic farmers. However, some farmers viewed their participation in the marijuana economy as a subsidy of sort. As one farmer told me, "if big farms get subsidies, why shouldn't we?" The tenuous relationship between organic farmers and the marijuana economy was certainly a component of the re-agrarianization witnessed in California generally, and Nevada County specifically.

While Nevada County does not have the fertile agricultural land just west of it in the Central Valley, it does have the cultural milieu to support beginning farmers. As mentioned above, it has a unique blend of exurban locavores, countercultural environmentalists, and homestead libertarians – all of whom support the vision of localized agriculture, albeit for different reasons. The idea of food sovereignty, for instance, was advocated by a few organizations and demographics within the county. At the Nevada County Local Food and Farm conference Living Lands (now Sierra Harvest[7]) would speak of food sovereignty in terms of establishing a locally organized

[7] At the end of the 2013 farm season, Living Lands Agrarian Network and Live Healthy Nevada County held a series of discussions about merging the two organizations. While Living Lands focused more on training and support for beginning farmers, Live Healthy focused on promoting local foods, running farm-to-school programs, and generally connecting consumers and farmers. Given the overlapping nature of these two organizations, the two organizational boards agreed to merge into a new collective organization called Sierra Harvest. This organization would fulfill both the farmer training and support

and controlled agriculture, while another organization promoted it in terms of a libertarian defense of private property rights. The fact that both ideological camps imagined the local food movement within distinct if not conflictual political frames was illustrative of why new agrarians, and Living Lands in particular, flourished in the county.

While the particular milieu of Nevada County was partial to new agrarians, the larger movement as a whole can and should be situated in relation to the historical process of agro-industrialization. Additionally, it should be understood as a response to the changing nature of work and the search for meaning and autonomy therein.

Historicizing the Young Farmers Movement: Agro-Industrialization and Re-Agrarianization

The young farmers movement, and the sustainable agriculture movement more broadly, is a response to the agro-industrialization of agriculture in the 20th century – a century that saw the displacement and consolidation of farmland in the United States and the corresponding rise of transnational agri-food corporations. It is also a response to the liberalization of the global food economy within the last 40 years and the corresponding retail revolution (the growing price pressures as dictated by major food retailers throughout the farm chain). The wholesale commodification of food and

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and awareness raising and education around local food issues. The merging was a win-win situation for both organizations. While Living Lands had tremendous grassroots support, its organizational structure and ability to fundraise was limited given that the majority of staff and board of directors were full-time farmers in addition to maintaining the organization. Live Healthy Nevada County was much stronger organizationally, and was run by two directors with years of non-profit management experience. To this day, Sierra Harvest has continued the work of Living Lands by establishing a more formalized farmer training school. The merge became official in 2014 when Sierra Harvest held its inaugural event.

the growing consolidation and power of multinational food corporations in the production and provisioning of food is the most proximate stimuli of the agrarian movement. A second and highly interrelated phenomena is the growing precariousness and rationalized nature of work. As I will illuminate in the following chapters, a major impetus of new agrarians is the search for unalienated and meaningful work. In both instances, sustainable agriculture is a Polanyian countermovement, a resistance to the social and ecological distortions of market society and its specific effects on the contemporary food system[8]. Agro-industrialization encapsulates both phenomena in that it has driven the deskilling of farm work, deepened a metabolic rift between society and nature, and extended rationalization of production. The culmination of these processes has resulted in a steady decline of farmers.

Agro-industrialization has proceeded through appropriation and substitution (Goodman, Sorji, and Wilkenson 1987). Industrial capital, on one hand, appropriates discrete elements of agricultural production and transforms them through industrial processes for the subsequent "reincorporation [of these elements] as inputs for production" (ibid: 2). On the other hand, agricultural produce is subject to industrial substitution during post-harvest processing in which agricultural products are the raw material inputs for industrial foods, cosmetics, or other products. "The industrial transformation of agriculture," Goodman et al. argue, "has occurred historically through a series of partial discontinuous appropriations of the rural labor and biological production processes and the parallel development of industrial substitutes

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[8] While Polanyian counter movements enlist the state as a mechanism for protection, new agrarians are less oriented towards the state. Nonetheless, the counter movement in this sense is a response to the

for rural products" (1987: 2). While most industrial interventions in agriculture before the 1930s were mechanical and chemical (i.e. tractors, synthetic inputs), the advent of hybrid seeds and the subsequent development of the biotechnology industry thoroughly deepened the agro-industrial model.

Pertinent to the new agrarian movement, is how agro-industrialization altered the work of farming. In the process of agro-industrialization, farmers lost much of their autonomy and their work became transformed from a craft to a purveyor of mechanical operations. The "art of farming," as Van der Ploeg has it, was transformed into a rationalized system of inputs and outputs, prescribed by agrochemical industries (2015). Industrialization transformed the farmer's role, reducing the need for discernment, intimate knowledge of agroecology, and skilled adaptations. In its place, agroindustrial farmers follow a rationalized production process, where machinery and agrochemicals are regimented to override ecology (Weis 2010). Industrial scale farmers become dependent on agrochemical companies, farm equipment suppliers, banks and insurance companies. This deskilling of farming is an aspect new agrarians actively combat. However, the temptation to rationalize production, albeit with organic inputs, is still a constant pressure and temptation for beginning farmers. Nonetheless, new agrarians are explicit in their efforts to reclaim farming as a skilled craft and protect it from the corrosive rationality that threatens its most substantive meaning.

Cheap food is another product of the industrialization of food and agriculture, and likewise, directly impacts the experience of beginning farmers. Cheap food, new

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effects of free market capitalism, even though the form of this movement is different.

agrarians point out, is propped up by state subsidies to commodity crops, agricultural research, and large-scale distribution and retailing networks. Furthermore, neoliberal economic policies have encouraged further depression of agricultural commodities as inexpensive food imports fill supermarket shelves. Hidden in the cheap food calculus is massive soil degradation, fossil fuel consumption, agrochemical pollution, and deforestation (Patel 2009). The food movement, with which new agrarians associate, makes explicit the relations of cheap food, de-fetishizing the global food economy. They promote food from somewhere, in McMichael's words, as opposed to the disembodied "food from nowhere" of the corporate food regime (2009).

Cheap food not only masks the vast inequalities and exploitative relations of the corporate food regime, it also undermines the ability of farmers to make a livelihood. Cheap food is a major impetus behind rationalizing production, scaling up, and short cutting ecological practices. This is what Guthman has termed the "logic of intensification," and is something that impacts beginning farmers. In efforts to revalue food, beginning farmers confront a price paradox: the food prices necessary to fairly compensate farmers often excludes low income consumers (2004). This paradox has generated a great deal of concern amongst both farming and food justice communities. That is, cheap food at once constrains farmers ability to produce on a small scale using ecological methods, and perpetuates food injustices amongst poor people. Local food is very limited in its ability to address this bigger question, as Guthman and others have made clear. The question of cheap food is a question of capitalism. Sustainable agriculture emerged within this crucible, and while offering small scale and networked responses to the corporate food regime are far from overthrowing or revolutionizing

it—as I will elaborate in the final chapter of this dissertation—they enact an alternative agriculture within the interstices of it. Beginning farmers are constantly engaged with this price paradox and other structures of the corporate food regime and capitalist economy more broadly. Their place-based projects, as such, are often full of tensions and contradictions. What follows is an analysis of these tensions and contradictions as they make visible instances of structuring, and are constitutive parts of the prefigurative politics beginning farmers espouse.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation makes two contributions to the literature on agriculture and social change. First, I provide an ethnographic analysis of a population that has been relatively neglected in the literature on agrarian change. Few ethnographic studies of beginning farmers in the Global North are available, yet there is a wealth of scholarship that either critiques or romanticizes new agrarians. In contrast to both of these positions, I provide a detailed examination of beginning farmers as a means of elucidating their values and practices, their relationship to capitalist structures, and the ways in which they are attempting to realize de Souza Santos' notion that "another world *is* possible" (2007). That said, there is no perfect politics, and the new agrarians of which I write are no exception. The making of alternative economies, subjectivities, and socialities is often fraught with tensions and ambiguities, yet the aspirations and practices of beginning farmers, as I argue here, are worthy of scholarly inquiry. I take a cue from Stuart Hall's study of American Hippies when he claims, "I am trying to make manifest what are, by definition, the latent meanings of a way of

life… I believe this is necessary to get close to the underlying value-structure and *weltanschauung* of this highly significant phenomenon" (2007: 146). He continues, "The way of life, and the values and attitudes embodied and projected in it, have a consistency and pattern. It is this pattern, and its future meaning, which I am trying to bring out. At the very least, the Hippie way of life represents 'definitions of the situation' different from, counter to, those which are maintained as valid and legitimate in the taken-for-granted routines of American middle class society: 'an island of deviant meanings within the sea of its society' (147).

This work also provides a theoretical intervention into political economic debates around food and agriculture. I use the concept of a livelihood ethic to reveal the complexities of contemporary economic relations and the ways in which beginning farmers are challenging the ethos of capitalism from within its confines. The notion of a livelihood ethic is premised on a valuation of substantive rationalities over formal rationalities, despite the fact that small-scale farmers engage selectively in capitalist markets. From this vantage point it is possible to understand how a "post-capitalist politics" (Gibson-Graham 2006) may be achieved on a local level, contradictions, flaws, successes and all.

I develop this argument, first, by situating my analysis in the conventionalization of organic agriculture debate and discussing the impact this literature has had on scholarly understandings of small-scale and beginning farmers (Chapter 2). Conventionalization, I argue, is essentially a variation of the agrarian question, or how capital subsumes and transforms alternatives; in this case, small-scale organic is coopted by corporate agriculture, reproducing agrarian capitalism in

California. However, this approach to agrarian change obscures, if not outright dismisses, a small, yet socially and politically significant, component of contemporary food movements. Drawing on Gibson-Graham's critique of capitalocentrism and McMichael's (2013) call to historicize agrarian forms of resistance and revalue the centrality of social reproduction in agrarian politics, I show how beginning farmers in the Global North are constructing new subjectivities and economic relations that serve as an embodied critique of – and an alternative to – capitalist relations.

Chapter 3 then explores what the conventionalization debate misses, namely the importance of substantive rationalities in local food movements and the ways in which these values and rationalities shape and are shaped by farmers' engagement in a diverse set of economic and market relations. Here I elaborate my conception of the livelihood ethic as understood through the lens of beginning farmers, arguing that this ethic reveals a much more complex set of economic relations that complicates the neoliberal-alternative binary.

I illustrate the livelihood ethic in Chapter 4 with a close analysis of farmer training centers. These are the heart and soul of the beginning farmers movement, as they teach young farmers not only the nuts and bolts of agroecology, but just as importantly they build networks of support that allow new farmers to practice the livelihood ethic. In this chapter, I focus specifically on a training center in Nevada City, Living Lands Agrarian Network, which I worked with extensively during my two years of research. Living Lands centered its training practices around the construction of vibrant community relationships. As a result, the organization helped to foster the re-valuation of food within the community and institutionalize social and

economic structures through which the livelihood ethic could be achieved.

I conclude with a reflection on what we can learn from the study of beginning farmers in the Global North, arguing that an emphasis on substantive rationalities can open up new spaces for dialogue and debate in contemporary food systems studies. Contra both critical scholars who dismiss beginning farmers as either insignificant or a new manifestation of the neoliberal subject, I show how this population is engaging in the difficult work of cultivating economic subjectivities and practices that seek to subvert the formal rationality of capitalism and revalue social and ecological relations. Such work is never perfect, as I noted above, but it is necessary and significant.

CHAPTER 2:

RETHINKING THE CONVENTIONALIZATION THESIS

Introduction

The conventionalization of organic agriculture in California is well known and documented. Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars of agrarian studies examined how the formation of an organic certification premised on allowable inputs was manipulated and dominated by corporate interests (Buck et al 1997; Guthman 2014, 2004). In these framings, the industrialization of organic agriculture is painted as a *fait accompli*, suggesting a foreclosure of transformative possibilities within the movement. In other words, capitalist competition within the sector predestined corporate consolidation and agrarian differentiation – a rapid and merciless enactment of the classical agrarian question. Due to the corporate consolidation of the organic market, many scholars believed the fierce competition would drive out smaller scale, and often more ecologically committed farmers. Since then we have not seen a rapid decline in small-scale farmers, as many expected given the dominant structures of agrarian capitalism that constrained and ultimately transformed this market alternative. In contrast, a steady stream of enthusiastic young (as well as older, second career) people are entering small-scale agriculture in what is often described as a local farming renaissance amongst a new generation of agrarians. Though this movement hardly registers in USDA national statistics, news media and the popular press have picked up on this trend underway across the country with significant hotspots in areas

in Northern California, the Pacific Northwest, and New England.[9] These new entry farmers are referred to in popular media as "Greenhorns," the next generation of organic farmers, contemporary back-to-the-landers, young farmers, or most appropriately, local farmers (Bradbury, Fleming, and Manalo 2012). Generally speaking, these farmers are inspired and bolstered by the shift towards local foods and localized economies within food movements. This chapter analyzes why and how these farmers are bucking the conventional wisdom of neoclassical economics, and what this might tell us about an agrarian question of local food.

Agriculture, for these young farmers, is both a livelihood and a way of life. It is integral to their conception of community, sustainability, and what constitutes the "good life." And while these agricultural practices are on the margins, they reflect important epistemological and ontological challenges to contemporary consumer culture, and to corporate agriculture more specifically. However, these practices are often obscured in political economy analyses of agriculture. From a classical political economy standpoint, these new farmers are categorized as simple commodity producers competing for space within a capitalist economy (Pratt 2009). Such a framework obscures the substantive rationalities and alternative forms of valuation that guide new agrarians' actions and projects. While economic competition shapes their decisions and practices, it is not the sole or defining feature guiding the actions of new agrarians, or how they make sense of the world around them.

In analyzing the politics and practices of these new agrarians, I draw on J.K. Gibson-Graham's critique of structuralist accounts of social and economic life – what

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[9] One of the reasons national statistics mute this pattern is because the Midwest is still experiencing a steady decline in the farming population, which obscures the re-agrarianization occurring more

they term ‘capitalocentric’ analyses (2006). Gibson-Graham broaden the scope of social and economic relations and renders visible a host of non-capitalist activities and values that are emblematic of the new agrarians with whom I conducted my research. Their analytical corrective allows for a more robust account of economic life and challenges economic reductionism. I build on this approach to highlight the full range of economic and social relations that constitute agricultural practices as a post-capitalist politics amongst new agrarians in California. Yet, in embracing Gibson-Graham’s rejection of capitalocentric analyses, an equally problematic risk emerges, namely the risk of displacing or minimizing the material effects (or pressures) of capitalism. There’s an additional risk of neglecting the ways in which young farmers selectively choose to engage in capitalist markets. Far from being one or the other – capitalist or non-capitalist – these farmers must operate and make a living within a capitalist economy. But, because of their marginality and their particular constructions of value, they also rely on non-capitalist means to secure their social reproduction.

Two theoretical framings of agriculture in California exemplify the aforementioned limitations of political economy: the conventionalization thesis (addressed in this chapter) and the characterization of local food movements as espousing a neoliberal politics (Chapter 4). Both of these framings illuminate important dynamics within agrarian movements and how they are conditioned and/or transformed by capitalist structures, yet they assume an economic rationality that is neither consistently nor predominantly characteristic of new agrarians. Importantly,

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prominently in New England and on the West coast.

these critiques of alternative agriculture render many farmers, such as those with whom I conducted my research, either complicit in the reproduction of neoliberalism, or simply invisible. While the conventionalization thesis provided a necessary and valuable critique of the corporate capture of the industrial organic market, its conclusions pertaining to the decline, if not insignificance, of small-scale agriculture has had empirically misleading and theoretically problematic consequences. In this chapter, I argue that the conventionalization thesis not only exemplifies the limitations of capitalocentrism, but that it has also had a powerful impact on the boundaries of academic inquiry around alternative agriculture. Significantly, the thesis has constrained what is considered politically significant, limiting the parameters of inquiry to farmers of large enough scale or sectors of alternative agriculture that register a market share of the overall food economy. While there have been critiques of this thesis outside of the United States (Campbell and Liebens 2001; Hall and Mogyorody 2001; Michelson 2001; Pratt 2009; Luetchford and Pratt 2011), few have critically examined the conventionalization thesis within the U.S. The unintended consequence of dismissing a whole segment of alternative agriculture in California has been to constrain analyses of so called "movement" or ecologically-oriented farmers (with the exception of Galt's (2011, 2012, 2014) recent work on CSA farmers). There have been even fewer ethnographic accounts of small-scale farming in the United States, despite the fact that this is one of the fastest growing movements in agriculture (Laura DeLind's work is the notable exception here). The extent to which small-scale agricultural initiatives and local food have become part of the common vernacular signal that the awareness and consciousness-raising of these issues has registered an

effect. I argue that these changes merit scholarly analysis rather than dismissal. Yet in doing so, it is necessary to reframe the terms and assumptions through which agriculture is analyzed. We need to look beyond exclusively economic understandings of agriculture. To do so, we need to understand the multiple meanings and practices of agriculture. This requires a re-examination of alternative agriculture that is neither dismissive nor romantic, but seeks to understand how and why new generation of people are moving into agriculture.

The Emergence and Cooptation of Organic Agriculture

The organic agriculture movement in California emerged from the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and its ecological and social critique of industrial agriculture. Alerted to the social and ecological ills of industrial farming by classic works of Upton Sinclair, Carey McWilliams, John Steinbeck, Rachel Carson, Cesar Chavez, Jim Hightower, Frances Moore Lappe, and Wendell Berry, the organic pioneers sought to create an ecologically-sound and socially-just alternative to industrial agriculture. At the heart of their vision was (and continues to be) the small-scale family farm and collective variations on it, including communes and other communal arrangements. Importantly, scale was central to the vision and ideal of the original movement. Small-scale farms, it was believed, allowed for closer ecological stewardship and tighter social integration of communities. Some of the early proponents saw small-scale agriculture as way to detach from capitalist modernity, while others sought to transform it. As Obach describes the early movement, "General discontent with modern social institutions considered oppressive and violent led some

to seek a simpler agricultural existence along with a social order reminiscent of the agrarian Jeffersonian ideal. Others envisioned a radical social transformation in which communal enterprises would displace industrial capitalist institutions" (2015: 41). The early years were largely dispersed and informal. Participants were geared towards action as opposed to forming organizations.[10]

These organic pioneers were embarking on projects big and small with strong social and environmental convictions, and at times visions of land-based, sustainable communities. These back-to-the-land projects were often limited by practical knowledge, and many people stumbled through the challenges of crop production. As the organic pioneer Amigo Bob admitted to me, "we didn't know what the hell we were doing, but we were problem solvers and committed to making organic agriculture possible." Many people dropped out, exasperated by the extensive labor requirements and minimal economic returns involved. Nevertheless, institutions that would become pivotal to the current food movement were established by these pioneers, including food co-ops, restaurants, seed and farm supply companies, and publications such as *Mother Earth* and *Organic Gardening*.

The making of the organic food market was less a deliberate, well-coordinated set of actions than it was improvisation and dealing with the unintended consequences of movement actions. For example, the emergence of certification – a critical factor in

[10] The overarching values that animated the back-to-land farm movement, however, were not just about agriculture exclusively. The reformulation of agriculture became a means of challenging human-nature relations as currently constructed and revaluing social relations in our everyday modes of production and reproduction. As such they presented an ideological critique of modernity and espoused a much broader vision to transform social and ecological relations. They helped to reformulate the meaning of a "good life" away from the more destructive capitalist ethos of accumulation. This vision carries on in many of the beginning farmers I interviewed, and while the organic market has become mainstream and largely captured by big agricultural interests, this consolidation has not killed the foundational practices or visions.

the so-called conventionalization of organics – was the product of a sequence of events that unfolded dynamically. After figuring out how to produce food organically (not an easy task given that the entire industry at the time was devoted to conventional agriculture), farmers had to devise marketing strategies. At first, they essentially sold at wholesale market prices (the same as conventional), despite the extra labor this farming required and the sometimes-reduced yields resulting from more ecologically sustainable methods of production. Organic produce and conventional produce were indistinguishable at this point. In an effort to demarcate their produce from conventional produce, farmers introduced the term "organically grown." But with no regulatory body to enforce these claims of organic, many free riders sold produce under the organic label that was grown conventionally. One long-time organic grower told me a story of being dumbfounded when visiting a large-scale conventional grower who simply switched labels to organic on his packaging line, despite all his produce being conventionally grown. The free rider problem threatened the integrity of the movement and its legitimacy amongst consumers. As such, organic activists sought out a regulatory body to enforce the organic label. After much debate and competing proposals, the movement decided to go forward with developing a national standard administered by the federal government.

The establishment of an organic certification standard, upheld by a national regulatory system, helped create a lucrative niche market that fetched significant price premiums compared to conventionally-grown produce[11]. While organic farmers struggling to make a living welcomed the price premium, it also attracted the eye of

[11] The organic niche markets were already formed in some states, such as California and Oregon, where state legislation had already formed an organic market.

agribusiness. Federal certification also pulled this nascent organic movement into the realm of federal politics – a realm for which organic producers were unready and had not the foresight to manage. The immense lobbying power of agribusiness and its entrenchment in the USDA led to a less-than-perfect certification system – one that focused more or less on allowable inputs, as opposed to a more rigorous standard of classification (standards that may have included crop rotations, fallow periods, hedgerows, soil organic matter maintenance, crop diversity, etc.).

Eventually, as Buck et al signaled during the height of its market expansion, organic agriculture began to mimic the patterns and development of industrial agriculture itself (1998; see also Guthman 2014, 2004; Allen and Kovach 2000). This process was enabled not only by manipulation of federal standards, but was heavily shaped by the agrarian history of California where a legacy of highly concentrated agribusiness could easily adopt organic standards without adjusting their mode of production based on mechanization, migrant labor, processing and packaging equipment, distribution networks, etc. (Walker 2004, Guthman 2014). Large agribusiness operations already controlled the vast acreage of prime fruit and vegetable production in the Central Valley, Salinas Valley, and Central Coast. By simply altering their inputs and making other small adjustments these agribusiness farms could readily tap into this new lucrative market.

In addition to increased competition from industrial agriculture, the price premiums associated with the organic market, according to Guthman, were capitalized into land values, increasing barriers to entry and putting pressure on existing farms to mechanize and expand the operations to maintain profitability. Increasing land values

and price competition pushed many organic producers out of production, favoring those farms that were capitalized enough to exploit this market niche. In short order, the organic sector mirrored the conventional sector it initially set out to challenge in its structure, production methods, and concentration. Within a decade of establishing the certified organic national market, corporate producers – far from the ideal of the organic, small-scale, family producer – dominated the sector. This disjuncture between the reality and ideal of organic agriculture is what Guthman deems the central paradox of the organic movement in her pioneering book *Agrarian Dreams* (2014).

Bifurcation of the Organic Market

Despite the foreclosure of the organic market, Guthman does note that some small-scale, ecologically oriented farmers have been able to survive by focusing on local and direct markets. The persistence of small-scale ecological farms existing in tandem with industrial organic farms has been termed the bifurcation of the organic sector (Buck et al 1998; Guthman 2004). This framing has shaped discussions about the prospects of alternative agriculture. In an early iteration of the bifurcation argument, Buck et al (1997) identified an emerging pattern within the organic farming sector, one that was characterized by large-scale industrial producers on one hand and more committed small-scale ecological farmers on the other (commonly distinguished as industrial organic farmers and movement farmers). Large-scale, industrial organic producers, according to their description, adhere to minimum organic standards, rely mainly on industrial methods of agriculture such a mechanization, migrant farm labor, input substitution (replacing non-organic inputs with allowable organic inputs), and

market their produce nationally and globally. Movement farmers, in contrast, adhere to an ideal of small-scale ecological production, including crop diversity, recycling farm nutrients, rotations, hedgerows, fallow periods, and other soil conservation practices. They also are committed to selling their produce locally or within regional markets through direct sales to restaurants, subscription shares (Community Supported Agriculture [CSA]), farmers markets, u-pick and farm stands.

Implicit in the formulation of the bifurcation of organics is that localization emerged as a response to the foreclosure of the organic market. However, the extent to which this is accurate is difficult to determine. For those interested in becoming moderately-scaled organic producers, the competitive forces within the organic sector quickly dashed their dreams.[12] However, very few of the farmers I interviewed aspire to being organic producers of such scale. This was not because of the prohibitive nature of the market, but rather because scaling up alters the nature of the work. For example, many farmers I interviewed stated that they "did not want to manage other people" or want to be "the boss." Other farmers were skeptical of scaling up because it could mean an increased division of labor on the farm and would have implications for the type of work they engage in. For instance, some farmers were particularly uninterested in being relegated to indoor work – namely marketing and managing the business side of the operation. Others, as mentioned earlier, did not want a supervisor type relationship with employees or any real or perceived exploitative relationships. In other words, the farmers with whom I worked saw local food as more socially and ecologically meaningful than organic, and embedded in a set of relationships that

[12] The fiercest competition occurs in the wholesale market, where economies of scale and labor efficiency greatly determine margin of profits.

simply could not be "scaled up" without losing their socio-cultural meanings and integrity.

The rise and fall of one moderately scaled farm in the area also served as a cautionary tale. Four Frogs Farm was one of the new and highly visible farms in the local food scene – their produce featured prominently at the local coop, restaurants, as well as their CSA and farmers market booth. At the time, many farm advocates saw this operation as the successful model, yet a few short years later the farm closed down. When I talked with two of the previous owners, they both mentioned that compensating their laborers in a fair manner meant there was little to no funds to reinvest in the farm and/or to pay for their own labor. In addition to the financial stress, they both lamented how their work had changed as the farm scaled up – the direct act of producing food had become more distant and mediated; the joy was gone. The Four Frogs Farm story was brought to my attention in nearly every interview I conducted, and as such, served as an allegory – a warning against scaling up and becoming too business-oriented. Much like their back-to-the land predecessors, beginning farmers were skeptical of business logic and made considerable efforts to protect the meaning of their work. Given the centrality of values that privilege local relationships over (instrumental) economic rationality in small-scale agriculture and direct connections to the land, there is little incentive or desire for beginning farmers to expand in scale.[13]

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[13] Importantly, the values espoused by the farmers I interviewed were by and large shared amongst the consumers of the food they produced. For the regular patrons of the farmers markets, farm stands, and restaurants, they valued ecological methods of production and the relationships above and beyond the monetary exchange (even if they never set foot on the farm). Many of the dedicated farm supporters would volunteer time on the farm and/or attend farm events. While, in general, I would estimate that customers were more likely to adhere to a market logic wherein prices and convenience would feature

This is another reason why small-scale farmers are for the most part dismissed or deemed insignificant in the conventionalization thesis generally, and the bifurcation literature specifically. The social and political meaning of small-scale agriculturalists are not taken seriously in these accounts. Guthman minimizes the existence of small-scale organic farmers because many survive on what she calls "subsidies" – inherited land or land accessed below market rate, off-farm incomes, inheritance, savings accounts, etc. The assumption here is that "real farmers" derive all their income from the land and acquire all productive resources via the market. This idealized independent farmer is more the exception than the rule at this historical moment, however. The USDA notes that 91% of farm operators have off-farm incomes (USDA 2012). This estimation is similar to what Van der Ploeg and others have identified as pluriactivity in European farms; the various non-farm and extra-farm activities that generate income that goes back into the farm (2008; Pratt and Luetchford 2014). Viewed in a strict political economy frame, these farmers may be seen as proletarianized or petite bourgeois, but from a different perspective such non-farm activities are devoted to the maintenance of the farm. In other words, the categories of political economy may blur the meaning of off-farm labor and the motivations and purpose driving it.

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in their transactions, there often seemed to be at least some restraint or modification of this culturally pervasive rationality when interacting with farmers. Nonetheless, farmers did mention some annoyance of customers who did not adhere to a similar ethic, and they often felt pressure to acquiesce to the normative strictures of market relationships. Local food, in balance, is more immune to cooptation than organic agriculture writ large. While supermarkets have made a push to market 'local' foods, this has not appeared to detract from the sustained growth of farmers markets and other more dedicated local food markets. Put in other words, the committed consumers of these local farmers are seeking some authenticity, not the shallow branding operation of a supermarket. Furthermore, while retailers are fully marketing local produce in their stores, the extent to which this creates competition between retailers and direct-market farmers is yet to be seen. Those who shop at farmers markets, farm stands, and

Guthman also suggests that these farms are politically insignificant in the grand scheme of things, as they do not challenge or threaten the prevailing corporate food system. Indeed, one of the central arguments of *Agrarian Dreams* is that the organic market does not threaten conventional agro-food systems either in the methods of production or in the market share it occupies. Organic produce accounts for a mere 2% of total produce sales (Guthman 2014). Direct-marketed produce – practiced by all of the local farmers in this study – makes up a small proportion of this organic market. From the standpoint of market share or sheer acreage in organic or sustainable production, local food is an abject failure. This focus, I argue, misses the political and epistemological significance of local foods and new agrarians specifically. If revolutionary criteria were categorically applied to social movements, very few would live up to the standard set by Guthman. How one thinks about social change and the temporal lens one applies matters significantly in normative judgements of success or failure.

Critiques, Rebuttals and Reformulations of Conventionalization

A number of scholars have critiqued the dichotomies employed in the conventionalization thesis such as those between large- and small-scale, conventional and alternative, industrial and sustainable agriculture, or local and non-local (Campbell and Lieben 2001; Pratt 2009). These scholars note that there are many producers who straddle these extremes and that a more careful analysis of farming practices and relationships should guide analysis of agrarian processes. Certainly,

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CSAs, are searching for relationships, experiences, and levels of quality that are distinct from retail

there is a great range of production practices, and numerous farmers fall between these ideal types of small and large scale agriculture, for instance. Nonetheless, the benefit and contribution of the bifurcation argument is that these two general groups of producers operate in largely separate markets, which buffers the competition between them to an extent. While bifurcation may gloss over some distinctions and nuances in farm production, it alerts us to the relatively distantiated spaces each type of organic producers operate within. While competition is fierce amongst the industrial growers and their mainstream markets, the direct markets of smaller ecological producers are relatively protected from free market competition – although this may be changing (Guthman 2014). Ryan Galt's work has highlighted the competitive relations within local foods, and my own research confirms that some local markets have reached a point of saturation – to borrow economic terminology, supply has started to outpace demand (Galt 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Farmers expressed to me that they were having difficulty filling their CSA, and as one farmer, Alan, summed up to me, "CSA has gone from consumer-driven to producer-driven." Farmers, he told me, are now having to market and advertise to fill their CSA (also see Galt et al. 2018).

Despite the signs of increased competition within local markets (Galt et al. 2016), small-scale direct marketing farms have largely been buffered from the extreme competition noted in the conventionalization thesis. Nonetheless, Guthman (2004, 2014) concludes that even "the most committed farmers cannot adopt a truly ecological form of agriculture," due to the small profit margins associated with this form of farming. Downward price pressures from more mainstream organic markets,

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grocers, and these relationships are fundamental to the viability of small-scale farmers' livelihoods.

competition between direct sale farmers, and high land prices all make ecological methods financially difficult, if not outright impossible. Farmers must forgo practices that increase labor intensity, reduce yields, or place land out of production (i.e. hedgerows, cover cropping, field rotations, integrated pest management, etc.) in order to cover their costs, let alone return a profit. As a result, many movement farmers must intensify production practices, such as ramping up year-round production, increasing application of off-farm organic inputs, and implementing labor-saving technologies (plastic row covers, use of mechanical planting / harvesting equipment). Guthman calls this dynamic the logic of intensification, and claims that all producers must conform to this logic in order to survive. The sole exception to this process are the hobby and lifestyle farmers (and likewise, market gardeners) that in her terms, rely on "subsidies" from family or extended networks (2014). The term "subsidies" is used predominantly as a way to demarcate so-called real farmers from those who are not full-time or do not engage in pure competition.

There were a series of critical articles published in the journal *Sociologia Ruralis* (2001) that used examples of organic agriculture in other countries to refute the assumed inevitability of conventionalization within certified organic markets (Campbell and Lipens 2001; Michelson 2001; Hall and Mogyorody 2001). A systematic review and critique of the conventionalization thesis, however, was not published until Jeff Pratt's 2009 article entitled "Incorporation or Resistance," and then subsequently in his book, *Food for Change* (Pratt and Luetchford 2014). Campbell and Lipens critique the assumptions of universality and linearity of capitalist appropriation that the conventionalization of California organics suggests. Social

movements and alternative production do get co-opted by corporations, but that is not the end of the story – the process is more dialectical. The most poignant example here is the more recent expansion and growth in local food markets. In part, this shift within the sustainable agriculture movement was a response to the perceived and real watering down of organic standards and corporate concentration within the sector. While this process effectively created insurmountable barriers to entry within the mainstream organic markets for most beginning farmers, it also allowed sustainable agriculture activists to reframe the meaning and content of organic food. The term "organic" still resonates with many consumers, but other attributes have been attached to the word – namely local – that demarcate the committed ecological farmers from the more opportunistic agribusiness firms. A strictly (political) economic analysis of this shift has suggested that the turn to local markets was a new strategy of farmers to create and protect economic rents (Allen 2011; DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006; Guthman 2004). An alternative analysis might suggest that distinctions between ecological local producers and the mainstream organic farms was a way to valorize small-scale ecological farms, and to reclaim the meaning of organic. There are numerous other examples of how sustainable agriculture activists fought to preserve more ecological farming standards both within the certified organic arena and outside of it. The movement for sustainable agriculture has adapted and created new strategies when confronted with corporate competition, or watering down of standards. It is this adaptability and responsiveness that makes movements fluid and dynamic. Large-scale industrial growers' capture of the mainstream organic market did not forestall the movement, but rather created a counter reaction to maintain strategies for

embedding agriculture.

Pratt provides a more thorough rethinking of the conventionalization thesis. In his piece, he argues that Guthman's overemphasis on the organic category (which was justified for the scope of her study) has led to a dismissal or trivialization of farmers who do not fall under that category, or do so only partially. He suggests that a focus on "organics" is not the same as a study of the scope of sustainable agriculture, and that Guthman essentially throws out the baby (all farmers) with the bath water (certified organic farmers). "The emergence of organic food", Pratt argues, "is an example of a much wider phenomenon: the way in which people put their creative energies into activities that are not directed towards profit, or money-value per se" (2009: 171). In lies a critical point for the argument at hand: that agrarian movements (organic or otherwise) reshape social values and meanings as much as they are trying to capture market shares of the food economy. If too much attention is given to the market relations of farmers, the underlying meaning of this movement gets distorted. As Pratt argues, "[c]apitalist expansion has not eliminated small producers, who are still in the majority, while another whole group of alternative producers have moved out of the 'organic' category. If we only track capitalist production, we miss them" (Pratt 2009: 172). Pratt also argues that Guthman may be missing the forest for the trees. For him what is,

> striking is the constant emergence of activities and movements that oppose [corporate] dominance and are built around alternative values. They are heavily shaped by the fact of being 'alternatives': defined against capitalist modes; their practices and values subject to constant encroachment. Marx's 'particular ether' is an essential part of the story, but not the whole of it. Analysis of the relationship between capitalism and what is (or struggles to be) 'outside' it has to be historically specific (2009:172).

As Pratt suggests, it is important to understand the values and rationalities of

small-scale farmers, not to assume a capitalist disposition or economic rationality. It is equally important to understand how these rationalities and values translate into practice, given the exigencies of 'the market.' While this development does not refute the claim that corporate interests have taken over mainstream organic agriculture – conventionalized the sector – it shifts the focus towards another group of 'alternative' farmers and challenges the idea that small-scale farming in California is disappearing or being transformed into capitalist enterprises. I draw attention to a parallel process of re-agrarianization that is distantiated from the conventional, or mainstream organic markets. Re-agrarianization in California highlights the creative efforts of beginning farmers to make a livelihood and to build local food economies. While the question remains whether local markets can sustain this movement or if local competition will initiate a process of differentiation as these markets saturate, I would suggest that there is already a dialectic response forming as food activists are strategizing for such issues – the development of food hubs, cooperative production and marketing.

The conventionalization thesis, and the debates it has spurred, bears resemblance to the classical and contemporary agrarian question – arguably another line of agrarian studies dominated by capitalocentric approaches. The classical agrarian question addressed the extent to which capitalist relations would transform peasant production in the countryside and the political implications of such a transformation. Specifically, Lenin and Kautsky argued that competition led to peasant differentiation, wherein larger, more asset rich farmers would expand and drive out smaller, less economically productive farmers (Lenin 1964; Kautsky 1958). Chayanov, in contrast, argued that small peasant farms would persist in spite of

increased capitalist integration, as they could disengage from the market and rely on family labor and the farm resource base to subsist (1986). This contention over the fate of the peasantry has shaped subsequent debates around the agrarian question. Henry Bernstein continues a classical political economy perspective, arguing that capitalism has differentiated and eliminated peasant production (2010). Phil McMichael, conversely, argues that the new agrarian question is being posed from peasant movements asserting their rights and existence (2013). Importantly, McMichael calls for an epistemic shift that examines peasants through their own discourse and practice as opposed to the strictures of political economy. In this formulation, the agrarian question of food shifts the analytic from capital's subordination of production relations to peasants' re-centering relations of social reproduction. The latter reaffirms the centrality of agriculture and food in an alternative modernity (McMichael 2008: 214).

The conventionalization thesis suggests that while the organic movement created a brief moment of opportunity and financial feasibility for small-scale agriculture in California, capitalist dynamics inevitably deteriorated the conditions for these agrarian livelihoods. Whereas the development of capitalist relations in agriculture was centuries in the making, the agrarian question of organic agriculture was 'resolved' within a mere decade or two in California. In the context of a highly developed system of capitalist agriculture in California, the development of an organic market was quickly and thoroughly exploited by opportunistic agribusiness. But has this really foreclosed the possibility of small-scale agrarian livelihoods in California? Are there other relations beyond capitalist relations that constitute this sector? What

does the young farmers movement mean in relation to the conventionalization thesis? As McMichael (2013) argues about the food sovereignty movement, I understand the young farmers movement as a critique of industrial agriculture – whether conventional or organic – and a revaluing of smallholder agriculture and livelihoods as guided by ecological principles.

In the following section, I review the critiques and post-capitalist formulations of political economy explained by Gibson-Graham, and articulate the alternative agrarian landscape of California through this lens. I also draw on the work of Van der Ploeg and Philip McMichael to shift epistemic and ontological framings of peasant agriculture. In recalibrating the analytical force (or explanatory power) of capitalism, a post-capitalist approach runs the potential risks of neglecting the historical development of capitalism. I seek to reformulate a political economy of alternative agriculture at once attentive to the historical development of capitalism as well as to the robust set of relations that are not encompassed by it. I propose an alternative understanding and analysis of small-scale agriculture that is sensitive to the diversity of non-capitalist relations and the tensions that emerge with capitalist structures. Re-agrarianization in California, I contend, can best be understood through a historicized account of community economies and the subjective meaning and politics therein.

Re-Thinking Capitalocentrism in Agrarian Studies: Community Economies and Agrarianization

As I've argued, the structuralist analysis prominent within the conventionalization thesis has marginalized accounts of agency within alternative

agriculture movements in California. This structuralism, however, is not distinctive to debates over organic agriculture but is prevalent in agrarian studies (and political economy) more generally – beginning with the classical agrarian question up to contemporary studies of agro-industrialization, agrarian change, and resistance movements (Buttel 2001). Much of this literature focuses on how capitalism penetrates, subsumes, and/or transforms peasant and family farmers. In doing so, the analyses are inattentive to the diversity of economic relations within agriculture. They often presume an instrumental rationality amongst peasants and a teleological progression of capitalist development. The economy, in these representations, is portrayed as thoroughly capitalist, and what is not capitalist is either in the process of becoming capitalist or greatly constrained by it. Henry Bernstein's aforementioned agrarian question of labor is emblematic of this approach. Fixated on the categories of political economy, Bernstein cannot *see* peasant agriculture. For him, capitalist relations have initiated a thorough process of proletarianization, leaving nothing but capitalist farms, wage laborers, and petty commodity producers (2012).

In *A Post-Capitalist Politics*, Gibson-Graham attempt to recover agency from structuralist accounts of political economy. Capitalocentrism, according to Gibson-Graham, is the uncritically assumed dominance, prevalence, and unity of capitalism as an explanatory and causal factor of economic life (2006). As such, social and economic life is reduced to or severely constrained by relations of capital. Agency, in capitalocentric accounts, is also greatly constrained and governed by the laws, imperatives, and relations of capital. Accordingly, instrumental rationality of people is presumed in economic life, neglecting other substantive rationalities and values that

guide human action. The problem with capitalocentrism, accordingly, is that it distorts the power and prominence of capitalism in everyday life, and subordinates if not erases non-capitalist relations that arguably constitute economic life as much, if not more than, capitalist relations.

As a counter to capitalocentrism, Gibson-Graham (2006) present the idea of the diverse economy, providing analytic parity between capitalist and non-capitalist relations. The idea of a diverse economy opens up spaces of agency and politics within economic life – an ontological reframing of economic subjects and activities. They use the iceberg metaphor of the economy to illustrate this reformulation, wherein the tip of the iceberg represents capitalist relations undergirded by an unseen host of non-marketized relations. This framework inverts the idea that capitalist markets are the sole or even dominant feature of the economy. With this framing, Gibson-Graham embarks on a political project of making visible the many existing community economies as alternative spaces of economic relations. The community economy, in their terms, is an ethical space of negotiation where production, exchange, and circulation are not dictated by capitalism but negotiated within communities of practice.

The construction and maintenance of a "community economy" by small-scale farmers is central to the form and process of re-agrarianization examined in this dissertation. The community economy is a privileging of social and ecological relations above a purely economic calculus. It is a recognition of social interdependence and an elevation of social reproduction over the impulse to accumulate. The value of local food and the ecological stewardship of the land, in this

instance, are prioritized above and beyond its monetary value. Local foods embody social meanings that foster connections greater than the exchange value of the food.

These cultural ideas are reinforced and materialized in practice. Economic interdependence, a centerpiece of Gibson-Graham's *Post-Capitalist Politics*, is at the core of local food economies in Northern California. For example, in Nevada County, many residents understand the need to support local agriculture as a way to sustain the ecological and economic resiliency of the community. In uncertain economic and environmental times (i.e. financial crises, droughts, climate change, etc.) community health and food security are tied to the ability of young farmers to make a living. Likewise, farmers rely on local residents to pay them a price premium for their produce and offer upfront money through CSAs[14]. They also depend on the community for their volunteer work and word of mouth advertising and consciousness-raising. At the heart of the relationship is an understanding of interdependence, and recognition of mutual benefit.

Beyond the example of nested markets (a critical site of this socio-economic co-dependence discussed below) is the issue of land. As the next chapter will spell out in detail, re-agrarianzation in California is strongly dependent on a moral economy of land. That is, beginning farmers must access land through non-commodified channels – far below market rate – in order to start their farms, let alone make a living. Many innovative land-linking and land-sharing schemes have emerged in the process, and is

[14] Here it is important to *qualify* what is meant by 'the market'. The field of economic anthropology and the substantive economics of Karl Polanyi illuminate the diversity and multitude a historically embedded market relations (Polanyi 1944). Only in the 19th century did 'the market' become synonymous with capitalist free markets that were governed by global supply and demand and speculative investment. What CSA, farmers markets, and other relations of beginning farmers represent in Polanyi's terms, is an attempt to re-embed market relations within community. In other words,

another great example of how the community economy (and its networks) underpins re-agrarianization.

Similar relations of reciprocity and community based exchange have been identified in seed saving networks. Elisa Da Via writes of seed saving networks in Spain, Italy, and France, “these initiatives foster the development of a decentralized and participatory model of agricultural innovation based on a plurality of forms of knowledge that can be reciprocally accessed, exchanged and reproduced” (2012: 237). These seed saving networks, importantly, create a political space for the community economy and for increased autonomy. “Red de Semillas has held an annual meeting,” Da Via writes, “the ‘Fair of Cultivated Biodiversity,’ in order to create a ‘political space’ for the shared use of agro-ecological knowledge and techniques developed by farmers, researchers, and seed curators within different regions and communities of Spain” (2012: 237). Agrarian networks in California, likewise, create both formal and informal spaces for non-commodified exchange of seeds, knowledge, and other resources. These spaces support farmers through the exchange of material resources and knowledge, but also connect them to a larger sense of meaning as a nascent, interstitial alternative to the corporate food regime. As Da Via states, “the goal is to reassert the centrality of farming as a source of social, cultural and ecological reproduction that can meet local needs in a sustainable and participatory way” (2012:238).

Boulianne describes the significance of local exchange trading systems amongst urban agriculturalists in Quebec (2006). He frames these exchanges systems

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beginning farmers attempt to socialize of the market and distance it from the liberal notion of market governing by extraneous factors.

as spaces of resistance to neo-liberal globalization. He argues,

> Self-provisioning on the one hand, and gift giving on the other, are seen within these movements as economic practices that have become marginal in Quebec during the second half of the 20th century. Both need to be revitalized in order to resist neo-liberal globalization processes at a local level. As far as LETS [local exchange trading systems] are concerned, trading services or goods with the use of a time–money is presented as a way of recognizing the value of people's knowledge that is not always fairly valued in the labor market. In this sense, urban collective gardening and LETS convey the idea that if people have faith in their capabilities they will not let the dynamics of the market alone decide their worth…. They are used as icons of other possible worlds where money and profit are not at the center of the stage (273-74).

Urban agriculture in Quebec, as Boulianne suggests, is an incubator of community economies and cultivates non-capitalist subjectivities. Because urban agriculture is often not a major source of income generation for participants, these activists are possibly even more insulated from the structures and pressures of the formal economy. New agrarians similarly engage in these local exchange trading systems, but simultaneously are cognizant of the need to earn income in order to sustain the farm, thus causing some tension and negotiations which I depict later. What they share, however, is a re-definition and conceptualization of the economy and economy-society relations. In Boulianne's words,

> Furthermore, they contribute to the alter-globalization trend by defending, in the symbolic and contested field of economy and society, the idea that economy is not an autonomous system that should be left in the hands of economists. Instead, it is about producing, giving, exchanging, and consuming, with or without money, with or between kin, friends, neighbors, or strangers. (275)

Wilson's research of agrarian networks in Canada emphasizes the importance of networked and autonomous spaces for food systems change. She points to the sort of community economy practices that create and enact these autonomous spaces. In

her words,

> Exchanging a share of the harvest (for labour or money), as opposed to invidious food items, insulated the food from market-based values and contributes to a process of de-commodification. While there were certainly discussions of wanting the shares to have a "good value" this was largely in regard to the size and variety of share, as opposed to a monetary value of the individual vegetables, which may have little to do with the cost and time of growing that particular item. De-commodification is conceptualized here as a process of removing food provisioning activities from market forces or market-based value systems. As with the lens of autonomous food spaces in general, de-commodification is rarely, if ever, a static and complete state. It is a continual process of negotiation and creation to insulate and distance food from the values and ethics of the conventional food system. (2013:730-731)

These forms of work-trade and other non-monetary exchanges are commonplace amongst new agrarians in California. The de-commodified relations relieve some of the monetary pressures new agrarians face, but maybe more importantly cultivate spaces of non-capitalist subjectivities and build the ties of community economies. Non-monetary exchange relations, however, do raise some issues (Ekers et al 2015). In a survey of farm interns (many of whom receive non-monetary compensation), Ekers and colleagues acknowledge the non-pecuniary values farm apprentices and interns adhere to, but also recognize the potential for these blurred lines to become exploitative. In their words,

> Many ecologically oriented farms are enmeshed in a series of non-economic relationships focused on the pursuit of ''sustainable'' forms of production, farmer training, and the building of broader agrarian and food movements. The phenomena of internships, apprenticeships, and volunteer experiences are an important piece of the non-economic fabric of the farms we surveyed. However, we also have argued that it is impossible to tease apart the economic from the non-economic, and such neat divisions, while heuristically useful, can obscure the contradictions between these two different aspects of social and environmental life. (718)

Certainly, this is a tension and issue that arose within training centers and on

farms I interviewed. As with any informal social relation, there is a distinct risk of abuse. Farmers in my research were aware of these issues, and often such abuses diminished a farmer's standing in the community. Nonetheless, I heard far fewer experiences of informal relations being exploited than the more beneficial and positive relations. Furthermore, during my ethnography with the Living Lands Agrarian Network, the issue of intern labor and compensation was a constant point of conversation. "One year we paid our interns for all their labor," Leo (one of the directors) told me, "but it was financially unsustainable. We decided to make the internship 20 hours a week, and made it more academic [guest lectures from community members], not just hard farm labor. This allowed interns to make money in part time jobs, while still living and learning on the farm." This compromise illustrates the space in which training centers and new agrarians operate, at once within the community economy and the non-monetary exchanges it entails and within the formal economy of monetary exchange. This tension is always present and difficult to side step.

An additional body of literature inspired by Tom Lyson, has documented the various ways that new agrarians and localized food systems have increased civic engagement in the US (Lyson 2007; Obach and Tobin 2014). This literature focuses on the role that closer relations between consumer and producers through localized markets that create a sense of civic duty, engagement, and participation in local development (Migliore et al 2014). While not explicitly discussing the types of non-market relations associated with community economies, this literature emphasizes the social ties and bonds that emerge through local agriculture and how these influence

people's decisions and participation in the community development. Such relations, scholars note, have created socially embedded economic relationships (Poulsen 2017). These various iterations of 'alternative economic relations' including civic agriculture, local exchange and trading systems, autonomous spaces, decommodified spaces, and solidarity networks, solidify the notion that new agrarians actively create such spaces and navigate between formal and informal economic relations. Furthermore, food and agriculture is not the only illustration of such spaces of non-monetary relations. Scholarship on commoning, cooperatives, social reproduction and affective labor, also highlight the ways in which people create, protect, or in some instances are exploited by de-commodified spaces (De Angelis 2017; De Sousa Santos 2007; Wright 2010; Leyshon, Lee, and Williams 2003; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2012).

Gibson-Graham's critique of capitalocentrism serves as a useful corrective to structuralist accounts, and indeed illuminates some of the central, though often obscured, dimensions of the new agrarians' lives and livelihoods that I studied. However, does it run the risk of skewing analyses of economic relations too far in the opposite direction? Gibson-Graham's approach has been critiqued as ahistorical and inattentive to the 'real' material effects of capitalism. As some scholars have remarked, you cannot think away capitalism (Watts 2003). What then is an appropriate relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist practices in the constitution of economies? What is needed is a historicized account of diverse, community economies. Two approaches within agrarian studies, I believe, can help formulate a historicized account of agrarian change attentive to diverse economic relations: Van der Ploeg's work on repeasantization and McMichael's agrarian

question of food in which he historicizes the food sovereignty movement.

Re-Peasantization

Van der Ploeg's work on repeasantization is a notable exception to the aforementioned structuralist trend in agrarian studies. Although he does not go as far as Gibson-Graham in deconstructing and decentering the capitalist economy, he goes to great lengths in identifying processes of decommodification and non-market relations that constitute modern peasants. Van der Ploeg argues that there is a global process of repeasantization occurring in which farmers are becoming more 'peasant like' out of necessity – as a defensive or survival strategy against the encroaching pressures (especially debt) of the corporate food regime. He explains that the "peasant mode of production" is premised on a "re-grounding of farming in nature and the development of multifunctionality" (2010:1). This type of agriculture, he emphasizes, is not a "remnant of the past," but is a manifestation of the present. Importantly, he illuminates how peasants are reconstituting their livelihoods around non-commodified circuits and relations. In explaining this shift he states:

> In short, as a reaction to the current dominance of markets, 'old' non-monetary transactions are increasingly being disseminated in substantial ways, while at the same time new forms are being developed. Their importance should not be underestimated. They function as a symbolic critique of, as well as an alternative to, the type of market-governed conversions that are central to Empire. Indeed, they may be viewed as acts of *insubordination* to Empire. Such alternative conversion processes allow room for maneuver (or 'space') that otherwise would be absent and they demonstrate that things can, indeed, be done better…they represent an attempt to produce 'actually existing utopias', as opposed to 'imaginary utopias' (Ploeg 2008: 270 [Burawoy 2007:7]).

Van der Ploeg takes seriously the myriad peasant practices that distantiate their

production unit from capitalist markets. This is predominantly accomplished by building up farm-based ecological capital. Ecological capital is self-generated resources from the wise management of soil, water, and land. These resources can be used in lieu of external inputs, making the farming unit more self-sufficient and the farmer more autonomous.

He distinguishes between three types of farming: peasant, entrepreneurial and capitalist. While peasant farming engages with capitalist markets, it does so selectively and with a different set of values and calculations – what Van der Ploeg calls "balances" (2014). Peasant households strive for autonomy and self-sufficiency. They achieve this through reconstituting their production, consumption, and marketing. In his terms, they build up ecological, social and cultural capital, meaning that production practices are grounded in nature, labor and knowledge and are socially provisioned, and markets are constructed around cultural values – what he terms "nested markets" (Van der Ploeg, Jingzhong, and Schneider 2012). In contrast, entrepreneurial farmers are largely market dependent, especially with regard to inputs, and rely on agricultural technologies and financial credit to expand the scale of operation. Capitalist farms are large-scale corporate operations, geared solely towards profit maximization and reliant on wage labor.

While van der Ploeg highlights the importance of cooperatives and collaboration between farmers, the thrust of his analysis is on the household unit of production. This provides useful accounts of how resources and decisions are made at the household level that adeptly negotiate market and non-market arenas. His account, however, is light on the importance of communities and networks in the process of

repeasantization. Importantly, farmer-to-farmer networks are utilized not only for resource sharing and labor exchanges, but also for knowledge and learning. Networks feature prominently in the adaptive learning of farmers and the shared vision of building resilient community economies. These features were prominent amongst the farmers I worked with in California. In fact, farmer-to-farmer networks and the community economies that develop around them is arguably the defining feature of re-agrarianization in California. Seed saving networks, likewise, feature prominently in repeasantization in Europe (Da Via 2012).

Such ideas are gaining traction in contemporary agrarian studies. Recently, there has been a rethinking of the agrarian question and agrarian studies more generally that is attentive to agency and non-capitalist practices. Much of this rethinking has been spurred by the rise of transnational peasant movements and agrarian struggles around the world that forcefully re-center peasant and family farmers in development debates. Contra Bernstein, McMichael's agrarian question of food reformulates the classical agrarian question (about the reproduction of capital in agriculture and peasant resistance) into a question of social reproduction of peasant agriculture (2013). In his words,

> Whereas the classical focus of the agrarian question concerned the reproduction of capital, the food sovereignty movement inverts this as a question of social reproduction, embedded in agricultural practice. In so doing food sovereignty redefines what it means to be modern, beyond scientific rationalism, in order to address the current social and environmental emergency. This vision of modernity advocates a historically specific conception of multifunctionality (2013: 138).

Importantly, McMichael situates processes of repeasantization historically and politically. These practices emerge during the current conjunctural crisis as both a critique of the corporate food regime and an expression of an alternative socio-

ecological vision. This squarely places contemporary agrarian movements in the historical struggles of agrarian communities. At issue in these struggle is a matter of valuation: where transnational peasant movements challenge the market episteme and its sole focus on exchange value, and reassert the prominence, proliferation, and ecological necessity of use values and peasant knowledge. As such, peasant agriculture (or the food sovereignty movement particularly) "is only capital's 'other' if objectified via a capital lens" (McMichael 2014: 198). Or, put another way, whereas categories of political economy constrain the ability to 'see' peasant agriculture, the view from peasant movements, attentive to diverse economies, opens up a politics of possibility.

While new entry farmers in California come from different social locations and are often first generation farmers as opposed to the multi-generational farmers described by van der Ploeg, they are comparable in the extent that they adhere to similar modes of production, and are equally marginalized by the corporate food regime. While the social location of beginning farmers in California provide a wider range of life opportunities, they nonetheless have to deal with the harsh economics of farm life. Their commitment to environmental practices and resourcefulness is not solely a matter of survival – many rely on other revenue sources to sustain the farm – but more a commitment to environmentalism and to the long-term health of the land.

Beginning farmers in California, however, don't go at it alone. They draw on the knowledge and resources of friends, family, and other farmers. These connections are often forged at agrarian training centers in California, conferences, and social gatherings (for example the farm apprenticeship at UCSC has a large network). In

addition to these networks, farmers rely on community support especially in the creation of what van der Ploeg terms "nested markets" (Van der Ploeg et al 2012). The strong community bonds create culturally-validated markets, where exchange goes beyond monetary compensation but supports the stewardship of the land and the health of the community. This resonates with Tom Lyson's quip that "it takes a community to raise a farmer," in his seminal work on civic agriculture (Lyson 2004).

Beyond the Impasse: Combining the Insights of Political and Community Economies

There is a dire need to integrate insights from the rich political economy studies within agrarian change scholarship into post-structuralist critiques and reformulations of economic life. The challenge in doing so, put crudely, is parsing out the relative power of the political economy vis-à-vis the community economy. To do so, one must draw on the contributions from interpretive historical sociology as well as the rich insights that can be gained through engaged ethnography. Put simply, ethnography matters. It matters because it can help bridge the divide between political and community economy approaches. Ethnography is attentive to the day-to-day experiences, practices, and meanings of farmers. Situated within the historical context – agrarian/social histories and political economy of agriculture – it allows for a reflexive analysis that may appropriately adjudicate the extent to which political and community economies shape the lived experiences of farmers. While I want to be careful not to reify these spheres as distinct or separate, the binary serves as a useful heuristic device.

My ethnography engages almost exclusively with "movement farmers." As such, I am not qualified to speak to the dynamics between or within the more industrial organic farming sector beyond secondary material. But, it does allow me to interrogate the question at hand: are small-scale farmers pressured into more industrial modes of production, eroding the ecological foundation of these practices? How do farmers navigate the political and community economies with which they necessarily engage?

Engaged ethnography provides insights into the lived experiences of farmers. It is also a reflexive methodology, as the researcher is not only observing but also working alongside and with people and organizations. My experience serving on the Board of Directors of the Living Lands Agrarian Network serves as an illustrative example. By participating in the decision making of the organization and experiencing firsthand the challenges and hurdles of young and beginning farmers I was able to gain insight into the more nuanced struggles of the movement. It helped me 'see' the spaces for maneuver and where structural barriers were persistently impeding the ability of small-scale farmers to flourish. This relationship was never static, however – innovation and creativity are hallmarks of this movement and as problems arose farmers responded accordingly.

I spent many days working in the fields with farmers, discussing their visions and challenges of farming as we harvested for market at dawn or painstakingly weeded in the mid-day sun. Through participant observation, I came to recognize the tensions, the bittersweet moments, and even the contradictions of these farmers – some of these are explicitly articulated, others are expressed in the way they look out

at their fields, or sigh during a break. What is important are the values and the meanings that drive their actions – not as much whether they are petty commodity producers or peasants, or if they are entrepreneurs or subsistence-oriented. All farmers straddle some combination of these orientations, but underneath are a set of values and principles that guide their action in the world. Ethnography enables an insight into these values. Engaging in these practices as an ethnographer provides a glimpse into the day-to-day lived experience of people. It is with this sensitivity to the complex and contradictory nature of our actions that I analyze the new agrarians. Additionally, I understand that these values and meanings are shaped by the world in which they live. Farmers make their own history but not just as they please, to paraphrase Marx. Historically situating these ethnographic insights then provides a vantage point into the nuanced process of what Abrams calls structuring. Abrams conceived of the problematic of structuring as an attempt to understand the dialectics of structure and agency as "continually constructed in time" (1982: 16) and imbued with subjective meanings. As he describes,

> …action is shaped by the meanings people bring to their predicaments or can wring out of them. An adequate sociology of such predicaments surely has to offer an analysis not only of the observable relationships of power and powerlessness within them but equally of what is made of those relationships by those involved in them; an analysis of the complex meaning within which relationships are enacted (Abrams 1982: 73).

As Abrams suggests here, an adequate analysis of structuring entails both the richness of lived experiences and a deep social and economic history of the contemporary moment. It is with this approach that I examine re-agrarianization in northern California in the remainder of this dissertation.

Conclusion

My critique of the conventionalization thesis is not in refuting that the creation of a certified organic market enabled the corporate cooptation and industrialization of the sector. My contention is with an implicit argument embedded in the conventionalization thesis, that agrarian capitalism in California precludes the possibility of a truly sustainable agriculture and signals the imminent demise of small-scale producers. This implication, I contend, has also shaped the subsequent lines of inquiry into alternative agriculture movements. I find this characterization and dismissal of so called lifestyle farmers to be politically and theoretically problematic. I build from a line of argumentation previously elaborated by Jeff Pratt and Pete Luetchford (Pratt 2009; Pratt and Luetchford 2014) and elaborate the nuances of this argument with ethnographic detail.

What is at issue here are conceptions of politics and social change. In contrast to more structuralist analyses, which delimit the realm of politics to the state, I broaden the scope of politics to community-centered practices that embody a politics (ethic) of the local. As McMichael puts it, "[t]he conventional view of the state as the principal locus or target for collective action limits the 'political arena' of contestation, foreclosing consideration of actions that implicate other power realms" (2010: 11). Re-agrarianization in California, and its correlates in the local food movement, can only be dismissed if we limit the realm of politics to the state. Their politics are expressed in local action and lived experience that express more subtle challenges to power. The next chapter delves into an ethnographically-grounded analysis of the politics of re-agrarianization.

CHAPTER 3:

RE-AGRARIANIZATION AND THE LIVELIHOOD ETHIC:

THE SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY AND MEANING

This book is for everyone, but it is especially for young people, in hopes that, given all the bad, you start building. Not skyscrapers or oil rigs, but lives that make sense, that contribute to a lighter, more intelligent, more beautiful way of living on the earth, lives that are lived as far outside and beyond corporate control as possible. That in doing so you find meaning.

~ Janicee Ray 2012, The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food

Life is said to be intolerable unless some reason for existing is involved, some purpose justifying life's trials.

~ Emile Durkheim (quoted in Froese 2016:1)

Introduction

Re-agrarianization in California occurs at the margins – both figuratively and literally. New farmers often cultivate marginal lands in marginal farming regions, and they operate at the margins of the economy (Galt 2013). Their financial existence is based on small profit margins, and the greater they can grow these margins by 'farming economically' the better their chances of sustaining the farm. Small-scale farming also occupies a marginal position in scholarly analyses of agrarian change. From a classical political economy standpoint, as I discussed in the previous chapter, small-scale farmers are categorized as simple commodity producers competing for space within a capitalist economy, and destined to disappear (McMichael 2014). Furthermore, critiques of alternative agriculture in the US typically render small-scale farmers either complicit in the reproduction of neoliberalism, or simply invisible or inconsequential (Galt, Gray, and Hurley 2014).

Drawing on Pratt (2009) and others (c.f. Campbell and Liebens 2001; Hall and Mogyorody 2001; Michelson 2001; Luetchford and Pratt 2011; McMichael 2014), I argue that despite their marginality, it is both theoretically and politically useful to examine the ideologies, discourses, and practices of new farmers in the Global North. An analysis of small-scale, beginning farmers opens up a view of economic relations that goes beyond capitalist understandings of agriculture. Indeed, farmers must be market-oriented to make a livelihood in a capitalist society, but the market is not the sole, nor necessarily the dominant force, in their everyday practices. The values and practices of beginning farmers cannot be neatly analyzed in terms of instrumental economic rationality, but must be considered within the tension between the formal and informal economies of agriculture and the value systems therein. New agrarians search for autonomy, meaning, and purpose in their livelihood and develop an ethic that helps them navigate the economic and cultural forces that corrode these values.

I argue that new farmers are able to sustain themselves in marginal economic conditions by cultivating what I call a 'livelihood ethic' that is produced and sustained through new agrarian networks. The livelihood ethic is similar to Van der Ploeg's (2009) idea of the peasant principle, but adapted to match the political economic and class make up of new agrarians in California. The livelihood ethic combines entrepreneurial and self-sufficiency impulses and relies heavily on networks of reciprocity between farmers. It centers the social reproduction of the farm and household beyond capital accumulation and scale expansion. The livelihood ethic, as I argue here, is critical in helping beginning farmers navigate the challenging economics – and landscapes – of agriculture in California.

In analyzing the values and rationalities of small-scale farmers, I challenge the teleology of capitalist agrarian development, and provide ontological and epistemic critiques of normative framings of agriculture. As the urgency to support a low carbon, resilient agriculture increases in the face of climate change, it is all the more necessary to analyze these small-scale projects (contradictions and all) to better understand the possibilities for truly localized and sustainable agriculture.

The 'Livelihood Ethic': Negotiating Substantive and Formal Rationalities

While beginning farmers are deeply dedicated to environmental stewardship – and this is one of the strongest underpinnings of their ethical makeup – sustaining a living from the land is the most immediate concern for these farmers. The reason I emphasize livelihoods is because it is an omnipresent concern of new agrarians; it informs their ecological practices and social engagements. In short, the imperative to reproduce the farm and household are at the forefront of the day-to-day decision making of new agrarians. This does not override an ethic of stewardship, but incorporates ecological regeneration as a central feature of farm economics. These ethics are continually negotiated in the everyday experiences of farming and social interactions.

Ethics are formed from historical traditions, they emerge from contemporary social problems, and often they are formulated in contrast to other ethical codes. The livelihood ethic is formed *contra* to what might be called the industrial ethic or capitalist ethic. The livelihood ethic emerges from a contrasting of two ideal types, large-scale industrial agriculture and small-scale sustainable agriculture. While

scholars of agriculture will quickly point out the vast degree of variation within and between these categories, they nonetheless feature prominently in the narratives of agrarian training centers, and help formulate the moral principles and meanings guiding new agrarians. As such, the livelihood ethic must be understood vis-à-vis the critique of large-scale industrial agriculture.

The ethics and knowledge of family farming have historically been passed on inter-generationally. Children learned how to farm from the experience of growing up on the farm, of working and learning from their parents and peers. One of the under-cited crises of modern agriculture is the loss of this knowledge and these ethics, and the process by which it is reproduced – what Schneider and McMichael (2010) refer to as an ‘epistemic rift.’ The consolidation of American agriculture not only signaled a shift in the structure and scale of agriculture, but also the predominance of what agrarian writer Wendell Berry calls industrialism over agrarianism (1977). That is, treating farming as an industrial endeavor as opposed to a finely tuned craft. The historical decline of family farmers (an effect of U.S. Farm Bill policies supporting large commodity farmers and the dynamics of capitalist competition) compromised the inter-generational transfer of knowledge so central to agrarian communities.[15]

The livelihood ethic is an orientation to land-based livelihoods in which farmers creatively balance ecological, economic, and household needs. The goal is straight forward – to maintain farming as a way of life. But, in practice, the reality is more complex. On a practical level this entails some balancing act of entrepreneurial,

[15] As I discuss in the next chapter, farmer training centers attempt to fill this knowledge gap and reverse the movement of people off the land by providing the ethical and practical knowledge necessary to restore small-scale agrarian livelihoods. Farmer training centers and networks revalue farming as

agro-ecological, and self-sustenance practices, so farmers do not become too burdened by any one factor. The critical feature is to determine the extent to which one engages in market-oriented practices and how this affects their day-to-day management of the farm. Accordingly, the livelihood ethic is often expressed as decisions and activities either geared towards the market to generate cash income, or, non-market activities that protect and enhance ecological resources or meet household sustenance – although these activities are not necessarily mutually exclusive (often, they complement one another). Another way of stating this is that beginning farmers simultaneously engage in the commodification and de-commodification of farm practices as a livelihood strategy and an ethical orientation. The reality and relationship between these ethics is full of tensions, or negotiations. These points of tension highlight moments of structuring (Abrams 1982), when agency and structure are most vividly in friction.

As described earlier, most beginning farmers in California are first-generation farmers – many come from urban areas long removed from agrarian or land-based livelihoods. Going 'back-to-the-land' for these new agrarians is conditioned by a number of economic and social barriers, including land access, finance, and knowledge. Farming relies on a deeply practical and experiential knowledge. It is also shaped by the philosophical and ideological position with which one approaches it. Ecological farming, for instance, creates a further requirement on farmers to restore or regenerate ecological processes and to mitigate off-farm impacts. As such, ecological farming is much more knowledge-intensive than conventional farming

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craftsmanship, attuned to ecology and community, yet acutely aware of the adverse economic conditions farmers must navigate.

(while the latter entails mechanical knowledge, it is less concerned with working with nature than with overriding it). The act of producing food is a complex interaction of human labor and nature that is fraught with all sorts of complications. Regenerating soil fertility, water systems, pollinators, soil microbial health, etc. requires an intimate understanding of these processes and of the specificities of the land and micro-ecology in which one farms. Although in certain instances a farmer's need for cash may override ecological management in the short term, new agrarians are well aware that the maintenance of ecological capital is critical to their long-term survival. Hence, the farmer is constantly balancing the ecological and economic with short- and long-term commitments to sustaining ecology and livelihood. As Pratt describes,

> For [new agrarians], farming is an endless engagement with nature, with a particular patch of land, its soils, slopes, weather patterns and pests. Producing any food is a struggle: making the farm produce more or better quality food requires skill, experience and the capacity to experiment. It requires constant watchfulness and flexibility: work carries on late when the weather is about to break or a calf is due. It requires long-term commitments… the ambition is not just to produce food this year, but to do so in a way which enables you to produce food in the future (2014: 186; 188).

Beginning farmers thus need to cultivate a sensibility of balancing cash and sustenance needs. While knowledge and experience, of course, is the core compensation, farm fresh food and the nutrition and pride related to its production instills a deep sense of value for the craft of farming. The livelihood ethic creates the distinct realization that the use value of produce is much greater than its exchange value. While the latter is necessary to maintain the farm, the former is a source of personal renewal – social, spiritual, and physical – and camaraderie.

For instance, whether a farmer sells livestock or keeps it for household consumption is based on a variety of factors including the cash flow of the farm and

monetary needs of the household, but also the quality, nutrition, and sustenance values that livestock brings to household consumption. In this decision, we see a negotiation of market and non-market values through quantitative valuation (the monetary price) and the qualitative value (the enjoyment, nutrition, ecological maintenance, and fulfillment of providing one's own food). As I repeatedly found in my ethnographic research, farmers will often find some balance between the two – selling half the meat to recoup some of the production costs, while keeping the other for household consumption. Monetarily, the farmer may just break even or might be at a loss in terms of recouping production costs, but the value of the meat for the household outweighs such monetary concerns. Additionally, many farmers expressed pride and satisfaction in growing their own food and a deep appreciation of the quality of that food.

Another example of farmers negotiating competing values occurred after an exceptional heatwave matured salad greens faster than expected in the county. A number of farmers were faced with the challenge of figuring out how to market extra salad mix beyond what they had arranged to sell at the local food coop, farmers markets, or local restaurants. After calling local restaurants about his salad greens, one farmer with whom I spoke decided their asking price was too low and that the greens were of more value being tilled back into the soil as a green manure, to enhance fertility for the next crop. While he certainly could have sold his salad greens at their price, he expressed to me what he valued his greens at and that it was in part an ethical matter of honoring the quality of his produce, and equally, acknowledging that tilling them in provided soil fertility. Another farm facing the same challenge donated their

greens to the local food bank prior to tilling the fields. Volunteers for the food bank came out and gleaned as much salad mix as they could use that day. While the farmers could have sold the salad mix below their valuation of it, they instead deemed the social value of that food to be greater than what they could earn in the market. The point here is that farmers are working with multiple conceptions of value, not solely economic value, and that these competing values influence the long-term productivity and ecology of the farm, the finances of the farm family, and the fulfillment and meaning of the work.[16]

For the most part, beginning farmers start with strong environmental and sustenance orientations, and the entrepreneurial ethic forms later after a season or two of losses or when confronted with market and economic pressures—often precipitated by unintended expenses (a broken truck, doctor or dental bill, etc.). Profit margins are very low in agriculture even in specialty or direct sales, and many farmers operate at a loss their first year or two. After recouping start-up costs (seeds, amendments, labor costs, land rents, water), very few small-scale farmers make an adequate profit to reinvest the following year. Furthermore, in a society where many social provisions and services are commodified, farmers are compelled to generate at least enough cash

[16] The CSA model, in many ways, is emblematic of the livelihood ethic. Although in practice, as Galt has astutely observed (2013), it can also encourage self-exploitation and under-remuneration for farmers. Not only are farmers' upfront financial needs met through CSA subscriptions, but the diversity of crops in such farming has its own aesthetic and sustenance values. The Herd Share is another iteration of the CSA model that is common among new agrarians, and specifically amongst the farmers in Nevada County. In this scenario, people buy into a herd and receive weekly or biweekly milk. The farmer receives income upfront and also receives milk and fertility from the animals. Milk production beyond what the shareholder needs, can be used for farm household needs, value-added products (milk, cheese, yogurt), or can be bartered (exchanged in a work trade, or for products or services not met on farm). Livestock manure is composted and applied to row production or pasture. Many farmers also practice intensive grazing to manage pasture or clear brush – frequently moving the herd so they can intensively graze areas. Whether or not a farmer calculates the net profitability of a herd share program, the added benefit of integrating livestock on the farm certainly outweighs whatever costs or labor expenditure above what is defrayed from member subscriptions.

income for such services. Healthcare is by far one of the biggest non-farm expenses. Farmers can often meet most of their food and housing needs through the farm or bartering of produce, and although not a substitute for healthcare, many beginning farmers treat their own health needs through herbs, farm-based nutrition, and alternative medical practices. However, more serious medical issues require professional care[17].

Nonetheless, farmers are cognizant that cash income is limited in spite of their best efforts, and are therefore thrifty and resourceful, reducing household expenses and production costs where possible. As Elizabeth Henderson of Peacework Farm explains,

> The less cash we need to live on, the freer we become. Part of my balancing act has been my conscious choice to live as lightly on the planet as I can manage and to pay as little in taxes to the war machine as possible. I keep pretty close track of how I spend my money – both because there isn't a lot of it, but also because I'm always looking for little ways to spend less. I recycle fanatically. I can, freeze, and root cellar food from our farm to keep me out of the supermarket in the winter, and I belong to a food buying club that cuts out at least one layer of middlemen. I do my other shopping at a food coop, where I get a worker-member discount by writing about farming for the newsletter (2012).

While this approach to life and livelihood has a kind of nostalgic appeal, it is important not to romanticize this work. Farmers committed to small-scale agrarianism can find a way to make it work[18] – at least in the short term – but it is certainly not easy. Many farmers express the physical and financial tensions of farming, often articulating both the pains and joys within the same interview. This was illustrated

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[17] In other countries where medicine is socialized, such as Canada, and farmers are less burden—financially and psychologically—by medical debt.

[18] By making it work, I mean farmers are able to make enough income to cover their basic needs, including health care, food, shelter, and enough money to reinvest in the farm. Beyond that, farmers may have difficulty saving for retirement or saving for children or other financial expectations of the middle class.

clearly to me as I sat with John, a second-career farmer, eating the grilled sausages, sweet peppers, and fresh tomatoes he prepared for me as we discussed the challenges and rewards of farming. It was so enjoyable, the food was delicious, sweet and juicy, hot off the grill, the breeze blew through the pine trees making that lovely swooshing sound. "It's hard to get in now," John, a second career farmer told me,

> The financial investment is extremely high. Even though it's an inherently good thing to do, it's tough! You can have all the right ideals and motivations, the right work ethic, but it is still damn hard. It is going to be a struggle as long as you have conventional agriculture vs local agriculture.

He went on to explain that it is not a direct competition in prices, but more indirect in the sense that it shapes consumer culture, expectations of price and convenience. Even though most people are willing and expect to pay price premiums for fresh local produce, conventional agriculture sets the baseline. Moments later, however, he adds, "But it's a great gig. I wake up in paradise every day. I don't have to account to nobody. I'm doing something important." In lies a recurring tension for John and other new agrarians. On the one hand, he loves where he lives, the kind of lifestyle it supports, but he is stressed by the economics and difficult labor requirements. "Those who are fortunate enough to do it, are happy…but I'm not optimistic, Ian—it's tough."

John was an animated person. He made great hand gestures and sounds to illustrate what he was talking about. He punctuated his speech with 'what?!' to emphasize the absurdity or the hardship involved in farming. But, I could see this love-hate relationship right before my eyes. He doesn't make much money, but is rich in the life he lives, and this cuts to the essence of it. Even though money is short, how do you value the sound of the wind, the taste of the food, the birds flying by? How do

you value taking an afternoon break after a strenuous morning harvest and the tangible pride of your labor? John struggles financially. As he said, "I have enough to pay my bills and to get by, nothing more." This is a central part of the livelihood ethic – a balance of monetary and non-monetary rewards; a swing too far in either direction can discourage a new farmer, either distancing them from the meaning of their work and the corresponding lifestyle, or in the other direction can cause an overwhelming financial pressure that constrains the ability to farm. Navigating this tension is essential for new agrarians. The exact balance depends on the farmer – their capacity for economic stress, their aspirations, their resolve and meaning they obtain through farming and its non-monetary rewards.

Even for some committed small-scale farmers, however, the financial stresses can become too great. This was the case for Pablo, one of the most passionate and dedicated farmers I interviewed. "It was a blind step," Pablo told me about going into farming, "but one from the heart." Prior to farming, Pablo worked in waste management for the county – a job he enjoyed for its environmental remediation, but also a job that became depressing as he witnessed the sheer volume of trash daily. In search for something more rewarding, he ended up volunteering at a local farm, and he was "hooked at that point… I knew I was going to quit my job at the county and work at the farm, even when [the farm owner] advised me not to quit my job." He was drawn to farming from earlier experiences gardening and feeding his family, and to a great extent he has stayed true to this desire for self-sufficiency and sustenance. "I thought to myself, 'this is how you affect community'. This is a more productive environmentalism than cleaning up waste," he explained. He felt more positive about

his work and was able to be outdoors,

> I enjoyed working with the soil, my feet in the dirt, and looking out at this beautiful land with a special history – there are Native American grinding rocks and remnants of settlers from the past, so there was this connection to the past, and an ability to feel connected and learning to read the land and its history.

This sense of place and connectedness to land was a reward farmers mentioned repeatedly. Moreover, many farmers, like Pablo, expressed a deep desire to live their politics, to build something and engage in a proactive environmentalism. Again, this is an expression on one hand of the ecological and social critique of capitalism, and on the other hand a tangible sense of meaning in their day-to-day activity. Such a perspective may lessen the occasional tedium of repetitive farm tasks, such as weeding (one of the greatest labor demands on organic farms), but as Pablo ultimately admits, is not enough in itself.

Pablo also benefited from the sociality of farming. "I also enjoyed the camaraderie and friendship with the farm crew. I became a part of the farm community. There was a family feeling at the farm. I enjoyed learning about the different crops and about scaling up my garden knowledge to the farm scale." Pablo's farm, as with many of the farms in the county, had a steady flow of volunteers, friends, and family that would help out on any given day, reducing the isolation that some farmers experience. Also, Pablo expressed how the broader community – the agrarian network he became a part of – gave him a real sense of belonging and connection with a movement.

The fresh produce was also a reward in and of itself, for Pablo. "I was inspired by eating healthy food and providing healthy food to the community," he told me. He continued, "[For me,] it was always less about the money, the business, than it was

about inspiring people to grow their own food." In other words, Pablo loved this unalienated relationship to food, and saw his work as encouraging others to join the movement in whatever capacity they could. The act of producing one's own food was central to Pablo's conception of the significance and power of the movement as a whole. However, the farm finances would eventually become too difficult for him to maintain the farm.

In the middle of the season, the farm owner who Pablo was working for was ready to transition out of the farm. He approached Pablo and the rest of the farm crew and asked if any of them would want to take over. Others declined because they saw the financial stress the owner endured while running the farm, but Pablo decided to take on the farm despite the challenges. In his own words, "my heart and passion told me to do it." Later, he was confronted with the financial side of farming, and the particular challenge of running this farm.

> I realized that it is much easier being a farm employee, putting in your hours and then going home than it is being the owner… I didn't realize the level of stress, the financial burdens and debt. Also, if you pay your employees and give them benefits, then at the end of the day there is nothing left for yourself.

Unlike many of the farmers I interviewed, Pablo was leasing his farm land at market rate – an amount he admitted was too high for the farm operation to handle. These land payments proved to be a burden, as did labor costs. This is one of the central dilemmas of scaling up production. Besides shifting the nature of the work for the farm owner, labor is the greatest cost in organic agriculture and tends to eat up any of the remaining revenue produced on the farm. If a farmer wants to treat his employees decently, as Pablo did, there is often no money remaining for the farmer. Pablo had no interest in exploiting labor, and this brought him to a financial crossroad.

Pablo, like many of the beginning farmers I interviewed, did not have detailed books of the money coming in and going out of the farm. He would go through the season and then tally up the finances at the end. At the end of the season, he was in the red, facing a debt that he realized would be difficult to break even. With debt at the end of the season, there was no way he could go for another season already in the hole, so he decided to discontinue the farm. Despite this seemingly sad conclusion to his farming dream, Pablo said repeatedly, "I got the most joy out of having as much food as my family needed. I was not into the monetary exchange, the real exchange was the food for my labor." As if moderating himself, he would juxtapose his love of farming with the business side of it. "You really have to have the business side dialed in." Yet, when we neared the end of our conversation, he told me, "nonetheless it was rewarding and fulfilling, and I'd do it again." The tension between the financial and non-financial sides of farming revealed one side of this livelihood ethic. Pablo, maybe more than anyone I interviewed, had a passion and deep enjoyment for farming – he loves farming and will always farm in some capacity. The financial stress, however, forced him out of farming. Most of the farm revenue went to pay farm labor and pay rent for the land and equipment, and by the end of the season he realized that there was no money remaining for him – in fact, there were still bills to pay. Unlike a few farmers that had similar experiences, the farm failure did not make him bitter at all. "The commercial side of the farm took away some of the joy of farming," he noted, but the joy of farming, for Pablo, was always about the unalienated relationship between labor and food, it was about the connections with people in the community and about creating some distance to the mainstream economy. Upon leaving the farm,

he was able to arrange a job working for a food non-profit – the Lake Tahoe Food Hub – where he was able to work trade for housing and a sizable garden space. He continues to produce food for his family, but without the burden of making a financial return on that produce.

Some farmers like Elizabeth and John find a way to make a livelihood from the land, and it often entails some creative combination of activities and non-market relationships to make it work. Others, such as Pablo, find a way to engage in an agrarian livelihood, even if farm production is not the primary source of their income. The critical point is to find a way to derive some modicum of livelihood from the land, and to supplement that with other income actives (waged and non-waged work) – what is termed pluriactivity. The purpose is to maintain some level of autonomy and creative craftsmanship that farming allows.

The critical tension within the livelihood ethic, as I've suggested above, is between attaining adequate financial compensation (stability) through entrepreneurial means without subordinating or corroding the other values associated with small-scale farming or degrading the meaning and purpose of one's labor. In Weberian terms, beginning farmers navigate the tension between formal and substantive rationalities. Formal rationality is what Weber referred to as means-end decisions and actions, whereby actions are calculated for a specific, quantifiable outcome. This logic was both a necessary pre-requisite for capitalism, Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and a defining and reinforcing feature of modernity. Indeed, bureaucracy, in Weber's eyes, was the epitome of this reinforcing logic. In capitalism, Weber argued, formal rationality comes to dominate – profit seeking

becomes all-pervasive and drives a constant pressure for efficiency and productivity. He saw this ethos of efficiency not just operating in business, but infiltrating throughout society even to the most intimate aspects of human experience. This form of rationality, Weber argued, is buttressed by technological and managerial innovations that reinforce the calculative and quantifying logic of production. The ultimate result of this process of rationalization, Weber famously argued, is the iron cage of rationality – an overbearing cultural, legal, and institutional constellation that subordinates humanistic and social values leading to the disenchantment of life and the substantive irrationality of capitalism itself.

In contrast, substantive rationality is premised on values outside the realm of calculability and economism. Substantive rationality is the realm of aesthetics, spiritual, social, and ecological values, that are qualitative and largely subjective. The livelihood ethic, as I've stated here, emanates from the parameters of substantive rationality, and is expressed not just in the agrarian lifestyle (the aesthetic and spiritual values) but also in notions of a just and fair price and in the directness of economic exchange, where the aspiration (but not always the reality) is that prices are not tied to abstract markets but to livelihoods of farmers (the cost of living on the land). What is often expressed by farmers is the substantive desire to have enough compensation to maintain life on the land. This is sometimes estimated as a certain level of income per year (say $15,000), but more often than not, it is a matter of trial and error – at the end of the season a farmer will assess what remains in their account and whether they can sufficiently live off that income until the next growing season.

While a formal rational approach to agriculture would view it as a business

governed by inputs, outputs and market signals, a substantive rational approach would see agriculture as an art, a craft, and lifestyle. Two beginning farmers with whom I spoke, Deena and Robbie, illuminate the importance of substantive rationality in their work, and the lengths they go to preserve these values in a capitalist society. I drove out to their farm one early morning in May. We sat on a wooden picnic table under the shade of two table umbrellas, the sound of the creek churning just fifty feet away, an occasional wind blowing across the field, through the meadow and the forest. The warmth of the spring day felt like an extension of the skin. We spoke while potting peppers, eggplants, and tomatoes from the small plugs into bigger pots, some for sale as plant starts and some for their own farm. As a visitor, the scenery and company made me feel content, and I thought to myself, 'this is why people farm, for the love of the land, being outdoors and close to nature, and doing work that feeds people.' I realized, however, that this contentment, this love, must become dulled from years of hard work, the daily routines and maintenance of the farm. Not to say that they don't draw from this wellspring still, but maybe its recharging effects wane as the years go on; it must be difficult to appreciate the sound of running water and the wind when your back is sore and you know there is still harvest left, and you're not sure if you'll have enough CSA members to make it work financially. Indeed, Deena and Robbie vocalized this tension. "Every morning," Robbie told me, "I wake up with a list of tasks longer than I could ever complete, and I try not to get discouraged…it's not just the production side, but also the business, the marketing of produce. Even on my times off, this weighs heavy on my mind." In the same discussion, they would talk about the attraction to the physicality of farming, working with your hands and body,

and also talk about the pressure of work, the endless tasks on the farm and the burden of marketing produce. However, when I asked them if they imagined themselves farming in 10 years, they both said unequivocally, "yes, we'd like to." They both stressed the need to improve the business side of the farm, but they were not willing to do this at all costs. A common refrain from the farm Cooperative Extension employees and other farm advocates in the area was for farmers to scale up. I asked them about scaling up: "at the moment we are not interested, but we may need to in the future to become profitable. Right now, we are not interested in hiring more labor because it will change the nature of our work." Again, they make a qualitative distinction between the potential monetary returns to their labor and substance or meaning of their labor. Deena and Robbie, as with nearly all of the farmers, the latter outweighed the former.

While many farmers realize the need for business planning, they are leery of its logical conclusion if it is doggedly pursued. This is very much a realization and critique of the irrationality of formal rationality. As Abrams explains Weber's idea of rationalization,

> …for Weber, the culture of the modern world was profoundly contradictory since it embodied a rationalization which was at odds with reason. In his own terms a gulf is opened between 'formal' and 'substantive' rationality. More and more, people orient their lives to the idea of doing things efficiently, of achieving their ends by the most economical, precisely calculated means. But as they become more and more rationalistic in this sense their actions progressively cease to be oriented to values over and above that sort of rationality. The means becomes an end (1977:84).

As Abrams demonstrates, Weber, recognizes the irrationality of an economic and social system where instrumental rationality becomes institutionally enshrined. Furthermore, Weber argued that the process of rationalization was a critical and

defining feature of capitalism, and that this process had a profound effect on lived experience. He saw the logical extension of this process as leading to widespread disenchantment in which human agency was greatly constrained by the culture of capitalism. Sayer explains the effects of unrestrained instrumental rationality,

> Calculation as an orientation to conduct, and experience of 'society' as a mere external environment of individual action (which may become a means to personal ends), are fundamental to capitalism's 'mode of life.' So are new forms of self-discipline and a distinctive ethos of conduct, which constrain and empower modern individuals in fundamentally novel ways, regulating the most intimate reaches of their humanity (1990: 2).

He elaborates further:

> That which alone gives to human lives their point and purpose thus becomes, in a thoroughly rationalized world, irremediably contingent – and transitory, and fugitive. In time, rational disenchantment not only destroys the possibility of that kind of religious framework which can bestow transcendental meaning on everyday actions, but it is incapable in principle of furnishing any kind of substitute for it. This is what I mean by irretrievable loss. There can be no going back – such contingency is the modern condition (ibid: 98).

While rarely articulated in terms of rationality, beginning farmers frequently explain their desire to farm in terms of a rejection of modernity, and specifically the nature of work and consumption within modernity. Staunch rejections of mainstream employment were ubiquitous in my interviews and interactions with beginning farmers. This sense of being estranged from the natural world and/or conscripted into a suffocating work environment was amongst the clearest articulation of their value orientation. And, as Sayer points out, Weberian disenchantment has much overlap with Marx's notion of alienation. Not only are beginning farmers critical of modernity's formal rationality, but equally with the separation of labor from the products of labor and control of the labor process. Sayer explains:

> Increasingly the substantive character of their labour becomes incidental to individuals, a mere means to the end of consumption rather than an affirmation of self or humanity. Marx famously analyzed the deep alienation

> of workers from what he regarded as the core of human 'species being' – the need and capacity actively to create (1990: 32).

The lifestyle of beginning farmers is a cognizant rejection of this sort of alienation and disenchantment. Many of my interviewees employed some iteration of the statement, "I did not want to be working an office job" as a signal to this rejection of a disenchanted life. They also expressed in many ways the desire to unite conception and execution within the labor process – often expressed as 'wanting to be my own boss,' but also in statements that expressed the creative side of farming, the freedom to experiment with different crops and to innovate. Additionally, farmers I interviewed tended to be wary of scaling up as it reflected a step towards a business orientation that was antithetical to their values. Many farmers I interviewed iterated the same skepticism towards expanding their farm operations. "I don't want to be a manager," a pair of first generation farmers running a CSA farm told me. Another couple in their third year of production, farming five acres for direct market said, "scaling up changes the type of work I do, and I am not interested in that. I like working in the fields and being in control of my day. I don't want to be the boss of other people." As Elizabeth Henderson says of her commitment to farming, "we enjoy physical labor and have no desire to become managers or exploiters of other people's work… There is great dignity in our work as well as sweat, joy, pain and satisfaction" (2012). In these statements we see, on the one hand, a valuation of the agrarian lifestyle above the potential increase in income. We also see a qualitative distinction between craftsmanship and capitalist production.

Additionally, farmers see the impulse to scale up or to operate like a business as shifting the purpose of agriculture from fulfilling nutritional, dietary, community

and ecological needs to achieving the greatest economic return. While capitalism prioritizes exchange over use value, new farmers flip the equation. Exchange value is necessary in so much as it keeps the household solvent and able to continue producing nutritional foods (and other use values of farming). As Abrams explains à la Weber, "[e]conomically, the rise of capitalism sees a shift of orientation from accumulation for the reasonable purposes of subsistence, self-preservation and comfort to the irrationality of meticulously calculated accumulation for accumulation's own sake" (1977: 85). While beginning farmers realize the necessity of honing their production and marketing systems in order to achieve a modicum of financial stability, they also try to guard against this pressure of becoming 'too business like' or too fixated on economic efficiency. After all, as many farmers told me, if they were in it for the money, they wouldn't have gone into agriculture in the first place. In sum, the livelihood ethic – and the beginning farmers who adhere to it – values the qualitative features of work above the financial remuneration of their labor.

Three field anecdotes revealed this tension to me. One day I was working at a farm established and run by two women in their early 30s, that had recently transitioned from a small CSA farm to a more specialized operation producing salad greens and cut flowers. We were cutting salad greens to fill an order, clipping them an inch or two from their stem so they would regrow for a second cutting. We made sure to remove weeds as we went along, moving through the row methodically. As we got close to filling the order, the two farmers decided that the mix could use some more mustard greens and asked if I would help them sort through a row that had already been clipped once or twice, selectively clipping mustard greens from the other

varieties in the salad mix. This was slow, tedious work and the morning sun was getting hot. I was plodding along finding the mustard greens that still looked good, clipping them one at a time. In my mind, the task seemed terribly inefficient and about midway through the row I voiced my annoyance. The farmers burst into laughter. "Maybe… if we adhered to the idea of efficiency!" We all had a good laugh at my expense. The task at hand was not necessarily about the most efficient use of their labor, in terms of how much product could be harvested, but was about the aesthetic of the salad mix, and about utilizing what was available in this row of salad greens before tilling it back into the soil. The farmers were cognizant of not solely or primarily making decisions about labor efficiency but held other values in their determination of labor output.

A second example of the tension between balancing monetary and non-monetary values emerged during my interview with Molly and Paul. These beginning farmers have a farm a few miles out of Nevada City composed of a few vegetable fields, meat chickens in their barn, and pigs that graze in the forests around the farm. They are graduates of the University of California, Santa Cruz farm apprenticeship program (discussed in Chapter 4). Paul worked for a number of years with the Homeless Garden Project in Santa Cruz – an organization assisting the homeless in their transition back to work. Molly and Paul developed a name for their farm through high quality pastured-raised chicken, but the market for organic chicken is very tight. As Paul described,

> It is very difficult to run chickens on a profit, not even including labor. I think we break even on the chickens. We drive once a week to the bay to deliver chickens to restaurants, and we pick up a load of spent barley from a brewery for our heritage pigs.

After asking them why they continued with the chickens despite the lack of economic return, they stressed that it was part of maintaining their reputation and that it had other benefits – the fertility and recycling of food for their pigs. The heritage chickens are an interesting case of the competing values small farmers face. The issue is valuation, again, and how it gets distorted in the exchange process. Paul expressed this to me in a poignant exchange:

> If killing animals doesn't make us sick, if it doesn't make us vomit, if it doesn't make us cry, then we shouldn't be doing this. We should have another job, we should do something else. We love our animals. How do you value that?

Paul repeatedly brought up the issue of values and the incommensurability of money and non-monetary values. Furthermore, money was just a small part of Paul's understanding of being able to live on the land.

> The hard part is not money, it is carving out a place to exist, finding people who will support you, a caring community. You have to build relationships, community is so important. We can't compete on a business scale. This area is not the best land, we're farming in the forest, we can't compete with people in the valley or in Capay. When we go to the bay they say we can buy chickens for $4.50 a pound from another farm, but we can't do that.

Paul's emotions heightened during this conversation, he was nearly apoplectic. He could not compete with the larger scaled organic farmers, especially in the highly competitive Bay Area, but he was at pains to explain that his produce, his livestock, were not just an abstract commodity – they are distinct.

> It's like apple and oranges, Ian. How can you value what we do, how do you value that our chickens run free over pasture, that we love them, we care for them, we hold them when they are sick, kill them when they are dying? Industrial farms don't give a shit! We care! How do you put a price on that? We cannot pay the true value? How do I articulate the value of what we do?

He paused from harvesting salad greens and looked exasperated. Paul's recognition of the competitive price pressures he faces from large-scale organic

farmers was also juxtaposed against another price consideration.

> We got into this to improve access to everyone, we wanted to feed the poor, we don't want this good food just to be for the rich, we don't want to only feed the 1%.

This is a challenging position for many of the small-scale farmers I spoke with, and one that is not easily resolved. Some find ways to make their produce accessible to low income people – by offering discounts, reduced cost CSAs, gleaning, work trade, etc. – but realize they are working with small margins and must receive a price premium on most of their produce. Paul was conflicted on his desire to produce food for all, and the financial requirements of the farm. For him, this was a challenge of finding meaning in his work and thus giving him purpose in his everyday activities.

The third instance of the tension between substantive and formal rationalities was revealed at a Living Lands Board meeting where we were discussing the structure and curriculum of the farmer training program. One of the board members was making the case for connecting with the local business community as part of the training program so that local business owners would teach classes on running a business. Another board member strongly objected.

> "We don't want to be like a business. Look at where that type of model has taken us. If we want to go that route we might as well grow monocultures!"
>
> "But farmers need to be able to make a living," the other board member retorted, "If they can't do that, then what are we doing here?"

What ensued was an intense back and forth, that for me, really captured the core tension of the small farm movement – the tension between market values and social/ecological values. In sociological terms, the point of contention in the debate was really about the extent and the role of formal rationality, of profit orientation

within the farmer training program. On the one hand, there was the argument for making farming more financially viable, and on the other, was the argument defending the non-monetary values of farming, and particularly its ecological integrity. Interestingly, this debate was occurring between two of the older board members, one a retired businessman/slow food advocate and the other a back-to-the-land farmer. The two beginning (younger) farmers on the Board fell somewhere in the middle of the debate, agreeing with the environmental ethic strongly, but also recognizing the need to make a livelihood. One beginning farmer board member stated,

> "But, if we need to have a trust fund to go into agriculture then what is the point of our training program? I have student debt and bills to pay, so I need to be able to make some money."

What the beginning farmers were articulating was that the two positions were not necessarily at odds. That, in fact, the business skills could support their ability to stay on the land and practice ecological farming. Their vision was to have a program that balanced these objectives, that would inculcate a livelihood ethic that would help farmers achieve financial solvency without forsaking the meaning and values of small-scale farming.

This tension played out in other ways. The University of California Cooperative Extension in Nevada County, for instance, was a staunch advocate for the business model, and in my interviews had little hope for "young idealists," as they called them. Cooperative Extension offered farmer business classes in which they encouraged beginning farmers to focus on no more than three crops (in an interview, one extension advisor said five crops should be the "absolute max"). They were very critical of the CSA model and farms that were overly diversified, claiming that farmers neither had the skills or business savvy to grow and market so many crops.

Farming for them was a matter of finding your specialty crop and niche market, mastering the agronomic techniques of crop production, establishing direct markets, and then expanding to a profitable scale. They were neither for nor against organic production, but were keen on specializing and scaling up.

Some farmers were very skeptical of this extension advice, others kept their distance, but some did incorporate their business advice. However, nearly all the farmers who did have a relationship with the extension office took their business advice with a grain of salt. Part of the interest in small-scale farming is the challenge and creativity of growing a diverse array of crops and nearly every farmer I interviewed incorporated a new crop or more every year. One CSA farmer I interviewed admitted that he was trying to decrease the diversity of crops he grows, but he looked at me and stated, "but, you know, I'm talking about going from 45 crops to 35, and I may go down to 30 crops". Some crops, he told me, made very little profit for him, but "I enjoy growing it and my customers and my family enjoy it too." Other farmers did have a specialty crop that they became known for, but always maintained at least a handful of other crops to market so as not to be over reliant on one crop. Nonetheless, the Cooperative Extension office provided a constant pressure and trainings for farmers to become more 'business like.'

What all these anecdotes express is the constant struggle beginning farmers face trying to obtain a livable income – and for some just maintaining solvency. For most, they are not driven by money and realize the pitfalls of such a guiding motif. The logic of business is seen as corrosive to the political, social, and ecological visions that initially inspired these farmers, yet mandatory for keeping these visions alive.

This paradox is the crucible in which the livelihood ethic is forged. It instigates creative and innovative uses of resources, the forming of networks of reciprocity, and it shapes a mentality and way of being in the world that buffers this stressful condition. Crucial to the livelihood ethic, as I will examine, is protecting and propagating a space for meaningful work.

The Livelihood Ethic and "Meaningful Work"

One of the most powerful motives behind the new farmers movement, and the livelihood ethic embedded therein, is the desire for meaningful work and purpose in life. The search for meaningful work, autonomy, and a sense of control over life is a fleeting condition in contemporary wage work. Farming, for many young people, is an avenue for achieving some level of autonomy and a livelihood that is socially, culturally, and ecologically meaningful. As van der Ploeg explains through the concept of the "peasant principle," this is fundamentally about,

> …subjectivity – the peasant principle implies that particular worldviews and associated courses of action matter. It stresses the value and satisfaction of working with living nature, of being relatively independent, of craftsmanship and pride in what one has constructed. It also centres on confidence in one's own strengths and insights (2008: 274).

Indeed, many farmers I interviewed discussed the challenges and joys of working in living nature. As John, a second career farmer in his late fifties farming diverse vegetable farm on five acres, told me, "The third rule of farming is to save your money upfront, be resourceful." He then paused to notice all the birds flying into his farm. "You know, Ian. Bluebirds are working for you. They eat the insects. Part of being successful is tipping the balance in your favor, the spiders, birds, ladybugs,

etc. You need to be able to tip the ecological scales in your favor and this is huge. It's all one living dynamic thing." He took some pleasure in witnessing this bird swooping into his fields and eating insects. It reminded him that his farm was part of the built ecology of the place, and that he was partly a steward of this ecosystem – not in an overly managed way, but in recognizing the power of ecology and the small actions that, in his words, might tip the scales in your favor. While seemingly innocuous, this exchange reminded me that while farmers may fret about the economics of the farm, the reward of working with nature seemed to at least buffer any economic hardship, if not completely subordinate it.

Furthermore, many farmers discussed the creativity of working outside. "There is a reward for working outside with your hands," said Dan Macon, a first generation sheep farmer. "Farming is an art," he said, "it allows me to be creative." Interacting with local ecology and weather patterns is at once a challenge and a joy, as many farmers noted in interviews. Adapting and altering production systems, however slightly each year, can be a source of pride and fulfillment. But even within the same interview, Dan mentions the tensions of farming, and the challenges of balancing substantive values and formal economics. "I started out being moved by feeding my community, but I have increasingly become motivated by being outside and feeling connected," he told me. But, he added, "there is a steep learning curve with marketing and figuring out value added and having the ability to price products appropriately. There seems to be a tension when farmers start to realize that a good deal of being a farmer is being a businessman, and when more of their time is spent marketing and doing 'indoor' work." Here, we can see how the demands of the formal

economy can create stress or keep the farmer from performing the sort of craftsmanship that initially provided a sense of connectedness and meaning in their work.

Pratt and Leutchford (2014) make a similar observation of beginning farmers in France. "A strategy of autonomy" they write, "generates creativity in the development and efficient use of resources, both in terms of material things and knowledge. This creativity becomes a personal achievement, gained through reflexivity, entrepreneurial endeavor, hard work and moral principles" (2014: 102). Farmers' approach to soil management serves as an illustrative example of the relationship between socio-ecological values and creativity. Generating on-farm fertility as opposed to purchasing off-farm inputs is nearly universally practiced among new agrarians in California – albeit with varying commitments. While a few of the farmers I interviewed came close to meeting all their fertility on-farm – through recycling animal wastes, composting, mulching, and cover crops – almost all at least maintained a compost heap to inoculate biological activity in their soils. Whereas larger-scale conventional growers may view animal manure as a waste product, small-scale mixed farm operations utilize this for soil fertility. Most small-scale growers aim to have no flow through of farm byproducts, finding ways to reuse and recycle. These efforts to make the most of on-farm resources is a creative challenge that meets both economical and ecological needs, but more importantly, keeps the work satisfying and meaningful.

Patrick and Diane, first-generation farmers who farmed a tract of public land in the adjacent Placer County illustrate both the centrality of autonomy and their ability

to labor creatively. “We got into agriculture because we wanted to live in this area and we wanted autonomy, we wanted to be our own boss,” they stated. Like many of their peers they were attracted to the work environment and recognized they did not want to work in an office setting. “We love the outdoors and so working outdoors and living close to the Sierra Nevada is ideal for us.” They coupled this desire for autonomy and to work outside with community relationships that allowed them non-market access to land (farming a historical ranch owned by a land trust), access to a tractor and cold storage through neighbors and family. Their land lease accounted for “sweat equity,” allowing them to write off any infrastructure projects and their labor improvements on the land. Expressing the livelihood ethic, they wanted to maintain the quality of their lifestyle and the nature of their work on the farm,

> Every step we take as farmers is to grow better and not necessarily bigger. We are always learning and discovering, innovating, becoming more efficient, and adapting in order to become better more educated farmers.

Efficiency in this instance, is not the monetary calculation of making more money per unit of labor, but conversely about preserving the quality of the labor and lifestyle more generally. Economic gains made through labor efficiency are important, they can mean the difference between being profitable or not, but of equal importance is maintaining the quality of one’s labor and the non-monetary rewards of farming. Again, this reflects a commitment to the livelihood ethic – finding innovative and resourceful ways to make enough of a living on the land without degrading the meaning and values of your labor. The findings of Howley, Dillon and Hennessy (2014) support this claim of balancing monetary and non-monetary values. In explaining the results of their farmer survey they conclude,

> The results suggest that farmers, for the most part, feel that there are a variety of

> non-pecuniary benefits associated with farm work. These perceptions, in turn, acted as a strong disincentive for farmers towards working off-farm. This means that even in the face of greater economic returns in the off-farm labor market, farm operators could choose to allocate more time to on-farm work due to the extra non-pecuniary benefits obtained (269).
>
> Farm decisions are not just centered on maximizing returns but rather seek to balance both economic and social goals and accommodate multiple sources of income, e.g., from off-farm work (Darnhofer et al. 2005). Attributes such as independence, pride associated with business ownership, social interaction, and enjoyment of working outdoors may be valuable to farmers and not readily available in other sources of employment. While it is true that financial gain will be important to many farmers, it may not be their core motivation for farming. Farmers may fear a possible diminution in the lifestyle and social benefits associated with farm work if they take up off-farm employment (270).

Generating cash income is always a pressing issue for new agrarians, but they often realize that the pursuit of profit can take some of the joy out of farming, if one too doggedly focuses on it. As Pratt and Luetchford speak of new farmers in France,

> Earning money may be accepted as a necessary part of realizing a livelihood… but it is not an end in itself. Instead these *néo-rurals* prioritize other values, including the creativity of work practices, craftsmanship, the preservation of environment and the quality of food. They also value cooperation and the creation of alternative social networks (2014: 103).

The autonomy to creatively organize farm production and your day-to-day schedule certainly has a direct relationship to the pressure to earn profit. As a first generation, diversified CSA farmer in Santa Rosa explained to me, "I always have at least four or five 'experiments' every growing season, whether it's growing a new crop, changing my soil management practice, or something else, I'm always trying something new." That flexibility and ability to try new things keeps the work from being monotonous and singularly focused on the market. While some of these practices may result in new market-oriented production, the initiative is often not so narrowly driven.

Additionally, small-scale organic farmers are often improvising and innovating

to deal with agronomic needs. One young farmer I met who operates out of Santa Rosa, California dealt with a cucumber beetle infestation by using a handheld vacuum, obtained second hand through craigslist, and manually vacuumed the bugs as he went through the row weeding (attached to his hip like a carpenter's tool belt). Others will plant a 'trap crop' at the edge of the farm, which attracts the invasive insect allowing market crops to grow without severe pest damage. This type of agronomic problem solving is at once vital to the economic survival of the farm and also personally rewarding – the tangible rewards of using ingenuity to solve production problems. Farmers also rely on social networks to help with labor-intensive needs – friends, family, and volunteers often help with labor-intensive projects, usually receiving some produce at the end of their day's labor. Such arrangements minimize labor costs and make the work more enjoyable.

Beyond field production, farmers use innovative and creative strategies for harvest and processing. Many of the beginning farmers had on-farm processing facilities that used recycled old bath tubs to clean vegetables or commercial sinks. Next to the rinsing station were often simple drying racks – handmade wooden table structures with metal wire stretched across the top. Others used old clothes drying machines to spin dry salad mix. These types of low-tech, inexpensive innovations proliferate at small-scale farms and fit squarely with an ethos of doing more with less money and honoring the craft and ingenuity that comes with the challenge of making an ethical living from the land. Importantly, farmers not only develop the skills of utilizing resources, but also develop an ability to *identify* resources within the community. This ability to identify resources is a significant part of what Gibson-

Graham describe as ‘starting where you are’ or an ethic of the local (2006; 2010).

Accordingly, another common innovation in the mixed farm operations were hand crafted ‘chicken tractors.’[19] I saw many iterations of this, but one, in particular, utilized recycled bicycle frames and wheels that made for easy transport throughout the pastures, keeping the chickens well fed on green grass and allowing their manure to fertilize the fields. This relatively simple innovation provides soil fertility and weed control, in addition to the eggs and/or meat provided by the chicken. Furthermore, since these contraptions are often made with recycled materials farmers can find on their property or source locally, farmers engage the creative aspects of work.

In the *New Peasantries*, van der Ploeg excerpts an editorial written from a Dutch farmer that nicely states the value and meaning of farm work:

> The freedom I have as a farmer, the possibility [of organizing] my own work and my own schedule – it is all very important to me. We are working in the open air, have a lot of alternation and variation in the work, both mentally and physically. We are working with nature, with animals. Thus, you are confronted every day with values that refer to life (Monique van der Laan 2006, quoted in van der Ploeg 2008: 275).

Indeed, the small-scale farmers with whom I worked in California are similarly interested in maintaining a quality of life that is socially and ecologically embedded. To some extent this entails financial return, but a great deal of the value of farming is in its non-monetary rewards. Alan and Jo, second-career farmers who were in their 10th year of farming (so technically, graduating from the USDA beginning farmer status) spoke eloquently about the valuation of laboring on the land. Alan, who I conducted the bulk of my interviews with, moved to Nevada City after years of

[19] Chicken tractors are moveable pens that allow chickens to graze different portions of the farm (farmers intentionally locate the coups for targeted grazing so that the field is neither overgrazed nor overgrown). It is a ‘tractor’ because the chickens scratch and dig at the soil, aerating the soil, eating

working as a paralegal in San Francisco. He experienced the ups and downs of a farm business, even taking a hiatus for a couple years, but returning with a renewed perspective on farming. Alan spoke many times about the criteria we use, especially the criteria for success. "Success does not necessarily have to be financial" he told me. "Customer happiness is a big criteria. Having beautiful land, or loving your work. I appreciate the aesthetics of farming and am increasingly interested in the botanical qualities of each crop." Alan was aware of farm economics probably more than anyone I interviewed. He held an annual 'business retreat' at the end of each farm season, he told me half-jokingly, which entailed him and his wife reviewing the farm season. They would assess what worked and what didn't from the previous year and make plans for the coming year. They would create a spreadsheet to project crop production and income and consider new marketing strategies and venues. Despite their annual tinkering with their business model, Alan and Jo never lost focus of the meaning and other values that constituted their agrarian life. They also had the benefit of owning their land, which reduced one of the major burdens faced by the younger farmers starting anew. Alan and Jo's perspective points directly to the livelihood ethic – of balancing various valuations. Below, Alan explains how he balances the hardships and pleasures of farming in a post he wrote on his farm website:

> In fact, many are called, but few are chosen. It turns out that beginning farming requires a lot of financial resources, along with a lot of courage and fortitude. Young people can have lots of courage and fortitude, but financial resources tend to be scarcer. Putting it all together in such a way as to make a farm pay for itself without exhausting the farmer with work and worry is something that is not widely recognized for what it is, even as more young people flock to farm.

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down weeds, and fertilizing with their manure. Since their coup is mobile, the soil throughout the farm can be improved with this technique.

> After farming for more than ten years on this small piece of heaven on earth, I'm still wondering if I'll be one of the chosen. Each year is a new opportunity, and each year presents its own particular challenges. The line between success and failure is, more often than not, extremely thin, and I often find myself unsure whether a particular year was a success or a failure. By what criteria, on balance?
>
> In the end, even as I know that this is not enough, I value integrity and the beauty of my fields over financial success. I value my relationship with my customers more than I value wider recognition of our accomplishments over the past ten years. I value the interaction I have over the Farmers' Market table with someone who wants to know how to prepare something we have to sell more than I care about the total number of pounds sold during a season. And, what's more, I value the moment I see some inscrutable thing that happens before me as I wander these fields, leaving me to wonder at the depth of pleasure that love can bring.

Again, this articulates the balancing act integral to the livelihood ethic – between the monetary and non-monetary rewards, between the business and the lifestyle, and between the short-term struggles and the bigger meaning and purpose of farming. Many farmers, Alan and Jo included, are physically exhausted by season's end, and take the slower winter months to recharge, and enjoy the fruits of their labor. With the immediate production schedule and marketing responsibilities relieved, they have a moment to reflect, enjoy, and plan. This was exactly the purpose of his annual business retreat as he called it. It was a time to retool the business plan but also a time to restock and to gain perspective and appreciation for the farm life. Winter, of course, is not the only time they appreciate the farm life – the farm season is full of enjoyable moments but equally of physically demanding moments.

Alan and Jo's most recent innovation was to create a farm card program, which was similar in concept but also a transition from the CSA model. The farm card idea was to allow customers to purchase prepaid cards (for example $300) that could be redeemed at the farmers market or farm stand. It relieved Alan and Jo of some of the

pressures they felt from the CSA model – providing all of the different crops and having enough diversity throughout the growing season (a term they referred to as the "diversity treadmill"). It also allowed for more flexibility and convenience for the customer. They could select what produce they wanted every week as opposed to receiving a predetermined vegetable box. They also could redeem their credit anytime throughout the season and were not committed to a weekly pick up. On one hand, this innovation could be seen as a shrewd business calculation, but that is not the sole consideration. This decision allowed Alan and Jo to focus their energies on the farm differently. They could focus more on the crops their land was particularly suited to and that they enjoyed growing. They could focus, in Alan's words, on the 'aesthetics' of the farm. They still received some of the benefits of the CSA model – the upfront money at the beginning of the season and the community relationships and support – but was no longer tied to producing everything. On these terms, this decision has more to do with the quality of the farm work as it does with the economic considerations and remuneration of that labor.

Another important facet in the art of farming is the subjective interpretation of farm labor itself. While some analysts have referred to farm labor as "drudgery" (most famously, Chayanov), small-scale farmers often take a different approach to their work. As van der Ploeg states,

> These new forms of repeasantization critically involve a rebalancing of the equilibrium between drudgery and utility. Those building new, multifunctional farms, grounded on a relatively autonomous resource base, are coming to redefine drudgery. Such farmers mention working outside, highly diversified tasks, independence and working with living nature as being among the more attractive aspects of their work. They experience far less drudgery than those following the entrepreneurial path, where labour can be monotonous, risky and dull (2013: 130-131).

Indeed, as van der Ploeg notes here, how one *views* their labor is of critical importance. Many beginning farmers I interviewed emphasize the creativity of their labor and the freedom they have in allocating their labor. For example, some farmers I interviewed would postpone weeding an area of the farm even if it meant a slight decrease in yields. The fact that they could make such a decision – to go for a swim at the river, instead of spending the afternoon removing weeds – was liberating and a clear balancing act to minimize 'drudgery.' Beginning farmers did, however, mention the physically demanding nature of farm work – the sense of having too many tasks to complete in the day, the aches and pains of manual labor, etc. – but this was always buffered by the aforementioned benefits of farm life.

Lisa and Marney, for instance, see their work not as drudgery, but as a meaningful contribution to their community and environment, as well as an outlet for creativity and personal expression. Lisa and Marney are two of the early organic farmers in Nevada County, very much products of the back-to-the-land ethos of an earlier generation. They describe themselves as biodynamic farmers meaning, "you have to leave the ecological functioning of the system healthy." Their farm is tucked into a narrow valley that suddenly appears after a long winding decent into west county.

Lisa and Marney have a very strong social ethic and articulate the social significance of small-scale farming. "I feel it is my duty to produce non-carcinogenic food, it's my duty to give back, and agriculture is the way to do this." This moral obligation and community contribution gives them meaning in their everyday life. There was also another value and meaning she placed on farming, that embraced the

mystery and wonder of the natural world—that is the deep ecology and 'interconnectedness of life'. "I have never been driven by money, but by the community part of agriculture, to connect people with animals and place." For Marney, agriculture cannot be understood in solely economic terms, it's about re-establishing a connection with nature and community.

> When we first started, we reached out to 5 or 6 close friends and told them we wanted to give them food shares throughout the summer, free of charge, but that we wanted honest feedback – we didn't need money right away because we had savings. From there things started rolling, they told their friends, and so on, until we reached what we believed to be the capacity of the land. We had a diverse product CSA, with value added products like jam, dry beans, grains, bread, and raw milk.

To diversify their farm, they got into compost production. Lisa had experience working for the Presidio Compost Operation in San Francisco. Now, compost accounts for nearly a third of their income.

> There are more ways to farm than just vegetable production or even just animals, you have to be creative, find new things to grow or to make. Economics of the farm are different than any other capitalist enterprise, not only do you have to deal with competition and fluctuations in prices, but you also have to deal with nature. This is why you need longitudinal plans, decade plans, and this is what we try to do.

Lisa and Marney embodied the vision and values it requires to stay on the land. They never lost sight of the purpose and meaning of their work, and were constantly innovative and resourceful. Indeed, they told me, "farms should take everything from the farm and make money from it" and this seems to be a main motivating philosophy – they are resourceful and create new products from the resources they have on farm. Their composting operation epitomizes this ethic, at once generating income, recycling organic waste, and contributing the soil fertility of farms in the county. Lisa and Marney were generating income in a way that contributed to the ecology and broader community, and simultaneously secured their financial stability of the farm

and created purpose and meaning to their livelihood.

What is important among all of these farmers is not just increasing the remuneration of their labor, but also the quality and meaning of their labor. At the end of the day, most of them want to feel their work is important and contributing to something larger than themselves. They also want to protect the non-monetary rewards of farming from the constant pressure to increase revenue. Seen as a creative challenge, such as Lisa and Marney illustrate, this can become a creative ambition – a single-minded focus on creating revenue from everything on the farm. These commitments express the paradoxical condition in which farms must commoditize and decommoditize their farms to create a meaningful and economically sustaining livelihood. The livelihood ethic, as I have explained here, is a mentality and disposition that farmers use in order to learn to navigate these realms of value, and to secure their existence on the land.

Conclusion

Farming is not the only area where a commitment to creating a meaningful life can be observed in society. Indeed, many people attempt to realize their dreams whether in arts, music, or opening a restaurant or small shop. The independent business owner or freelancer has a strong allure in American society. Yet, the petite bourgeoisie has often been marginalized in critical social science. In addition to the personal sense of autonomy, control, and meaning there are broader social values and status garnered by independent farmers. Owning and working a piece of land holds a special appeal in American culture – and arguably a very romantic image of an

agrarian past. However, the status and sense of dignity that an independent farmer garners from being 'one's own boss' is socially significant. In this vein, James C. Scott describes the draw of a petite bourgeois lifestyle[20],

> I suspect that the tremendous desire one can find in many societies for a piece of land, one's own house, one's own shop owes a great deal not only to the real margin of independent action, autonomy, and security it confers but also to the dignity, standing, and honor associated with small property in the eyes of the state and of one's neighbors… I found it impossible to ignore the incredible tenacity with which many marginal smallholders clung to the smallest patch of land. When pure economic logic suggested they would be far better off seeking a profitable tenancy or even moving to town, they held on by their fingernails as long as they possibly could. Those who had no land of their own to farm sought long-lease tenancies, preferably from relatives that represented the next best thing, in terms of status, to owning one's own fields. Those who had neither their own land nor a viable tenancy and who were reduced to working for others hung on to their house lot in the village to the bitter end. In terms of sheer income, a good many tenant farmers were better off than smallholders, and a good many laborers were better off than small tenants. For the peasantry, however, the difference in autonomy, independence, and hence social standing was decisive. The smallholder, unlike the tenant, depended on no one for land to farm and the tenant, unlike the laborer, had at least land for the season and control over his or her working day, while the laborer was cast into what was viewed as a demeaning dependence on the good will of neighbors and relatives. The final humiliation was to lose that last physical symbol of independence, the house lot (2012: 89-90).

The local food movement has certainly elevated the status of farming, and as Scott eludes, is tapping into a strong symbolic narrative in American society of an independent landowner.

While the lifestyle farmers are often critiqued or dismissed due to their relatively small-scale and class/racial privilege, it is possibly more insightful, and more useful, to think about what people do with such privilege and why it is that people from well-to-do backgrounds choose farming, a profession in which it is notoriously difficult to make a living, which requires hard manual labor, and a fair

[20] This reflection, Scott notes, is from his many years researching peasant farmers in Southeast Asia, but equally his experience in the United States.

amount of uncertainty and risk. While these farmers could certainly have reproduced their own privilege as doctors, lawyers, financial accountants, computer engineers, etc., they have decided to make a small living in agriculture, where they can have independence, be their own boss, and have more substantive meaning and purpose to their labor. Cammie Harbottle, a beginning farmer in British Columbia, summarized the essence of the meaning and purpose new agrarians assign to their livelihood in the following way,

> [It] made sense to me on a lot of different levels. I saw what was happening to our food system, and I saw the loss of knowledge that was happening with all the generations of farmers leaving the land. I also wanted to do something practical, constructive and meaningful for my life. And for me, growing food and feeding my family and my community was the most constructive, practical, thing I could do...I love the challenges — it has a physical side, it has a mental side, it keeps you learning all the time, active and outside (Ross 2017).

This desire to be one's own boss and have meaningful work are two animating features of the livelihood ethic and help beginning farmers navigate the tensions of substantive and formal rationalities. In the next chapter I will analyze how this ethic is cultivated through agrarian networks – specifically emanating from training organizations. In doing so I will link the formation of this ethic within a broader post-capitalist politics. A critical dimension of post-capitalist politics is the desire for independence and autonomy. Whereas the livelihood ethic can partly be seen as a more individual (yet socially informed) desire to obtain some measure of autonomy and manage their own time and labor, it is also structured by the necessities of the cash economy. The networks of support and reciprocity are in part a buffer to raw market competition, but equally a space of subject making. Beginning farmers view the farm not only as a source of food and other materials, but perhaps most importantly as a site

of refuge in an economy that is premised on wage labor and the demands and alienation therein. The lifestyle is the point, despite its often pejorative connotations, and it reveals something about the nature of work, the desire for an un-alienated existence.

CHAPTER 4:

DEVELOPING THE LIVELIHOOD ETHIC: COMMUNITY ECONOMIES, FARMER TRAINING NETWORKS, AND LIVING LANDS

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the community economy of new agrarians, which is largely initiated through farmer training networks. These training networks, as I will demonstrate here, both nurture and reinforce the livelihood ethic discussed above and connect beginning farmers to a community that assists them in maintaining an agrarian livelihood and a degree of autonomy on the land.

At the most basic level, farmer training networks provide first-generation farmers with the agroecological knowledge needed to produce healthy, sustainable food. They are often structured as apprenticeship programs where aspiring farmers participate and learn from experienced farmers in all aspects of farm production, from soil management, planting, harvesting and market, to seed collection and auxiliary skills of basic carpentry and machine repair. While some training centers include classroom activities, by and large farmer education is experiential, learning by doing. Often the apprentice is given more and more independence as the growing season progresses, affording them more responsibility. Some programs offer a second or third year journeyman option, where the apprentice operates a small parcel relatively independently. Nearly all of the training centers in California, as I will detail below, offer an immersive experience where interns live together on the farm and much of the communal and social aspects of farming are inculcated.

Training and knowledge sharing, however, are not confined to the training centers themselves. They are reproduced through social networks, which are forged at the training centers. These relationships play a pivotal role for new agrarians as they rely on them for knowledge sharing, moral support, access to resources, and business relations. The networks of friends and farmer colleagues are sustained and reinvigorated at farmer conferences and, more regularly, through social media. They proliferate through Grange meetings[21], the establishment of farmer guilds, farmer-to-farmer trainings, informal potlucks/parties, events and social gatherings, and at markets. They also extend greatly through Facebook, websites, blogs, and Twitter accounts. Knowledge is shared through local food coalitions, list serves, and through YouTube videos. Whereas previous generations of family farmers could rely on kinship networks for knowledge and resources, the new agrarians rely on peer-to-peer relationships – many of which are initially developed at training centers. Successful farming is less about the act of heroic individuals, and more about the product of vibrant networks. The networks support and bolster the ongoing education of farmers, and likewise, serve as a sort of safety net during hard times.

Other scholars have articulated the political, social, and ecological importance of farmer training and other agrarian networks (Hassenein 1997; Holt-Gimenez 2006; Van der Ploeg 2008; Da Via 2012; Minkoff-Zern 2012, 2013; and Pratt and Leutchford 2014). Hassenein's research on two farmer-to-farmer networks in Wisconsin argues that the sharing of local, experiential knowledges was not only

[21] The Grange is a national agricultural advocacy group that originally formed during the civil war. There are Grange buildings across the country, many of which had fallen into disrepair or underuse. There has been a concerted effort amongst new agrarians to revitalize this organization and to orient it towards sustainable small scale farming.

critical to maintaining sustainable farming practices, but also embodied a radical democratic impulse that challenged the knowledge systems of industrial agriculture. “The power and promise of sustainable farming networks,” she says, “lies within the observation that problem solving through collective creation and exchange of knowledge is the foundation of our democratic society” (1997:190). Hassenein also highlights the significance of the support function of these knowledge networks. This is a thematic that recurs throughout my research, wherein farmer training is not solely about agro-ecological knowledge, but also the supportive community it creates.

Holt-Gimenez long-term research of the Campesino-a-Campesino movement (in Central America) illustrates how such informal and participatory networks constitute a resistance to agro-industrialization and capitalist development. Campesino-a-Campesino farmer-led workshops and knowledge exchanges helped smallholders “eliminate their dependence on external inputs…stopped erosion, reclaimed soil, forested hillsides, diversified crops, and raised productivity” (2006:177). These agroecological practices, he explains, have “stabilized the family food system and resulted in a marketable surplus, thus providing most farmers in the Movement with some autonomy from the vicissitudes of the hollowed state and the skewed global market” (177). While the farmers within his study are vastly different than the subjects of my study, they share a desire for autonomy through agro-ecological practices and farm level innovations. What is significant here is how these training networks buffer and create a space for small-scale agrarian livelihoods at the interstices of the industrial food system.

Curry and Kirwan (2014) found the prominence of tacit knowledge in

sustainable agriculture networks in Europe. They argued that tacit knowledge is a critical component of a constructivist epistemology, that is locally situated and combines scientific (objectivist) and other knowledges in the practice of sustainable agriculture. Drawing on Polanyi, they claim that tacit knowledge "prevents knowledge from being reduced to a set of rules" (2014:350). Importantly, tacit knowledge is adaptable and flexible and draws on experiential, folk, and scientific knowledge. Accordingly, farmers assess various production techniques in a broader context as opposed to a strictly instrumentally rational or objectivist approach. As I have elaborated, the livelihood ethic and community economy approach both rely heavily on this tacit knowledge and the ability to adapt to context, or "start where you are." Curry and Kirwan argue that sustainable agriculture necessitates such knowledge. They explain,

> The 'complex' set of objectives, values and styles of implementation in sustainable agriculture do not lend themselves well to reductionist or universalist knowledge. It will need to be acknowledged that the application of knowledge for sustainable agriculture will be context dependent and that context will be scientifically, culturally, purposefully – and tacitly– different in each locality (356).

Knowledge sharing and social networks, it is important to iterate, cannot be removed from racial and class inequalities and power in America. Minkoff-Zern's study of training centers and networks of immigrant farm workers demonstrates the racialized barriers to entry for these new farmers, including land access and market exclusions (2013). The Agriculture and Land Based Training Association (ALBA) in Salinas, California, provides similar agro-ecological training and market approaches as other agrarian training centers, yet must struggle with the racial barriers and the highly

competitive nature of agriculture in the Salinas Valley. Many of these farmers, Minkoff-Zern notes, bring agrarian knowledges from their lives in Mexico and learn to adapt to the new climatic and market realities within the US. Despite their difference in the experience of racial and class dynamics, they express similar motivations for farming as many of the new agrarians I interviewed. She states, "establishing a farm is a survival strategy, and a way to recreate life as they knew it before becoming laborers in the global migrant stream. They are farmers who have left their homes and are attempting to reconstruct agrarian livelihoods" (2013:15). ALBA, as with other agrarian training centers, help aspiring farmers in cultivating this agrarian livelihood, including production knowledge as well as tacit knowledges. While the farmers of Living Lands Agrarian Network and other training centers I interviewed did not face similar racial barriers, they similarly instill this livelihood ethic, as I've termed it, and attempt to construct and support the necessary community economies to support such livelihoods.

Living Lands Agrarian Network (Living Lands), as I will describe in this chapter, is an illustrative example of how agrarian community economies are established and the critical role they play for beginning farmers. Focusing on this particular network in Nevada County, I demonstrate how this organization helped to forge new agrarian subjectivities, instilling the livelihood ethic through the building of community economies. While Living Lands' vision was to create a localized food system in Nevada County – a vision that is still in the making and partial at best – their lasting legacy is the imaginative space they created and the agrarian subjectivities they inspired. This is the unofficial function of agrarian training networks. Although

Living Lands' model of farmer training was somewhat unique, all of the farmer training centers I interviewed instill a community ethos and maintain farmer-to-farmer networks (either formally or informally) for resource and information sharing, among other things. In sum, farmer training centers realize the necessity of building community economies as a buffer and alternative to open market competition. They also produce and reinforce an agrarian subjectivity premised on sociality to counter the corrosive effects of capitalist culture.

A Community Economy Framework

There are many iterations of 'alternative economies' in scholarly literature, including social economies (Olin Wright 2010), embedded economies (Polanyi 1944), and community economies (Gibson-Graham 2006), to name but a few. Despite slightly different theoretical formulations, these conceptions of an 'alternative' economy serve as a critique of the exploitative character of capitalist relations and an attempt to generate socially (and increasingly ecologically) just economic relations. J.K. Gibson-Graham's articulation of community economies as a form of post-capitalist politics (2006) has been particularly influential in expanding scholarly inquiry around alternative economies. Post-capitalist politics, according to Gibson-Graham, is "the discursive imaginings and practical enactment… [of] building different economies" (2006: xxii). Their project is motivated by "the need for a new language of economy to widen the field of economic possibility, the self-cultivation of subjects who can desire and enact other economies, and the collaborative pursuit of economic experimentation" (2006: xxiii). Pertinent to my research is their notion of

the diverse economy as a *way of seeing* non-capitalist economic relationships. As I discussed in Chapter Two, political economy has strongly influenced agrarian studies in which capitalist relations take on an oversized analytical weight. Consequently, many non-capitalist relations – in fact, the majority of relations as Gibson-Graham claim – are either overlooked or analytically underemphasized. This capitalocentric ontology is readily apparent in Guthman's analysis of conventionalization within the organic agriculture sector of California, as I discussed previously. While conventionalization within organic farming is certainly a process of capitalist transformation, it is not the only story of significance within organic or alternative agriculture (Pratt 2009). The diverse economy framing,

> …brings into visibility a variety of economic sites and practices in any particular location, constituting them as a resource for building community economies. The diverse economy framework poses an active challenge to the dominance of any one set of organizing principles or determining dynamics… Including the full range of non-capitalist and alternative capitalist organizations and practices in the economy *widens the scope of motivating drives to encompass more than calculative rationality and competitive individualism* (Gibson-Graham 2006:195 original emphasis).

Analyzing organic agriculture and new agrarians from the perspective of a diverse economy – where capital does not erase or subordinate all other relations – makes visible rationalities and subjectivities that are not defined by the categories of political economy.

Whereas the 'diverse economy' is Gibson-Graham's ontological reframing of economy and expansion of economic relations, the concept of community economies reflects the actual practice and projects emphasizing and cultivating non-capitalist relations. In other words, community economies are one expression of the diverse economy – a particularly utopian vision that orients action. Community economies,

according to Gibson-Graham, are projects that are rooted in a sense of "social interdependency" and foster "new kinds of economic subjects" (2006: 165). This sensibility and approach is precisely what agrarian training networks inculcate through their programs, above and beyond production and farm management skills. Living Lands was explicit in this centering of community and social interdependence within their farmer training program, but all of the other training organizations I interviewed incorporate the community approach, whether formally articulated or not.

These projects, and community economies in general, also exemplify what Erik Olin Wright calls 'real' or grounded utopias – projects that enact a different ecological and social way of being in the world. This is not a rigid blueprint vision of utopia, but a process. As such, there are often contradictions and tensions throughout the implementation of such projects. Wright refers to this approach as "interstitial change" (2010) while Gibson-Graham describe it as "an acknowledged space of social interdependency and self-formation… an unmapped and uncertain terrain that calls forth exploratory conversation and political/ethical acts of decision" (2006: 166). Stated differently, Gibson-Graham observe, and encourage, such community economies to commence from a "start where you are" orientation (ibid) – that is, they build from what is at hand not what is lacking in any place and moment (a.k.a. the deficiency model of economic development). Beyond the call to engage in a specific time and place, this orientation "treats obstacles and local deficiencies as resources rather than as barriers… [and approaches] existing conditions in a spirit of experimentation" (2006:194). This "start where you are" orientation is a critical component of agrarian training programs – to utilize the resources within one's

community to build the farm. For many farmers, as the previous chapter eluded and as I will discuss at greater length in the following chapter, this is also a meaningful form of politics.

The community economy is essential to new agrarians not just in the meaning of their work, but also in their day-to-day material reality. As Gibson-Graham explain, there are three realms of economic transaction – non-market, market, and alternative market. Each have rules and relations defined formally or informally that characterize the commensurability or incommensurability of the exchange. Non-market relations entail household work, ecological stewardship, care work, gifts, and production for the household. Market relations are formal arrangements where goods are exchanged for money and prices are determined by supply and demand or other formal and calculative rules. Alternative markets can include monetary exchange or non-monetary exchange, but are socially negotiated and for the most part determined outside formal economic calculation. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters bartering, work trade, and monetary exchange premised on moral or ethical considerations are central to new agrarians' livelihood strategies. Non-monetary transactions are likewise at the core of their day-to-day lives and livelihoods wherein they interact with nature, increasing soil fertility and the ecological functioning of the farm. Taken together, the non-market and alternative market relations predominate in the livelihoods of new agrarians. However, their economic success is often evaluated and assessed on their formal market relations – that is the quantity of their market share.

The four features of community economies, according to Gibson-Graham, is

how they define and meet (subsistence) needs, generate and distribute surplus, address issues of consumption, and replenish and enlarge commons (2006). I use this framework to analyze the significance of farmer training centers to agrarian livelihoods – including the ways in which new agrarians both learn and enact alternative economies and how these practices challenge normative politics and social relations. In what follows, I first briefly describe the emergence of farmer training centers in California. I then analyze how these training centers develop agroecological knowledge and the livelihood ethic. I then focus specifically on a training center in Nevada County with which I conducted my ethnographic research, Living Lands Agrarian Network (Living Lands). Throughout, I illustrate the centrality of the community economy as a buffer to the capitalist economy and as a way of creating social meaning and value in farming. I argue that the creation of a new agrarian subject – one that is premised on a "start where you are" orientation to agriculture and community-building – is not only emblematic of the new farmers I studied, but is critical to their ability to stay on the land and re-embed socially and ecologically just relations in agriculture.

The Emergence of Agrarian Training Centers in California

California has a long history of back-to-the-land movements, dating as far back as the Kaweah Colony founded in 1886. Yet the institutional infrastructure to support these movements was formed relatively recently by the early organic pioneers associated with the counter culture movements of the 1960s (Guthman 2014). The counter culture / back-to-the-land movement was strongly rooted in a desire to

‘detach’ from urban capitalist modernity. The visions and projects of these people were often radical efforts to create autonomy and self-reliance, through food production, alternative energy, non-monetary exchange systems, and communal living. Yet, as many participants will admit, adequate food production and a sustainable income were two of the greatest challenges. While committed to growing food without chemicals, they lacked the knowledge and avenues for learning how to farm ecologically beyond trial and error. These initial efforts were valiant and visionary, if not fully realized, but more importantly they created the foundation for the current generation of farmers.

One important contribution of the earlier generation was the building of a common knowledge pool through documenting organic and sustainable farming methods in publications, conferences, and other venues. The Rodale Institute was a pioneer in this regard, researching and documenting organic farming practices starting in the late 1940s. By the 1970s, a flurry of books and magazines were established with the purpose of extending agroecological and organic farming techniques. Such organizations as the Ecological Farming Association, the Organic Farming Research Foundation, and the California Alliance of Family Farmers were part of this knowledge building. The accumulation of this knowledge has helped beginning farmers improve agronomic techniques and has documented the technical skills necessary for future generations of farmers going into organic/agroecological farming. Importantly, this knowledge became institutionalized and put into in agrarian training centers that emerged as early as 1967, and grew rapidly in the first decade of the new millennium.

The first formal training program dedicated to small-scale, sustainable agriculture was formed at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) in 1967. Alan Chadwik, an eccentric French biodynamic gardener, started a permaculture garden on a steep hillside on campus – later to be called the Alan Chadwik Garden. Many early organic farmers interned and studied with Alan at the UCSC garden. Later the University would dedicate a 20-acre land parcel for the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS), first directed by Professor Stephen Gliessman. CASFS provides communal farmer training programs, where cohorts of farm apprentices live on the farm, collectively farm, and market the produce. They learn agroecological techniques and the tacit knowledge of living on the farm – foundational components of the livelihood ethic I elaborated in the previous chapter. Additionally, they have the largest beginning farmer network of all the training centers in the state, and many of them get their first on-farm experience after their apprenticeship. For the last 40 years, CASFS has been a keystone of the sustainable agriculture movement in California and across the nation. It was the first sustainable farming apprenticeship in the U.S., offering season-long experiential learning in organic agriculture. Many of the early participants of this program have gone on to establish farms, agrarian training centers, food justice organizations, and other related food organizations. CASFS has graduated roughly 700 trainees through their sustainable farm and garden apprenticeship program, with graduates establishing farms across the country (the map can be viewed on the CASFS website: https://casfs.ucsc.edu).

Beyond CASFS, however, there were few institutionalized venues for farmer

training in the 1970s and 1980s. Private organic farms offered internships and apprenticeships, often in exchange for room and board, and this was a common educational path for many new farmers. Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF), an international organization connecting organic farm advocates with work opportunities on organic farms around the world, was another common avenue that aspiring farmers utilized to gain farming knowledge. Nevertheless, the dearth of institutionalized training centers was a limiting factor in local and sustainable agriculture movements' attempt to revitalize small-scale farming. While apprenticeships on private farms proved to be effective to some degree in training new farmers, they were legally questionable under California labor laws (sometimes outright illegal), and after a few busts on private farms, farmers began to shy away, if not completely abandon, internship programs. Ironically, the very laws that were set in place to protect farm workers and make California Labor Laws among the most stringent in the country, are the same laws that hinder on-farm apprenticeships and internships. Laws developed in relation to large-scale capitalist farms become the Achilles heel of sustainable farm apprenticeships; under the law, interns and apprentices are regarded as labor, requiring farmers to meet minimum wage requirements and to pay workers compensation. For most small-scale farmers, this is financially prohibitive.

A number of organizations and public institutions stepped up to fill this role in the sustainable agriculture movement. In the past decade, there has been a proliferation of agrarian training centers in California. With few exceptions, the majority of these farmer training centers have started within the last 10 or 15 years.

The increase in farmer training programs is both a response to and a driver of the re-agrarianization of California. On one hand, they are a response to rising interests in farming by young and second career adults spurred by the movement for local food systems. On the other hand, they take a pro-active role in inspiring and cultivating new agrarians that become leaders in the local food movement. They raise public awareness and support for new agrarians through numerous public events that increase the visibility and dissemination of information about small-scale ecological farming.

Importantly, these training centers teach and demonstrate that it takes 'a community' to farm at a small-scale, and that this spirit of developing community relationships is important to the maintenance of farm livelihoods and should be the foundation of individual farms. Each center has its own pedagogy and style, but all serve as loci for sustainable agriculture networks. They play a vital role in inculcating the livelihood ethic amongst new agrarians and establishing the relationships and knowledge to create a livelihood on the margins of the agricultural economy, as I detail in this chapter.

Agrarian Knowledge and the Role of Community in Farmer Training Networks

While there has been an accumulation of published information on organic farming over the last several decades, farming knowledge is inherently experiential and is place bound (Hassanein 1997). One can learn the principles of organic or sustainable farming methods, but the application of this knowledge is geographically variable. As many of the farmers I interviewed acknowledge, it takes between 5-7 years until they feel they have refined their farming practices in a way that optimizes

the specific ecological aspects of their land – and this is to say nothing of whether or not they turn a profit. Farmers acknowledged that ecological stewardship and knowledge of the land is a lifetime's work, the seasonal pauses in work allow for reflection and fine tuning of the craft of farming – a kind of reflective craftsmanship. One of the more experienced farmers confided that even in his tenth year of farming, he is still humbled by seasonal variations in weather and pests.

Agrarian training centers offer a space for such reflective craftsmanship. Throughout training, new agrarians are faced with an overwhelming array of choices, from production methods, to crop planning, fertility management to marketing, and each decision is scrutinized collectively with an unrelenting eye towards maintaining livelihoods and ecological capital. For example, the understanding of soil ecology and maintaining soil fertility is paramount in these training programs. These practices include cover cropping, green manures, rotations, fallow periods, compost and compost teas, grazing, animal manures, and, when necessary, off-farm organic fertilizers. The UCSC farm, for instance, has relationships with local wineries and receives truckloads of grape pulp for their composting. Other training centers, such as Hidden Villa in Los Altos, California, utilizing the piles of woods chips discarded by local tree service companies for their mulch pile, also have established relations within the community to recycle wastes for the farms soil fertility. These practices have to be adapted to site-specific conditions, but the ethic of looking within one's community to enhance soil fertility is strongly rooted in the training curriculum.

While new agrarians are introduced to these practices at training centers, they are expected to implement their practice in other ecologies. This is the art of farming

(Van Der Ploeg 2013). While the knowledge of soil ecology and soil fertility practices are a starting point, it requires much experimentation, innovation, and in situ learning to hone fertility measures adapted to local ecologies – what van der Ploeg calls "co-production" (van der Ploeg 2009). "Farming," van der Ploeg says, "can be seen as the ongoing interaction and continual transformation of people and living nature" (2013: 48). This co-production is a critical component of agrarian training centers. For instance, Joey, a graduate of Hidden Villa's farmer training and journeyman programs, told me of how he has adapted the lesson he learned as a farm apprentice:

> I've made farm connections and found farm help through the farmers guild [a farmer-to-farmer organization for knowledge and resource sharing] Facebook page. I've split my farm into four sections and I'm doing trials on one side, adding lime, and pelletized fertilizers while the other remains mainly in cover crop [for fertility management] and I will adjust production methods afterwards. I'm also moving away from tilling, which may mean no more cover cropping as you have to incorporate cover crops into soil…but there are other implements that will de-compact soil… I am also interested in learning mechanics and am taking a welding class at the community college [in order to repair his own equipment] …

Instead of isolating on the farm, Joey describes a particular ethos that is taught and practiced in agrarian training centers, that is establishing community relationships and constantly experimenting and adapting methods.

Training centers also inculcate a particular agrarian sensibility or orientation to farming – a frame of mind, if you will. Jeremy, a young farmer who specializes in heirloom potatoes but complements that with a diverse range of vegetable crops, expressed the requisite attitude of a beginning farmer. He told me of his training experience,

> I learned a lot from my internship, not just about growing food, but also about having the right attitude and demeanor when farming… this is important! You can't let it consume you, there is always more work to do, more problems and you have to roll with it. I think there is a demeanor that makes for a good farmer, if you're always stressing, this robs you of any joy.

As Jeremy suggests, the mentality of a farmer is as important as the agronomic skills. Farmer training programs and networks teach beginning farmers to protect against burn out – to not get discouraged by the low compensation and long work days or letting stress detract from the joys of farming. Admittedly for some, this balance is difficult to achieve. As one farmer who left his farm after five years told me, "you really have to be committed to the lifestyle – I wasn't committed enough and had financial aspirations that were impossible to realize." For him, the tight financial margins were a constant stressor and eventually outweighed the other values of farming. While he was somewhat dismissive of small-scale farming as a viable livelihood, he acknowledged that "it works for people who are dedicated to the lifestyle".

Perhaps the most important dimension of the training centers, though, is to cultivate a network of farmers and community relationships upon which small-scale agrarian livelihoods rely. As Living Lands explicitly stated on their website,

> We measure ourselves on our ability to "graduate" new farmers who are competent in the full range of skills they need to grow and sustain successful farm businesses. We recognize that a part of our role, in addition to training and mentorship, is helping to prepare the ground on which new farm businesses will be planted. As a community-based organization, our ability to do this is premised on the strength of local partnerships and networks. To this end, we work to increase the participation of community organizations in LLAN programs including local schools, non-profits, government agencies and a constellation of local farms/farmers; and lend our energies to other organizations that can benefit from our capabilities.

The collective energy, knowledge sharing, and support provides a great deal of security and motivation to beginning farmers, not to mention the tangible material benefits of sharing and reciprocal exchange. As one Living Lands farmer and UCSC

farm apprentice graduate explained,

> I've been thinking lately about how important is it to have a network of people doing the same kind of work, growing food for CSAs, farmer's markets, and other direct distribution outlets. The encouragement and brainstorming with other farmers makes such a difference in my mental health. Although we live in a capitalist society, in which we are all competing for resources, I find that the benefits of many small farmers far outweigh the competition for customers. As I see it, the potential for marketing locally grown and raised food is endless, and the real difficult part is educating consumers to the importance of buying local and possibly spending just a little bit more on their dinners. I know it can be tricky negotiating this line between competition and support, particularly for more established farmers who are used to dominating the market, and now potentially feel more pressure to compete with all the small farms starting up through the county. Yet the more farmers we have in the area means that we are that much more able to feed the whole community, and to reach out to those who can't afford or don't understand the importance of fresh, local food. I find it so inspiring to see the faces of the interns who are farming here in Nevada County. Of the vibrant passion they bring to our community and the inspiration to make something of their own. We are training the competition in a sense, yet this is the most important work we do in my opinion.

Farmer training centers, as the above demonstrates, inspire an ethos of sharing and collaboration in spite of the realization that in some instances there is a level of market competition. What is significant, however, is that on balance farmers I interviewed tended to elevate the benefits of sharing and reciprocity networks above that of competition. It is an acknowledgement that competitive individualism is corrosive to the spirit of the farmers' movement.

These connections persist through social networks long after beginning farmers graduate from training. One established farmer, John, who runs the largest CSA in Nevada County, explained in an interview,

> We've tried to stay near the cutting edge of our type of farming, and that way that we've done that is by connecting with other farmers and being part of a bigger farmer community that goes beyond our small area here…we're all trying to solve similar problems, so we've adopted some of these innovative things. It's not like we've really invented anything. Well, we've invented a few little things but we took this old 1950's weeding tool that was popular among organic

> farmers and some guy figured out how to convert it to electric which helps its functionality a lot, so we did that…the same guy also figured out how to make a regular residential air conditioner into a walk-in cooler, to make it go colder than 60 degrees, so that's a big cost and energy savings modification (North Columbia Schoolhouse interview 2012).

Agrarian networks, as John articulates, assist in innovation and new techniques that help farmers save money and labor, and also provide a sense of shared purpose and collective problem solving.

Paul and Molly, two farmers I introduced earlier, reinforced the necessity of social relationships to their ability to farm in an ecologically and socially just manner. They had a strong desire to make their food accessible, but acknowledged the challenge of realizing such a dream. They emphasized the importance of building relationships. "We have a commitment to quality, integrity and excellence," they told me, "and this is the only way you can make it." Much of this reputation is built on the steady development of relationships and building of community.

> You have to build relationships, it's all about relationships, and reputation, but this is hard work, you have to take the time to be social, to check in with your neighbors, your landlords, owners, etc., and this is very difficult after working all day.

Building community for Paul and Molly wasn't always as enjoyable as others expressed. Our conversation was taking place the day after an incident that require a great deal of neighborly remediation – their pigs had escaped the fence and had blocked traffic on the road. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that maintaining relationships is a type of social work – one that is vital to the success of farmers – but can be burdensome at times. In their words, "you have to take time to become part of a community. You can't do this alone, you're going to need help.

That will give you staying power."[22]

Farmer training centers are central to the constitution and reproduction of the livelihood ethic. While there may be variation in the moral orientation of individual trainees, their actions are often conditioned by the ethical codes of their profession or community. Training centers and the networks that emerge out of them, to a large extent, provide this function for new agrarians. More than learning the 'nuts and bolts' of agricultural production, it is about a way of conduct in the world, it is about moral principles. These are enacted through teachings and informal discussions, and in the everyday practices of farming. They instill a spirit of frugality and resourcefulness and of low consumption lifestyles. In doing so, these centers inform a way of being in the world that is critical to maintaining land-based livelihoods within the agrarian political economy of California. It's an ethic of working with nature, not overriding it. This has a double purpose of regenerating the ecological foundations of farming, but also is part and parcel of farming economically. It is also an ethic of farming socially – building community support and relationships that create a social safety net during hard times.

New Agrarians in Northern California and the Formation of Living Lands Agrarian Network

Amongst all of the farmer training centers I interviewed, Living Lands Agrarian Network was the most explicit about their commitment to the community economy and its integral relationship to the livelihood ethic. Livings Lands, as I will

[22] One way this manifested was neighbors and community members offering Paul land to farm. As he

detail below, eventually merged with another food organization in the county (what came to be known as Sierra Harvest) and the farmer training model transitioned into a more typical model of agrarian training, from the communal/collective training to a more curriculum-based farm school. This transformation, as I see it, had less to do with inherent flaws of their training model, but was due to challenges of running a non-profit organization and some bad luck.

Farmer Training in Nevada County

New farmers in Nevada County, as discussed in Chapter 3, are a mix of young people and second career adults that are from Nevada County or nearby. A few of the farmers come from outside the area and were attracted by the farming possibilities and support for new farmers in the region. For most of the last decade, farmer training occurred on a handful of private farms in the county. Some of the more established farms – Mountain Bounty and Riverhill, in particular – would take on interns every year and provide hands-on production experience in exchange for room and board and/or a small stipend. Some of these interns went on to start their own farms and establish similar intern opportunities. This internship approach functioned as an apprenticeship of sorts, allowing aspiring farms to learn from established farmers and get a sense of the daily operation of a farm. It also had its drawbacks, since there were little to no standards for the actual education of interns, making the training experience variable from farm to farm. As such, the need for an organization to manage and support farmer training beyond the dispersed private farm model was evident to many

stated, "We have so many people offering us their land to farm."

local food advocates in the area, and Living Lands Agrarian Network formed in order to fill this void.

The idea of Living Lands was initiated in 2006 and the formal organization was established two years later by four farmers – Tim, Maisie, and Willow, all in their mid-twenties, and Leo, a retired contractor in his early fifties. Tim, in his blog (2011), explains the origins of the idea of the Living Lands Agrarian Network as he and his college friends dreamed it:

> None of us were really interested in more formal education like that which we received at college - not to say that we were not grateful to have been educated in that way, but that we were ready for what was next - we wanted our next education to be through living and feeling. We wanted to be connected to the earth, to nature, to soil, to land, to people, to community and to create the meaning of our lives through these connections… After a bit of brainstorming we came up with Living Lands. That was it. Living Lands embodied what we were after in our lives. Explicit in its connection to the Land and in the form we wanted that relationship to take - through our Lived experience - It also expressed our view of the Land as a Living thing, and worthy of total respect.
>
> …I saw my involvement in agriculture as so much more than just growing food - I felt a calling to engage with people, to confront the barriers prohibiting their involvement within farming; land access, knowledge of farming, support, start-up costs, marketing, and socially-stimulating engagement with their peers and elders!
>
> This was when Living Lands became Living Lands Agrarian Network, or at least through the process of myself and Leo throwing ideas back and forth about how to go about this endeavor. The concept was far too great for only two people to hold completely. We went for it, never the less, and by the beginning of that next year we had expanded to a total of four farm sites within the Nevada City area, had five interns joining us for the season, had expanded our growing into the realm of staple crops like beans and grains to provide for our food needs year-round, and were raising chickens for eggs and meat, spring lambs, and pigs! The vision was still young but it had started to take material form and due to our dedication to remaining flexible we were able to remain on the path…

The guiding vision for Living Lands was to establish a localized food economy that sustained the soils and ecology of the area and produced healthy food for the local

residents. The goal was to inspire and support a new generation of ecological farmers to realize this vision, and specifically to help them overcome some of the major barriers to entry for beginning farmers, including access to land, start-up capital, resources, and most of all knowledge. More generally, the founding members wanted to inspire a revaluation of food and agriculture in the community. This would prove to be pivotal in enlisting property owners to offer farmland to the organization and other financial and volunteer support.

Living Lands summed up their vision and approach in their organizational mission statement:

> Living Lands Agrarian Network provides training and mentorship to a new generation of farmers. Our unique model of cooperative, sustainable agriculture integrates education, resource sharing, community partnerships and celebration around the food we grow. We practice and promote small-scale agriculture as part of the larger movement to create localized and sustainable food systems that are healthy for people and the planet. We offer training and mentorship in sustainable agriculture through our diverse network of farmers and farms. When a trainee is ready to begin their own independent farming business, we offer access to land, infrastructure, continued mentorship, as well as venues for farm sales to help them get a successful start. Our model is dependent on local community members who value the importance of local, sustainable agriculture. Our farms are located on private property by local land-owners who value the opportunity to host a sustainable farm.

As stated above, the organization formed with the merging of two practical programs to realize their larger vision. First, the organization addressed land access through the idea of connecting beginning farmers with property owners in the community. Living Lands' founders literally went door-to-door to secure land for beginning farmers. This had the double benefit of addressing land access barriers common for beginning farmers, and as a means of building community support for local agriculture. There were no formalized agreements or rent exchanged between

the landowner and farmer, but produce from the land and the improvements to the land were the tacit compensation. This is one illustration of how Living Lands developed a community economy to support new agrarians. Second, Living Lands created a farmer-to-farmer network in which farmers could support one another with regard to agricultural knowledge, resources, and labor. This collaborative spirit guided the organization and endeared it to the local community. The broader notion of developing self-sufficiency from the talents and resources of the community, I would argue, harkened to a deeper cultural vein within the rural west. Making a living from the land and the ethos of self-sufficiency—and other iterations of libertarian/anarchist communitarianism—are deeply engrained in much of the rural American west. This admiration for the project was visible amongst the dozens of people who would show up for volunteer workdays and the hundreds that joined their potlucks and community events. Eventually, Living Lands had so many people contacting them to offer land to farm that they had to start declining them. Overwhelmed by the interested landowners, Living Lands created an online Land Bank where owners could post a description of their land and beginning farmers could search for an adequate match and directly contact those landowners.

The early years of Living Lands were marked by a communalist approach: all the farm partners shared the work, the food, and the profits of the land they farmed. They collectively worked all the farm sites (initially four farms) and were active in building a community of support through weekly potlucks and workshops that rotated from farm sites. These farms were established mainly on private property – the land of a school teacher, a lawyer, and a dentist – but also a farm site in collaboration with

the Bear Yuba Land Trust and the Maidu Tribe. These farms were small (1-10 acres), highly diversified vegetable, fruit, and meat operations. Living Lands sold produce at farmers' markets, local restaurants, and their CSA, but also grew a good deal of produce for their own consumption and for the landowners hosting them, including staple products such as dry beans, grains, eggs, dairy products and meat. "There was a great deal of creative energy in those early years," Leo told me. He compared the organization to the hub of a wheel. "We collectively ran the farm sites, but people were always starting new side projects." This included value added projects, gleaning, preservation, worm bins, bee-keeping, and other axillary projects. For instance, one year they made fruit compote from locally gleaned fruit and sold pancakes (with flour from the one local grain producer) at the farmers market. Without prompting, the farmers said, "it didn't make any money. We probably broke even," they laughed, "but it was fun – people loved it…and, we ate well!" Another farm member started pickling the leftover veggies from market, at first just for household consumption, but later he also sold or bartered some of his pickled produce (he later moved and started his own value-added pickle company).

Living Lands farmers didn't have much cash but they had an abundance of food that often served as a form of currency and sociality. They shared their surplus produce with landowners, building goodwill and a sense of reciprocity and community. They also shared their produce at farm events and with volunteers and community groups. Farm produce, and the farm sites as well, were means of creating what Pratt and Luetchford, building on Gudeman, call mutuality: including reciprocity, sharing, gift giving, and solidarity (Pratt and Luetchford 2014; Gudeman

1998). These spheres of mutuality are expressed in the solidarity networks forged by Living Lands and that helped farmers maintain a level of autonomy and control over the value of their labor. Such networks, in Pratt and Leutchford's words, help "prevent the value of work and creativity being appropriated by others" (2014: 188). The quality of relationships established between farmers and farm advocates was greatly valued amongst Living Lands, often more than monetary transactions. These relationships not only provided tangible resources – volunteer labor, equipment sharing, land access, and other services – but also a kind of social safety net that allowed for some security and peace of mind for beginning farmers.

As money was always tight, Living Lands farmers relied on on-farm and local resources, their own skills and labor, and community volunteers. Resourcefulness and frugality were at the heart of their training and community ethos, and to a great extent fueled their creative endeavors. Frugality, when not necessary for survival, can be a source of ingenuity and innovation. Vegetable washing stations were often constructed from salvaged bath tubs or sinks, and surplus lumber, for example. Farmers within the Living Lands network developed a reflex to rely on community resources instead of cash expenditures. Sharing and cooperation were central components of their livelihoods and went a long way to reducing costs – one critical component to making a living in agriculture. When a farmer had a labor-intensive project or harvest, for example, Living Lands farmers would assist and then could later rely on the other farmers' labor when they were in need. One farmer who raised chickens relied on the farmers in the network to assist with the chicken slaughter and processing days, where a half-dozen farmers would help slaughter and clean 200 or

more chickens. In exchange, the farmers received some of the chicken and the assistance of this farmer when they required additional labor. Indeed, the challenge of making a living off the land was one that inspired craft, creativity, and cooperation amongst Living Lands farmers. These farmers were engaged in what Gibson-Graham call "resocializing economic relations" that acknowledged and developed interdependence in the production and distribution of farm produce (2006: 79).

Frugality and resourcefulness also have a liberating effect in relation to the monetary requirements of the farm: the less one requires market purchases, the less pressure they feel towards increasing income. Likewise, reducing or eliminating debt through frugality and resourcefulness relieves farmers of the burden of bank debt (or family or customer debt in terms of CSA farms). This balance between off-farm expenditures and on-farm resources, however, was hard to sustain for many beginning farmers, as I will explain later. Many cost-reducing activities require additional labor, and as such are not always feasible. That is, farmers must weigh a tradeoff between monetary savings and labor expenditure – whether to use one's labor or purchase materials was rarely calculated (rationalized) but was usually assessed in relation to the farm cash flow and the non-monetary rewards of using one's own labor and time (the skills and knowledge learned in the process and the sense of satisfaction and achievement). If, for instance, a farm was lacking cash flow (say the beginning of the farm season before produce was ready for market) then farmers were often forced to turn to their on-farm resources and networks for any farm projects. However, mid-season, a farmer may determine that an external farm purchase is necessary as they have a cash flow and their labor is spread thin. Frugality, as I've expressed it here, is

expressed in circumstances of limited financial assets, but this type of frugality amongst beginning farmers is a type of voluntary poverty. Beginning farmers have chosen this career often from a position of privilege which is qualitatively different from involuntary forms of poverty. Most of these farmers have families and resources (and college educations) to fall back on if finances become too dire, whereas farm workers or multigenerational family farmers do not often have such alternatives.

While the day-to-day farmer training at Living Lands focused on agroecological practices, many Living Lands workshops had to do more generally with sustainable living. For instance, Living Lands held workshops focused on increasing self-sufficiency – whether in doing home repairs, food storage, or do-it-yourself projects (building composting toilets, cob ovens, winterizing a home, etc.). The first workshop I attended with Living Lands, for example, was a cob oven building workshop. Two Australian brothers who had relocated to the area taught the interns, farmers, and community members the process of using local resources (clay, sand, and straw) to build an outdoor oven. The workshop was hands-on, where all participants collectively built an oven. The entire demonstration was interactive – the instructors included everyone in their deliberations about the proper clay, sand, and straw mixture, the thickness and number of layers, and assessing what was available to us at the farm site. The exercise was illustrative of Living Lands' committed to using local resources – Gibson-Graham's notion of "start where you are" – and engaging in a deliberative practice of community building. Upon completion of the oven, Living Lands held a community potluck and made pizzas and bread in the new oven. Other workshops focused on natural building (using hay bales and adobe), fermentation,

food preservation, bee keeping, wild foraging, medicinal plants, among many others. Participants learned to see their local community and environment as assets. These workshops express one part of how the livelihood ethic was created within Living Lands – new agrarians learned the requisite skills to live on the land without much money and to create solidarity networks that enabled them to survive with limited finances. The reflex that was developed amongst Living Lands interns was to limit as many external purchases as possible by utilizing resources on your farm or within your community. Living Lands, for example, used horses from a local horse rescue to plow their fields, they harvested trees for lumber and fence posts, and what they couldn't procure themselves, they bartered for. Food and goodwill, in many ways, were the currencies with which Living Lands farmers survived. In return, they received an immense amount of support, from volunteer labor and borrowed equipment to professional services such as dentist visits, medical check-ups, massage therapy, and even legal and tax services. Farm advocates in various professions offered services to Living Lands in order to support this highly visible expression of re-agrarianization.

Other workshops were more directly related to farm production, including increasing pollinators on farm, intercropping, soil management, rotational grazing, cover crops, mulching and composting. All of these workshops were oriented towards the long-term development of soil fertility. Leo often spoke of creating abundance in terms that at first seemed philosophical if not spiritual to me. He meant, in part, that if you care for the soil (creating a healthy soil ecology), that the farm will provide in abundance. This was made clear to me when one of the land parcels he was farming for nearly seven years was about to be sold. He did not lament the loss of land as a

productive asset as much as he lamented losing the soil fertility that he had built. Soil fertility, for him, was at once an embodiment of his labor and the value therein, and also the source of future (and enduring) abundance. Living Lands extolled long term soil fertility as the key to abundance. Furthermore, they taught interns to share this abundance as a way to build community that would help sustain the farms in the long run. As such, this notion of abundance connected the ecological and social spheres of the farm, each strengthening the other. This idea was central to Living Lands' training and more broadly their vision of a local food system where food and farms held a social and ecological currency beyond their value in money.

The education at Living Lands, like nearly all farmer training programs, was strongly production-oriented. That is, interns learned about specific crop production techniques, soil management, planting schedules, harvest, post-harvest processing, etc. They also learned some basic business knowledge, including accounting, sales, even though sometimes this entailed simply penciling it out on the back of an envelope. Perhaps most important, however, is the tacit knowledge, the enculturation process within these farmer training programs: frugality, innovation, resourcefulness, low-consumption lifestyles and cooperation – all of which I described in detail above. These knowledges, dispositions, and skills are critical to the sustenance of farming for beginning farmers. The economic odds of making a living in small-scale agriculture are so stacked against beginning farmers that it requires a certain ethical disposition, and set of corresponding skills that can buffer the stringent economics and likewise sustain farmer motivation. Recognizing the small profit margins in agriculture, Living Lands instilled a certain ethic of "farming economically", as Van der Ploeg would

have it, and of living within the resource base of the farm and farm community.

Living Lands' building of grassroots community support was exceptional amongst farmer training networks. The farmers of Living Lands often had a refrain about "sharing abundance," exemplified in Leo's understanding of land and community described above. It took me some time to realize the significance of this idea, but it was on display often in what most people would deem an innocuous event – the potluck. Living Lands held a community potluck every week that rotated from each farm. On the surface, a potluck is an event where people bring a dish or drink to share and eat together. This weekly ritual, however, was critical component of Living Lands community economy. The ritual of sharing created bonds amongst community members, it created a sense of community self-sufficiency, and it showcased the beauty and abundance of small farms. These events were a gathering place not just to eat and celebrate, but also of creating collaborations and generating ideas. Two farmers were discussing how to incorporate grains and dried legumes into the local food system and collaborating on a holistic CSA program. A community baker met with the one organic local grain producer to develop a subscription bread program. Some discussed how to repair equipment or shared production techniques. Others bartered or traded equipment or produce. Regularly one vegetable producer would announce an over-abundance of some crop to offer at a discount, for trade, or for gleaning – this was a common occurrence and another iteration of "sharing abundance." The abundance Living Lands discussed was not only the visible production of food, but the sharing of the vision and energy therein. Abundance was not just a physical manifestation but a harder to locate creative energy, wherein people

learned to participate and contribute to community self-determination and sufficiency. It was a way in which the livelihood ethic was bolstered and shared with the larger community and that non-farmers could contribute and develop a sense of meaning and purpose within the movement.

This was nowhere more evident than amongst the landowners who leased their land to Living Lands. "Don't expect any financial reward from this relationship," one landowner advised a group of landowners at the Nevada County Local Food and Farm conference. "I always ask the farmer, 'What can I do for you?'… I don't expect compensation, but I am rewarded with beautiful land, produce, and friendships." These relationships were cultivated and nurtured by Living Lands, from which people drew energy and were inspired to reciprocate to their project.

Living Lands also had more formal fundraisers, including soup nights and summer farm tours. These events were widely promoted and brought in people from all over the county and adjacent counties. Above and beyond the farm fresh soups, people were invited to be a part of this creative experiment, relationships were forged, and abundance was reciprocated. Leo explained during one of our interviews, "the potlucks and soup nights were a big part of engaging the community. They raised some money, but more importantly they were fun, and people gravitated to our energy and our project." Many professionals, as I noted earlier, who did not have time to volunteer or contribute in other ways to Living Lands would offer their services to the farmers in exchange for fresh produce – dental work, massage, chiropractic, etc. Abundance, in this sense, was akin to Gibson-Graham's notion of cultivating subjects for community economies – that is, the ability to see the multitude of non-market

relations, and the full breadth of substantive rationality.

As with many of the non-profit farmer training programs, Living Lands also had to sell produce for profit as a revenue stream for the training program. Marketing, as the members of Living Lands expressed to me, was often a secondary concern to the aforementioned community building. That is, marketing did not direct their farming practices or decisions but was partly improvised throughout the season – a market plan was often sketched at the beginning of the season, but often not strictly adhered to. Accordingly, they attempted to balance the need to produce for the local market with their desire for self-sufficiency. The organization buffered farm interns from some of the most difficult economic pressures small farms often face through the fundraisers discussed above and other income-generating activities so that the farm was not the sole source of income. As interns persisted with the program, they could arrange to farm one of the land sites in the Living Lands network, still retaining the support network but on a more independent basis in terms of their farm business – taking on more of the financial risks and burdens of the farm. As such, the network was meant to ease the entrance and persistence of small-scale farmers in the community.

To the best of their abilities, Living Lands attempted to create closed-looped systems, either on-farm or within the community, such as utilizing resources that would otherwise be wasted. For instance, they raised pigs that were fed food scraps from the local food co-op and restaurants that would otherwise go into landfills. A few times a week, they would pick up food scraps from the local co-op, cafes, and restaurants and would toss a portion of the edible food to the pigs and the remainder

would be composted with leaves and yard waste collected and dropped off by the city. They would sell one or more of the pigs to defray the cost of the supplemental feed grain, and the rest they butchered and froze for their own consumption throughout the year. The manure from the pig pens would be added to the compost piles, ultimately being used to replenish the soil. This sort of innovation and creative utilization of community assets is emblematic of the livelihood ethic Living Lands instilled in its trainees.

After Living Land's initial year in 2007, the project expanded quickly, both in terms of the number of farms and farmers, and also in terms of wider community support. Two more farmers joined them the following year, and two more in their third season, so they eventually managed ten farm sites in 2010. The idea had spread not only throughout the county, but regionally at conferences attracting aspiring farmers from as far away as New York. Living Lands no longer had to seek out new land to farm as landowners started contacting Living Lands directly. These lands were listed on the online land bank Living Lands established for other aspiring farmers throughout the County to use. They were receiving so many requests from landowners that according to one of the founders, "we literally did not have enough time in the week to visit all the sites." The project was so widely supported in part because of its seemingly straightforward solution to land access: connecting aspiring farmers with willing and supportive landowners.

From a collective operation Living Lands transitioned into an umbrella organization of autonomous but networked farms (in 2012). Each farmer took on a landsite and was in charge of production decisions and farm management. They still

marketed food collectively through a CSA, restaurant sales, and farmers markets, but the day-to-day operation of each site was determined by each farm manager. They had weekly collective work-days where all farmers along with community volunteers and interns would help one of the farmers with a labor-intensive project. Interns were collectively trained, rotating from farm to farm to learn from each member, and to learn how to manage the particular ecologies of each farm site. As Tim described this change:

> We finally settled on a hybrid model. The non-profit would be separate from the farm businesses, focusing on its charitable mission of providing agricultural education to interns, supporting our farm-to-school program, hosting educational workshops for the general public, and supporting beginning farmers through providing access to land, markets, capital, and a social support network. Each farmer would be responsible for running their own business. This means that each person or partnership is responsible for their own financial well-being as well as deciding how much they work, when they work, and how they work. In exchange for access to land, capital, markets, and the social support provided by the non-profit, farmers would be responsible for hosting the interns one day a week and educating them on the workings of their particular farm. To maintain the inter-connection of the different farms we decided to have one day a week, Wednesdays, where all the farmers, interns, and any volunteers work together on one of the farm sites. This day rotates from site to site each week and keeps everybody together as well as provides a big work force for especially large projects - it's cross-pollination! Farmers are also expected to participate in the fundraising events throughout the year that are crucial to the financial well-being of Living Lands.

The benefit of this new model was that the organization was not overburdened with day-to-day farm management and could now focus on enhancing training opportunities while the daily operation of each farm-site was the responsibility of one of the farmers. Maisie explained in an interview, “we were all feeling burnt out moving from site to site, running the internship and the organization at the same time. We still benefited from the collective work days, but we didn’t have the burden of managing everything.”

At this same time, a community member inspired by the Living Lands vision after viewing a short documentary on it, offered a small one-acre parcel with a house near downtown Nevada City. This became the home base for farm interns – they ‘rented’ the site and house in exchange for work trade and food from the farm. The acre parcel became the home garden of interns and a kind of experimental site for intern projects – apiaries, different crop varieties, soil management strategies, and more. Interns spent about half their time at the home site and the other half working at the farm sites in the network.

A series of articles in the local newspaper publicized this new and exciting organization (see insert below of article from the local newspaper, *The Union*, profiling Living Lands). As Kellar’s article highlights, Living Lands’ training combined ecological production techniques, marketing, and peer-to-peer mentoring. They situated this training within the broader community through workshops, work days, and land arrangements. The new intern farm site, Maisie explained to me, “was when we were really able to ramp up the academic component of the internships, where we would have guest speakers from the community—anybody who was somebody. We had *the* permaculture person, *the* green roofing person, *the* bee keeping person. It became a really holistic experience in community education and sustainable living.” Importantly, their training was reflective of their broader ethos, as explained by Maisie at the end of the article, that prioritizes the non-monetary, social dimensions of farming, rather than the financial dimensions dictated by a formal rationality.

Living Lands Lends Helping Hand

By Liz Kellar
The Union, July 24, 2010

Making a living as a farmer, even in eco-friendly Nevada County, is an uphill battle. It's hard enough for an established grower to succeed. It's exponentially more difficult if you're just starting out. The farmers of Living Lands Agrarian Network have made it their mission to smooth the path for folks interested in local and sustainable agriculture, helping with training, support - even finding patches of land just crying out to be tilled.

"There are so many components," admits Tim Van Wagner, as he explains what, exactly, the non-profit endeavor is all about.

Simply put, Living Lands functions as an umbrella, non-profit organization under which the farmers operate autonomously. While the scope and the number of projects are ambitious, the over-arching goal is simple.

"We want to expand opportunities for new farmers," said Maisie Ganz, a Living Lands member who formed the Soil Sisters collective with Willow Hein. "We saw that it's difficult to get access to land, to capital, to infrastructure and support, in order to start a farm, especially as a young person getting into this vocation. We need as many young farmers as we can get."

And that's why Living Lands has chosen to host a farm tour Sunday where the curious can tour three different farm sites: Soil Sisters, Harmony Valley and Bluebird Farm.

"The point of the event is to get our concept more into the public eye," Ganz said. "It's a super-local movement - and in order to do that, we need people to think about supporting the local economy and local food."

Living Lands is not just about supporting local farmers; it's also about educating community members about growing their own food. Van Wagner teaches monthly workshops for home gardeners, covering topics pertinent to the season such as composting, weeding and harvesting. Leo Chapman has inaugurated an education program through local schools, making classroom visits and hosting a summer camp. Living Lands' next big event is a gourmet Dinner in the Field on Sept. 9, a locavore dinner on the farm where the fresh and tasty ingredients were grown, featuring Peter Selaya, owner of New Moon Cafe in Nevada City.

Land is a vital part of the equation for a new farmer, and Living Lands has created a land bank where it recruits landowners and facilitates leases with prospective farmers.

"The non-profit is establishing and maintaining those connections, and providing access," Van Wagner said. "We all contract with Living Lands to lease the land."

In return, farmers agree to host interns, participate and help run fundraising events, and commit to a work day once a week. The work days rotate among the farms, so that each farm gets a work party once a month. Farmers can do a cash lease if they don't want to participate in the network – but as Ganz commented, collaboration is the whole point of Living Lands.

"It's so little to give," Ganz said. "What we have is an abundance of energy and passion for what we're doing. It makes it easy to put together a work day, and have the rest of week to run our own farms and projects."

Training is another huge barrier to neophyte farmers, hence Living Lands' internships and journeyman program.

"Ninety percent of new farmers are not trained (to farm)," Ganz said. "There's a lack of confidence. We're learning everything," from cultivation to marketing.

An eight-month internship helps train future farmers in small-scale, ecological farming, including all elements of cultivation from seed to seed, as well as farm animal integration and management. The interns also have the opportunity to learn about and experience a variety of market models, including community-supported agriculture, farmers market and restaurant sales.

"By rotating among the different farms, it's like interning for five farms," Ganz said. "You get a real varied experience, a holistic experience."

After completion of the internship program, continued mentoring is available through the journeyman program, where budding new farmers can begin their own farm with guidance and support. The third major factor in assuring success is support - and Living Lands has that covered as well, with structured work days and community potlucks. Feeling isolated is a typical problem for new farmers, Hein and Ganz said.

"There's so much to do," Ganz said. "It's daunting."

"There's no time for creating community," Hein agreed.

"I see farming more as a lifestyle than as a job," Ganz explained. "We want to be really intentional about valuing the parts of farming that don't make money, like eating together ... and taking the time to actually enjoy what you're doing."

Leo described the great transformations that he saw in the farm interns and apprentices that came through the Living Lands program. “We created a bubble for people to grow. People became bigger than they thought they could be. I saw a lot of people come in lacking confidence or uncertain of their abilities, and leaving motivated and confident.” Indeed, the community economy and relationships that formed during the training provided a great deal of support as they transferred into their own farm operators or transitioned to other food endeavors. “People were attracted by the friendships and energy that formed at the training site,” Willow told me. This social support, for Willow and others, was one of the more important aspects of Living Lands network that was not just psychological assurance but also had real material benefits. On two different occasions, farmers in the Living Lands Agrarian Network had injuries mid-season, and were received help from the other farmers and volunteers in the network to make it through the season.

Living Lands inspired a host of food- and agriculture-related organizations – a cooperative kitchen, a gleaning organization, farm-to-school programs, a local food and farm conference – and helped establish five farmers’ markets in the area. They were part of a burgeoning movement for food sovereignty including the reclamation of locally adapted seeds. As they explained on their website,

> Living Lands is one of six “foundation farms” for the Sierra Seeds Cooperative, a local organization working to select and save locally adapted seed varieties for the Sierra Foothill region. Local seeds adapt to the climate and soil in which they are grown and are more likely to thrive and produce under extreme conditions. Therefore, our local seed bank increases our food security and breaks our dependence on buying seed from faraway places. We support local seeds because that is one of the foundations of the local food movement. Living Lands has provided seed for 35 varieties of vegetables, beans, and grains, and is currently the umbrella organization for the Cooperative as it grows into establishment.

Indeed, Living Lands had a tremendous impact on the cultural politics of the region, an issue I elaborate upon in the concluding chapter. In a short time, an agrarian community and identity was emerging in a location where one hadn't been present for generations. These supportive community relations became vital to the functioning of the organization and to the farmers involved in the network. Reducing the need for cash output, and in some cases exchanging produce at a more 'valued' amount for these services than market price, helped farmers create a livelihood on the land and within the community.

In this regard, Living Lands achieved a phenomenal level of success. In a short amount of time, it gained widespread community support and admiration. In a county that had seen fierce debates about the changing cultural and economic landscape (Walker and Fortmann 2004), Living Lands seemed to integrate and express latent values across the community. They were appreciated by the old timers who viewed the land as a 'working landscape' and envisioned an economy built around the utilization of natural resources (Walker 2007). Likewise, they appealed to the aesthetic sensibilities of many of the ex-urban new comers, who pushed for environmental conservation and the preservation of environmental amenities. Living Lands inspired a sense of community autonomy and resourcefulness – dare I say a step towards food sovereignty – values which were already latent in the community, but flourished in the organizational presence of Living Lands.

Importantly, the transformation of the landscape and local identities instigated by Living Lands hinged on the cultivation of an agrarian ethic *not only* amongst the farmers who participated in the farmer training programs, but in the community at

large – the landowners who provided land to the farmers, local residents who purchased food from the farmers, the children who engaged in farm-to-school programs facilitated by Living Lands, and the host of volunteers who bartered their time on the farm in exchange for produce. The importance of this project is not only in how this network inspired and supported a new generation of farmers back to the land and took a step towards building a regional, resilient food system, but was also in the everyday lived experience of the farmers that embodied another way of being in this world, a way of being that was not consumed by instrumental rationality and capitalist impulses of expansion and accumulation, but by one governed more by substantive rationalities – thereby enacting a post-capitalist politics (Gibson-Graham 2006). In a small, yet significant, way, these transformations in place-making and identity can be understood as a pre-figurative project – a project that enacts a future yet to be realized.

While probably the most explicitly community-oriented, Living Lands is not the only agrarian training network in California that stresses this community economy approach. Many grapple with the tension between the business and the social ethic of farming, as I described above. All, however, recognize that it takes a community to maintain a farm. While they may train farmers to utilize spreadsheets, calculate profit margins, and develop detailed business plans, all of the training centers recognize this is far from sufficient training for beginning farmers. They must have an ethic and disposition that bridges the economics, community, and the broader social and personal meanings of the farm. While some analysts see this as a retreat from politics, or worse, a form of neoliberal politics, I argue that beginning farmer politics

is located at the everyday practice of sustaining the farm, as a pre-figurative action – a point I develop in detail in the final chapter. It is also worth noting that large-scale agribusiness and community agriculture are not politically commensurate. Agribusiness has direct ties to national politics via their lobbies and disproportionate financial backing. This disproportionality on one hand constrains and shapes the options of political engagement for beginning farmers, and on the other limits their ability to enact national political change—a circumstance familiar to all small-scale farmers.

Conclusion

Living Lands and other farmer training networks in California may not live up to the revolutionary aspirations and transformative expectations of some scholars and activists, but this is no reason to dismiss or exclude these projects from analysis. While small in scale, they demonstrate the creative capacity of people to create at least small changes in their communities – more ecological farms, community gatherings, education, fresh produce, grains, pulses, meat, eggs, and more. Furthermore, the actors in this story, contrary to some depictions, are far from neoliberal subjects or paragons of a radical alternative. They straddle an economic and social world where small-scale farming is not valued – monetarily or culturally (though the latter is changing thanks to efforts of the local food movement) – and therein they adhere to a seemingly contradictory set of practices at once promoting the market and individual consumption of fresh produce (a commodification of the 'local') and at the same time creating networks of barter, sharing, and cooperation that align with Gibson-Graham's

notion of community economies (2006). This seeming contradiction, as I've explained in this chapter, is not necessary a contradiction at all, but instead is part and parcel of the livelihood ethic to which farmers adhere. On the margins of the agricultural economy, these farmers must rely on entrepreneurial practices as well as non-market avenues of social reproduction. Staying on the land and maintaining ecological integrity are the critical components, and the livelihood ethic guides farmers to engage in both processes of commodification and de-commodification on the farm. They at once are seeking new markets for farm products and likewise reducing external costs through on-farm self-provisioning or through community networks. What is critical, in my view, is the everyday work of reproducing the farm, the networks, and community relations that support a revaluing and rethinking of agriculture vis-à-vis the health and vibrancy of the region at large. These farms may only produce a small portion of the county's fruits, vegetables, meats and grains, but they have instigated a shift in consciousness. Once an afterthought, farming has now become a focal point around which debates on ecological and community health turn.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion: Locating the Politics of New Agrarians

Much has been made of local food politics – from early pronouncements of its transformative potential, its challenge to the agroindustrial food system, and egalitarian and sustainability features, to critiques of localization as defensive, classist, racially blind if not negligent, and neoliberal. Many questions have also been raised about the future of local foods, including whether the movement is significant in terms of transforming the food system. Analyses of local foods from this vantage point has traversed three overlapping phases: adulation, critique, and synthesis. While clearly an oversimplification, this characterization neatly sums up the debates around food system localization over the past decade. Early analysts interpreted local foods as a signal of Polanyi's double movement – an effort to re-embed agriculture in social and ecological relations (Kloppenburg and Hendricks 1996; Hinrichs 2000; Sage 2003; Sonnino 2007). Other analysts saw the local food movement as a direct challenge to the industrial/corporate food system, with a promise of delivery community food security, revitalizing small-scale farming, bolstering local economies, improving nutrition, and ecological sustainability (Feenstra 1997; Lyson 2004). Localization was often framed as the antithesis to globalization, where local food could bring local development, food security, and land stewardship.

Critical accounts questioned many of these premises, especially whether locality is inherently a more just or sustainable scale as well as the political/transformative potential of local food movements (Born and Purcell 2006; Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012). The critiques have pivoted around issues of

social justice (Winters 2003; Guthman 2007; Goodman and DuPuis 2005), inequalities (Hinrichs 2003; Allen 2010), race (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), and the extent to which local food movements represent an alternative to neoliberalism or in fact reproduce it. DuPuis, for instance, has described localism, and localist movements, as defensive, un-reflexive, elitist, and furthering neoliberalism (2003). Others critique some food advocates' obsession with consumer politics – i.e. 'Vote with Your Fork,' as Michael Pollan once argued (see Guthman 2007 and 2008; Alkon 2011 and 2014). These critical scholars have argued that the promotion of ethical consumption reinforces neoliberalism's emphasis on consumer choice and individualism and reasserts market relations in lieu of 'political' action. When taken on its own, the "buy local" discourse (or shop your politics) is clearly an abdication of more substantive change and a call for market-based activism.

For instance, the consumer-based discourse that appears as a neoliberal trope can be found within the young farmers movement, but from their vantage point, robust local markets have a distinctly immediate effect on their livelihood. Their livelihoods depend on local food advocates who are willing to pay a price premium for local produce. Yet, these same farmers will equally express the non-market relations they depend on for their livelihoods and politics. This holding of seemingly contradictory beliefs, I argue, is a matter of making a living both within and outside of market exchange. As such, to characterize the farmers movement as neoliberal, or simply entrepreneurial, is a mischaracterization. Re-agrarianization, the defining practice of the young farmer movement, is one critical facet of the local food movement more broadly and offers another vantage point on the politics and practices of the broader

movement. While local producers are featured widely on "buy local" campaigns, the extent to which these farmers espouse the local food movement agenda varies to some degree, but all benefit from the rising awareness and consumer support of local farms. New farmers navigate market and community economies to secure some meaning and security in their livelihood.

More to the point, to assume or expect farmers to fulfill an alternative existence outside of the market economy is far-fetched and unrealistic. Farmers must earn cash income and to do so requires going to market, and, yes, competing with other farmers to sell produce in some cases. But to elevate these aspects of their action above the many other actions is to give disproportionate weight to the instrumental logic of the market. This would be a fundamental mischaracterization of beginning farmers and their values, and the impacts they have on their communities. To characterize beginning farmers as market actors or as alternatives to it overlooks how farmers navigate both market and non-market strategies, how they enact a livelihood ethic premised on substantive over formal rationalities, and the small yet significant cultural and political transformations they inspire in their communities. Hetherington's ethnographic study of organic farmers reaches a similar conclusion. "Growers who are committed to sticking it out usually come to a more flexible understanding of their role and their relationship with neighbors, with nature and with the economy. These people have maintained their convictions to a certain point because they have been able to make imagination part of farming, to find practices that work, always informed by ethical principles but never blinded by them" (2005: 111). What is needed in the academic literature, then – and what I have attempted to

contribute through this dissertation – is ethnographic analysis that takes these farmers and their social, political, and ecological projects seriously. In order to glean the significance of such movements, scholars need to move beyond debates over whether or not small-scale farmers reproduce neoliberalism and attempt to understand the place-based politics and practices of beginning farmers. As Wilbur confers in his study of back-to-the-landers,

> Taking a non-judgmental perspective allows for contradictions and inconsistencies to reveal themselves without facing condemnation. This is particularly important for relating the dilemmas of ecologically-minded food producers, who are faced with the double challenge of environmental *and* economic sustainability. The radicalism of back-to-the-land is more akin to a lengthy experiment than a sudden revolution, but one that consciously seeks stable, replicable and enduring results. Through their ethical or ideological principles, as well as material practices, back-to-the-landers collectively inscribe certain values on the countryside, such as environmental sustainability, cooperative labor or voluntary simplicity, values that contrast with the consumptive, acquisitive and myopic attitudes that otherwise characterize rural development and industrial agriculture. Importantly, back-to-the-landers can act as test cases for strategies that weld these values to everyday practice, with scaled-up and collectivized variants enacted by AAFNS [Alternative Agri-Food Networks] (2013: 157).

Locating the Politics of Beginning Farmers

The analysis presented here starts with the proposition that there are no perfect politics. Perfect politics only exist in the academic imagination removed from political contact points. Beyond the rhetoric and discourse of political movements is the actual enactment of them; herein is where perhaps the most revealing aspects of political praxis occur. In practice, politics are contradictory, muddled, and at times include unsavory compromises, slippages, and of course corrections. Ignoring these contradictions either to glorify or vilify such movements may miss the more productive instances of everyday political work – the constitutive moments of

structuring, often in the mundane day-to-day activities and decisions where values, motivations, and aspirations meet competitive economic pressures, legal regulations, normative cultural values, ecological limits (in this case agronomic factors as well as physical exertion), and the spiritual and emotional thresholds of those involved.

The local food movement is composed of numerous and diverse actors including consumer advocates and 'foodies,' food coops, restaurants, school food and nutrition advocates, local business boosters, farmers market coordinators, farmers and farmworkers, among others. While all are part of the local food movement, each constituency brings a different perspective or angle, their own view of the meaning of local food. What is most often labeled neoliberal are the consumer and business booster components of the movement, the ones that focus on increasing local food consumption, often focusing on food choice – an individualized response to a social problem. This perspective can hue the entire movement as it is often the most visible component in farmers markets and local food advertising. But not all are so doggedly committed to this vision of social change. The pragmatic component of this impulse is one of reductive economics – increase the demand and the supply will follow – and from a farmer's perspective it meets the immediate objective of trying to fill their CSA or increase farmers market sales. But probing deeper, farmers and activists alike realize the more systemic conditions within the food system and the economy that favors cheap food, low wages, and a culture of convenience. Why not address the systemic problems, some critics ask? For farmers the everyday work of growing produce is all encompassing, and they view this as political in and of itself. Additionally, there is a pervasive view that the formal political arena is stacked against

them, and they would prefer placing their creative energies into the act of producing than in fighting a David vs. Goliath battle. They tend to be more focused on local politics, things that seem within their realm of tangible impact, rather than state or national politics – with even the former being preferable to the latter.

While some farmers may believe in a panacea of a consumer-driven shift towards local food systems, most realize there are definite limits to that vision. Many farmers with whom I spoke talk of local foods as having reached a saturation point, and lament that "all the low hanging fruit has been picked." Different organizations have emerged to try to bolster support for local foods, or innovate with new retailing organizations, such as regional food hubs. Such efforts are incremental, and may be simply palliative to the larger illness, but are they meaningless? Or worse, do they deepen market hegemony? Farmers don't see this as an either/or decision. Can a farmer support the effort to increase local food consumption and likewise understand and speak out against the structural problems of the food economy? Yes, and this is the adamant position of new agrarians. While the latter may be the primary causal determinant, the former presents itself with more immediacy. The harvest can't wait for new legislation, or the transformation of capitalist food system. Farmers' politics lie, in part, in the daily practice of reproducing the farm, and creating a space for small farms to exist. They embody another way of being in the world, attuned to ecological cycles and the long-term health of the farm and community. Furthermore, their vision is not isolated at the farm, but amplified and supported through farmer training centers and other agrarian networks.

A more nuanced understanding of the beginning farmers movement, and re-

agrarianization more generally, requires greater attention to the substantive rationalities and values that guide new agrarian practices. The transformation of rationalities and values has been a central theme of sociological theory from its inception. Classical social theorists were deeply concerned with the moral and ethical effects of capitalist modernity. While Weber most explicitly and thoroughly dealt with rationalities, Marx and Durkheim were equally concerned about how capitalist social relations reconfigured the desires, motivations, and values of individuals and classes. Durkheim discussed the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity in society and warned of the individualizing and isolating effects on people, namely anomie. Marx's concept of alienation describes how in capitalist production the workers become estranged from their labor, their species-being eroded as the product of their labor is usurped. Weber was concerned with the ever-increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of society, particularly the subordination of substantive rationalities and the predominance of formal rationalities, such that calculative self-interest would become the dominant ethic of capitalist modernity. All of them, in their own terms, believed that capitalism transformed social relations into atomized, individualistic, and competitive relations – mediated by monetary, calculative exchange.

The most explicit study of farming and rationality in the U.S. is Patrick Mooney's *My Own Boss: Class, Rationality and Family Farms* (1988). Mooney's study of family farmers in Wisconsin demonstrates how capital penetration into agriculture (i.e. new forms of contract farming) during the post WWII-era pushed farmers deeper into debt and contractual relations that instilled and reinforced farming premised on formal rationality. Ironically, he states, most family farmers express their

commitment to farming because they value being 'their own boss,' yet the transformation of the countryside and the increasing imperative of making farm decisions based on formal rationality decreased their control over production decisions.

Beginning farmers today express their desire to have autonomy in their work or have some level of control over their labor. Whereas the family farmers in Mooney's study were actively deciding to *stay* in agriculture premised on the substantive values of farm life despite the encroaching formal rationality imposed by capitalist relations, beginning farmers in California are choosing to *enter* into agriculture and actively construct these spaces of autonomy. Nevertheless, farmers in California are subject to the forces of formal rationality. Price pressures from supermarket organic produce and increasingly saturated local farmers markets place a constant pressure to produce more efficiently and cost effectively. In some instances, farmers have turned to sophisticated management technologies to calculate and determine rates of profits, crop selection, etc. Or, they mechanize portions of their operation to reduce labor. More often than not, they tweak their production process in small and innovative ways. Farming economically is guided by a different rationality than capitalist rationality. The former relies on creative and resourceful measures to sustain the farm, where the later relies on capital to increase productive capacity and to expand. However, even in these instances the relative balance of formal to substantive rationality is still weighted towards the latter. This is in part because overtly instrumental rationality, or capitalist ethos, is widely disdained amongst the sustainable farming community. The farming community, as such, upholds certain

social norms and while farmers are not ostracized for turning towards more ‘rationalized’ farming methods, beginning farmers are highly critical of those who do so.

At the 2013 EcoFarm conference, for example, I witnessed a heated discussion at a workshop about farm economics. The presenter was making a financial argument for disposable drip irrigation tape to reduce the need for startup capital. A few young farmers were arguing for more durable (but costlier) irrigation on ecological grounds. “We don’t want to perpetuate fossil fuel consumption and throw away culture,” the two farmers said. The presenter retorted that it was too risky to take on financial debt when starting a new farm operation. They agreed to disagree eventually, but the conversation highlighted this internal dynamic within the movement, with one eye towards the finances and economics of farming and the other towards its more ecological and social ideal. Farmers land somewhere along this continuum, but very few approach the extremes. At the business end, farmers become derided as conventional, and on the other ecological end, finances become hard to sustain. However, this balancing of the two has much to do with the idea of ‘communities of practice’ in which certain principles and rules of conduct are collectively negotiated and enforced within a profession. Beginning farmers negotiate these principles at conferences, Grange meetings, at farmers markets, and through informal discussions. These discussions regulate what is deemed socially acceptable amongst this community of practice.[23] This community check is a safeguard of sorts from employing

[23] Plastic row covers are another example of this. Some organic farmers utilize plastic row covers to control weeds and reduce labor costs, but this is largely derided by more ecologically-committed farmers that refer to the practice as “plasticulture”. In this production practice, rows are covered with plastic covering and then are disposed of each year.

what is deemed industrial, or mono-cultural techniques.

Van der Ploeg, describes a similar phenomenon occurring in western Europe, part of what he terms re-peasantization (2012). Under increasing competitive pressure from 'food empires,' Van der Ploeg argues that small-scale farmers are turning towards "peasant" forms of production. This includes developing farm-based resources, limiting external inputs and debt, shifting towards subsistent production, and creating direct market relations and other value added relationships (ibid). These practices are guided by a 'peasant principle' which overlaps substantively with what I refer to as the livelihood ethic. The peasant principle is future-oriented and is aimed at restoring and obtaining agency. It also connotes a particular ethical conduct and way of being in the world. As Van der Ploeg states,

> It is also about subjectivity – the peasant principle implies that particular worldviews and associated courses of action matter. It stresses the value and satisfaction of working with living nature, of being relatively independent, of craftsmanship and pride in what one has constructed. It also centres on confidence in one's own strengths and insights" (2008: 274).

Shifting focus to the values and rationalities of beginning farmers and local food advocates provides another lens onto the politics of local foods. Beginning farmers often evaluate their labor not solely in terms of its monetary return, but in the quality and independence it fosters. Monetary return is a concern of beginning farmers, but is often balanced or tempered by non-monetary rewards. Furthermore, beginning farmers depend on customers that share such values in craft and quality, such is emblematic in the CSA model. Ryan Galt discusses the tensions farmers face negotiating substantive rationality within the strictures of the formal economy (2011, 2013a, 2013b; Galt, Gray, and Hurley 2014). In his terms, CSA farmers operate within a moral economy that often acts as a double-edged sword (2013a). That is,

CSA farmers often self-exploit to return value to their CSA customers, essentially 'paying' a monetary if not emotional toll for customers allegiance. What his research highlights nicely is that adhering to a substantive rationality is often not enough for farmers to persist, and that formal rationality – or actions taken to increase profits – is essential to the survival of farms. This is exactly the balancing act that I discussed previously in terms of the livelihood ethic, and goes to show the difficulties of enacting alternative economic subjectivities.

What appears as a contradiction, thus, is reflective of the positionality of beginning farmers and their efforts to realize an alternative agriculture within the interstices of the corporate food system. While they are able to distantiate themselves to a degree, they can never fully detach from a marketized food system. Pratt and Leutchford (2009) describe this tension as being simultaneously outside and inside the circuits of the mainstream economy. Small-scale farmers, they explain, orient their actions toward economic closure, or relationships wherein value is not siphoned away from the community. Economic closure allows for autonomy and self-determination, whereas the open economy is one of extraction and exploitative relations (see also Netting 1994). Economic closure, they explain, is never fully realizable, but it orients action and the daily practices of farmers. What Pratt illustrates nicely is that small-scale farmers are constantly operating in these two realms of the economy, but always attempting to create more closure. In other words, their efforts may appear modest or even ambiguous at times, but that is a result of the liminal space they occupy and that their vision is set towards a long-term creation of autonomy and ecological and human sustenance. This is created through a culmination of small practices over years and

decades to create some space for closure (Netting 1994).

Enacting Food Sovereignty: Beginning Farmers and Prefigurative Politics

Beginning farmers, as I've conveyed throughout this dissertation, are enacting a prefigurative politics. They are engaged in the practice of building alternative food systems, as imperfect, messy and contradictory as that can be at times. This does not prevent some of the movement from engaging in other forms of politics, from more customary forms of protest, political campaigning, and legislative action. But the bedrock of local foods is the actual practice of raising food in more ecologically and socially embedded ways. Growing food is a challenge, and doing so in ecologically and financial sustainable ways is even more challenging, especially since the economic deck is stacked against it. Accordingly, for beginning farmers, the everyday practice of farming is political; developing soil fertility through self-generated and controlled resources is a form of circumventing the corporate food system and the power therein. Stuart Hall's analysis of Hippies takes a similar view[24],

> These 'possible solutions' are, of course, as yet utopian, for the societal context in which real solutions could be offered to real, emergent problems is precisely what, in the confrontation between the movement and the system, is being contested. Yet it is in Utopia that future possibilities are rehearsed…. It may be that all this is a utopian dream. But it is of such dreams that the revolutionary project is made. Trapped and surrounded by civil society as they are, breaking free of a tyranny as personal as that of the family and as world-historical as that of America as a global power, Hippies and their predecessors and successors cannot make actual, except fleetingly, these insubstantial possibilities. But, in

[24] Stuart Hall also challenges the argument that diminishes the counter culture movement because it was unable to sustain its form over time. "The 'meaning' of the Hippies for the movement is not defined by their capacity to survive intact as a separate formation, but precisely their capacity to flow back into and through the fluid forms which revolutionary activity continues to take in this pre-revolutionary ferment. But, despite their tendency to break up under the pressure of events, they 'project' for the sole movement some future forms even from within and through the negative distortions and experience of the present" (2007:166).

> their 'moment', they begin to suggest and anticipate it, to sketch it in, like some cast of hired actors perpetually 'on stage' in some theatre-in-the-round of the future (2007: 166-167).

As farmers explain, plants need to be watered and animals fed, and doing so in an ecologically and socially responsible manner requires planning, foresight, and persistence. Accordingly the daily decisions and practices of farmers culminate and are embodied in their produce and the aesthetic value of their fields. It serves as a reminder that agriculture plays a vital and central role in community life and is part of a longer-term process of revaluing ecological and human relationships. Hetherrington's ethnographic study of organic farmers in Nova Scotia, Canada, came to similar conclusion. He states, "[organic farmers are] insurgent architects…for whom blueprints are provisional drafts rather than orders and utopias are inspirational rather than straightjackets ... by purposefully blurring the line between discourse and practice in their political imaginings, by trying to overcome the apparent chasm between nature and society, growers constantly negotiate tensions that they can never fully resolve" (2006: 110).

The visible re-emergence of farms in Nevada County is no small matter in itself. The existence of small-scale, agroecological farmers counters the dominant narrative of capitalist modernity in which the smallholders are pushed from the land to join the industrial workforce. In this sense, beginning farmers and their prefigurative practices are reframing the classical agrarian question. As the food sovereignty movement articulates, beginning farmers are revaluing food and reframing narratives of modernity. They do so under the constraints of the corporate food regime and pervasive neoliberal culture. As McMichael claims,

> Instead of defending a world lost, transnational movements such as Via Campesina advocate a world to gain – a world beyond the catastrophe of the corporate market regime, in which agrarianism is revalued as central to social and ecological sustainability (2008: 210).

Similarly, beginning farmers in California envision another world of possibility and commit to a livelihood that at once upholds this vision and allows for autonomy and meaning in their lives. New agrarians create spaces of maneuver within the formal economy through networks of reciprocity, on-farm resourcefulness, and other community economic practices. Similar to transnational peasant movements, they reframe the "economic logic [that] fetishizes growth in quantitative terms, standardizing agriculture in input-output terms" (McMichael 2008: 214). Instead, beginning farmers, to appropriate McMichael, enact "a grounded ecological perspective [that] offers a range of values concerning the multifunctional and epistemic contributions of agriculture to humans and nature alike" (ibid).

An interview with Paul, the first-generation farmer who began his career as a farm apprentice with CASFS, exemplifies the epistemic alternative small-scale farming poses to capitalist agriculture when he stated, "I believe this farm has a right to exist." Here he was not only talking about his farm in particular, but small-scale ecological and ethical farms more broadly. While acknowledging this central tension that beginning farmers face of incommensurate values, he also sees it as a space or condition that inspires creativity and innovation. Speaking of the farm movement more broadly, he said,

> We're not going back to the past, we are very future thinking. We're not farming in the 1910s, we're looking to the future. You have to be forward thinking, both ecologically and market-wise.

Herein lies an important sentiment, one that expresses a kind of grounded

utopian thinking as Olin Wright would call it – that one's actions are geared towards a more sustainable and just future, despite the immediate challenges. That under conditions of "deprivation," as Van der Ploeg defines the peasant condition, new creative constellations emerge. Paul and the other small-scale farmers I interviewed enact a politics that seeks to subordinate capitalist valuation to substantive rationality – in spite of the fact that they live within a global capitalist system. In doing so, they are engaging in a politics that offers a grounded alternative to our current social and ecological crises. As Martinez Alier states,

> …[i]n other terms, imposing the logic of monetary valuation… is nothing more than an exercise in political power. Eliminating the spurious logic of monetary valuation, or rather relegating it to its proper place as just one more point of view, opens up a broad political space (2002:150).

The prefigurative politics of farming is likewise a reformulation of the agrarian question, shifting the focus from capital's transformation of farmers to the question of food as a window into the future of socio-ecological relations. As such, it is a movement that, in a modest way, expresses that another world is possible, a world in which the centrality of agriculture is reasserted as essential for reversing ecological and social crises of industrial agriculture, and reasserting the substantive rationalities central to meaningful livelihoods and community economies.

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