

Cultivating Agricultural Resistance: Alternative Farming as Slow Modernity

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary methods of food production in the United States have become undeniably destructive ecologically. Two of the strongest symbols of that destruction from corporate industrial agriculture are CAFOs (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) and monoculture crop production. This thesis seeks to find examples of producers refusing these methods as well as what motivates those producers to refuse, and what that refuse could mean politically. The project is grounded theoretically in the work of critical theorists, especially Herbert Marcuse, because the Frankfurt School's criticism of instrumental rationality and understanding of domination functions to elucidate the societal conditions that allow for agricultural (over)production to be swept up in problematic methods in the name of efficiency.

Part I starts by analyzing academic as well as popular discourses of CAFOs and the historical process of industrializing meat production and agriculture in the United States. Here both corporate capitalism and enlightenment rationality are indicted and Marcuse's theories are put to work to set up what is being refused. Part II uses examples of organic and local food to provide an understanding for how consumption centered refusals can be co-opted by corporate interest. Part III seeks out contemporary refusals that go past 'green consumerism' and foster a "new sensibility" that is grounded in a sense of place, ecological cooperation with nature, and refuses corporatism. In this new sensibility there is a direct rejection of the instrumental rationality, the profit motive and exploitation of nature.

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Introduction:

Food is a particularly powerful entry point for ecological resistance to the hegemonic structure of global neoliberal capitalism. It is by no means *necessarily* the best way to go about resistance, and certainly not the only way, but there is a certain amount of accessibility, visibility, and feasibility in options to resist global corporate industrial hyper-ecologies that have emerged in the corporate industrial food system. This is the case, in part, because people throughout the world are increasingly alienated from the production of their food.¹ Over the course of the twentieth century the number of farms and farmers declined in the global North, while production of agricultural commodities increased markedly leading to export-based agricultural policies.² A realization of problematic food production due to corporate controlled agribusiness becomes readily apparent for anyone who applies even a rudimentary inquisition to the ecological, health, and/or social justice implications of high-input, oil-dependent, export based, corporate controlled industrial agriculture.³

Critiques of the current food system, both popular and academic, have become ubiquitous, as Warren Belasco points out in his 2002 analysis of the emergence of “food studies.”⁴ Belasco reasons that an increase in the study of food is important because “there is in fact nothing more basic. Food is the first of the essentials of life, our biggest industry, our greatest export, and our most frequently indulged pleasure. Food means creativity and diversity”; he adds that “many of the world’s wars may be viewed as a

¹See: Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007); Carlo Petrini, *Terra Madre*, (White River Junction Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2009).

² William D. Schanbacher, *The Politics of Food: the Global Conflict Between Food Security and Food Sovereignty* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2010)

³Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*; Tony Weis, *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming* (Zed Books: New York, 2007).

⁴ Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (Routledge, New York: 2002) 4-5, 8-9.

series of colossal food fights.”⁵ Food, then, becomes a highly concentrated site of power relations⁶ where both domination and resistance can manifest through especially means of production as well as conception of food. In resisting hegemonic capitalism food can be a place to begin. Sometimes as a stand-alone cause, but often situated among other ecological criticisms or resistances, the politics of food provide ample opportunities for action and reflection, because after all, everyone has to eat, and as Wendell Berry has argued, “eating is an agricultural act.”⁷ Producers of agricultural goods have the capacity to opt out of the corporate controlled and ecologically destructive food system that is steeped in the instrumental rationality, and geared toward profit and high levels of production above other concerns.

This thesis utilizes critical theory, especially that of Frankfurt School and those influenced by it, to attempt to find a disambiguation of resistance, or of refusal, to global industrial capital between producers and/or movements that are attempting to foster a more ecologically and socially just food system. Marcuse and other critical theorists’ analyses of industrial capitalism, administered society, unfreedom, and instrumental rationality, allow for an elucidation of the irrationality found within the corporate industrial food system and its claim of profound rationality. Ben Agger’s theory of “fast capitalism,” which essentially describes omnipresence of working and the high tech domination in contemporary society to which “slow modernity” in the form of ecologically minded farming is a foil or resistance.⁸ To what extent each alternative

⁵ Ibid, 2, 4.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 92-93.

⁷ Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” in *Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002) 321.

⁸ Ben Agger, *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism: Cultures, Jobs, Families, Schools, Bodies* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Pub. 2004) 59-62.

farmer or agricultural movement supplies a negation of global corporate industrial capitalism will be central to the focus of the investigation. The cases examined consist of local points of resistance found in farmers that refuse to take part in the industrial food system, especially livestock farmers that utilize pasture instead of industrial grain for beef production.

The central question for this project is: What are the motivations of these farmers who have gone against the grain? And what can their reasoning tell us about larger trends within agriculture –alternative or otherwise— and past agriculture in a society organized among corporate administered capitalism? In some literature, especially agricultural or economic,⁹ alternative farming is often explained as producers choosing to sell to niche markets, and there is a distinct lack of theorization in terms of their motivations (political or otherwise). This understanding of farmers as *homo economicus* is thoroughly incomplete, and can, somewhat surprisingly, be found in academic literature outside of agronomy.¹⁰ In an attempt to understand the motivations of farmers that are producers within alternative agriculture, I have conducted interviews of farmers as well as investigated primary sources, such as publications or websites that can point to why and how farmers are opting out of the corporate industrial food system.

Methods

Activism and discourse relating to food in the United States has grown in the last decade, and along with it academic criticism which sees a lack of transformative potential in alternative food choices or movements. Movements like slow food, the organic

⁹ Peter Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, *The Locavore's Dilemma* (New York, PublicAffairs) 121.

¹⁰ Greg Sharzer, *No Local* (Winchester: UK, Zero Books, 2012), 10.

movement, local food, community food security, and food justice organizations mostly focus on creating markets and fostering conscious consumer choices that are more ‘environmentally friendly,’ ‘sustainable,’ ‘healthy,’ or more broadly ‘just.’ Supporting local economies, providing diverse diets to low-income communities, and growing food without the use of harmful inputs are all things that are helping people live better, but arguably, because of their reliance on market mechanisms and the reinforcement of individual responsibility these organizations can reify neoliberal subjectivities and hold little potential for transformative change. In addition the reliance on markets, it is sometimes charged that participants in the slow food, local, or other food related movements do not act as citizens, but rather only as part of a market. While these analyses can be accurate in their problematization of food movements, they often lack a theory of how to foster resistance or an idea of what one should do if they have serious problems with how the corporate industrial food system harmfully exploits labor, animals, and the environment.¹¹ This thesis seeks to use the theoretical groundwork laid by the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School to find instances of rejection of a corporate controlled food system in the form of farmers that are refusing industrial methods and interviewing them to discern how they view themselves, their clientele, and attempt to understand their motivations for opting out of normative agricultural practices such as the use of feedlots, pesticides, herbicides, etc. The decisions of these farmers challenge both societal and agricultural norms and could work to help others develop a critical awareness of the corporate industrial food system through increasing reflexive thought about food sourcing and its implications particularly in what Marcuse calls “one-

¹¹ Desrochers and Shimizu,12.

dimensional society”.¹² While there are mainstream movements that are co-opted or de-clawed/depoliticized, there may be signs of life in food politics. As Chad Lavin argues, desires for local or organic food can in many cases be a response to anxieties caused by globalized hegemonic neoliberalism.¹³

To find answers to these questions, this project highlights ‘alternative’ farmers in Southwest Virginia and the wider the mid-Atlantic. The primary method for sampling is the “snowball” method, which provided the researcher with the ability to access networks of farmers that may not be available at a single farmers’ market or through conventional advertising. Farmers’ markets in Southwest Virginia have yielded two subjects who were willing to be interviewed that are beef farmers who raise their cattle on pasture without the use of industrial feed and do not use harsh inputs on their pasture, the third beef farmer is certified organic and also raises his cattle on pasture, and the fourth is a young vegetable farmer who is co-managing a polycultural cooperative farm in Maryland. The fourth farmer was found through the National Family Farm Coalition, which is based out of Washington DC. The NFFC is one of just a few networks that focus on supporting food sovereignty in the US. There are two main groups as the research stands, those tied together by being grass fed beef farmers in southwest Virginia, and those tied together by being affiliated with the NFFC and supporters of food sovereignty.

Despite a good-faith recruiting effort the response rate was fairly low, and at the time of writing there have only been four successful subject interviews. Primary source information will be supplemented by information from farmer websites as well as any publications written by a farmer who fits the search criteria. This method was chosen

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 32

¹³ Chad Lavin, “The Year of Eating Politically” *Theory and Event* 12.2 (2009).

because the perspective of alternative farmers is sometimes overlooked in literature, as discussed earlier, and because finding out different actors' reasoning for rejection of industrial methods is important for assessing what this specific moment of rejection could mean for larger trends in contemporary society. Interviews are much more personal than a discourse analysis or survey, and helped to get a real sense of where each farmer saw him/herself in relation to the corporate industrial food system. Additionally, off the cuff conversations yielded more than a pre-programmed questionnaire possibly could. The questions that were asked included, but were not limited, to the following:

- What are your main products?
- How and where do you sell your produce and/or meat?
- Are you a first/second/third generation farmer?
- What motivated you to partake in agriculture?
Did you go to an agricultural college? If not, where and/or how did you learn to farm?
- What does the term “conventional agriculture” mean to you?
- How did you come to the decision to grow the way you do now? Were you ever a “conventional” farmer?
- Are you familiar with food sovereignty? If yes, what does food sovereignty look like?
- How would you describe agro-ecology?
- What is your relationship with the soil and land around your fields?
- Do you consider yourself an activist? If yes, in what capacity?
- What is your opinion on the Farm Bill?
- Do you own your land?
- Are you able to make your living by farming?
- What are the biggest challenges you've faced as a farmer? Do you believe they are different as someone who uses nonconventional methods?

- Do you see any discernible widespread change in US agriculture happening, starting, or brewing?
- Does your livestock eat anything other than hay and what is from the pasture?

Although responses to the questions varied, each farmer had unique reasoning for taking part in whatever ‘alternative’ method they chose and each had expressed ecological concerns. All felt that their operations contrasted with ‘conventional’ farming practices that focus almost entirely on high levels of production and profit without concern for ecological consequences. An in-depth analysis of the interviews will come later, after addressing the problems that ‘conventional’ agriculture produces in both crop and livestock production, and outlining the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

Part I consists of a description of how agriculture in the United States ended up dominated by industrial methods and administered by corporate interests. The main contention is that instrumental rationality, philosophical foundations from the enlightenment, as well as industrial capitalism all played crucial roles in the corporatization and concentration of farming practices that are widely considered to be ecologically harmful, inhumane, and threatening to health. Part II consists of possible resistances to corporate industrial capitalism and examines how previous resistances such as organic food have been subsumed and no longer serve as negations. Part III includes my findings based on the interviews broken into roughly two parts, the three grassfed beef farmers and the agro-ecologically minded food sovereignty farmer activist.

Part I: Instrumental Rationality and its Agricultural Implications: CAFOs as the Commanding Heights of Irrationality

The mainstream logics of production within corporate industrial agriculture are completely subsumed by a “universalizing claim to economic rationality,” that become “a convenient guise for an ideological framework that allows foundational assumptions to be cast outside the realm of debate or moral concern.”¹⁴ This criticism describes the problems of an agricultural system embedded in concepts of Western instrumental rationality, and resonates with criticisms of enlightenment logic of Critical Theory. This point is especially relevant when referencing contemporary animal agriculture.

The Enlightenment project, scientific objectivism, and instrumental rationality have produced a logic that has acted as bedrock for the rise of CAFOs. Studying life with the premise that everything can be reducible to either its constituent parts or to rationalized numbers allows for the treatment of creatures as machines, as simple systems of inputs and outputs. Additionally this allows for the surrounding environment, locally or regionally, to be seen as inorganic, measurable, predictable, and thus controllable as well as the perception that a CAFO can exist in space independent of its environment. CAFOs are the height of irrational rationality in the corporate industrial food system. They are deemed safe and sanitary, and yet are a breeding ground for superbugs and produce a large amount of biological pollution because there is no effective mechanism for processing so much manure in such a confined area. A convergence of modernist thought and industrial capitalism allowed for the dismantling of an agrarian agricultural system that could have been considered potentially sustainable, safe, and/or ethically sound. It is difficult to declare agriculture as a historical bastion of morality, but

¹⁴ Weis, 39.

abundant slaughter, waste, pollution, and mistreatment of all life are all rampant in contemporary agricultural practices that are celebrated by agricultural science, the food industry, and the government.¹⁵ These are the consequences of the eclipse of reason, according to Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as they write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself.”¹⁶ So finding a way to break through that alienation is crucial for a shift to occur.

CAFOs are often viewed as a post-modern problem, a relatively novel and unprecedented turn taken in the agricultural world. Yet, as I argue in this project, the idea that these abuses are unique to, or stem from the second half of the twentieth century fallaciously focuses on scale as opposed to edifices and logics that allow for the these injustices to erupt so quickly and so viciously. That is to say, it is perhaps more useful to look at the logic and understandings of the natural world which allow for CAFOs to arise, rather than seeing them as a disjuncture in some notion of an assumed linear progress of a romanticized and nostalgic view of agriculture and animal husbandry.

Some of the most prominent and widely recognized voices on food simply ignore or seldom mention underlying causes of a broken food system, and identify what should be seen as symptoms as the cause. For instance, in his book *Meat Market*, Erik Marcus mentions 1950 or “the 1950s” no less than thirteen times in the first twelve pages, but only mentions a date earlier than WWII once.¹⁷ In a New York Times article, Michael

¹⁵This type of language can be found in many USDA publications or on their website, see: <http://blogs.usda.gov/tag/feed-the-future/>. Monsanto’s “Feeding the World,” marketing scheme is visible on their website as well as in the press, see: <http://www.monsanto.com/improvingagriculture/Pages/feeding-the-world.aspx#.UYkXp5VLH8s>.

¹⁶Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

¹⁷Erik Marcus, *Meat Market: Animals, Ethics, and Money* (Boston: Brio Press, 2005),

Pollan points to farm subsidies (specifically corn) as the major culprit in the American food system today.¹⁸ Eric Schlosser, as is evident in the title of *Fast Food Nation* sees the fast food industry as perhaps the greatest driving force in factory farming. While in principle their analyses can be mostly accurate, and their advice is certainly worth taking, it is in many ways, dangerous to stop with addressing symptoms, without looking toward the root cause of something so horrific as the contemporary CAFO. For example, Marcus waits to analyze pre-WWII history in *Appendix H* of his book. Drawing from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* to establish a timeline of a rise and fall labor standards within the meatpacking industry and butcher shops, which peaked in the 1950s in both high wages and worker safety, but fell into steep decline when large production companies decided to "process sides of beef directly at the slaughterhouse... ..do away with the local butcher," and maximize savings from "the use of assembly lines to maximize worker efficiency."¹⁹ The problem here, once again, is not that Marcus is wrong in this assessment, but rather tragically incomplete. His story starts with *The Jungle*, and neglects to inform the reader that the process he describes took place in the late 1800s on a massive scale. As William Cronon demonstrates, the industrial revolution as a whole, specifically the development of railways to western pastures and, as this project argues, the existential faiths underlying it are endemic to the fluctuations in worker and animal treatment he describes. Without understanding, or even interacting with, what allows for the creation of the problems that Sinclair wrote about, there is no foundation for comprehending the

1-12. to precariously claim that "the farms of the 1950s looked scarcely different from how they looked in the 1800s.

¹⁸Pollan, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/19/opinion/when-a-crop-becomes-king.html?pagewanted=3&src=pm>

¹⁹Marcus, 224

problems that Marcus himself is decrying, which are mirroring the historical happenings that he leaves out. Of course the exact conditions of agricultural industries separated by a century not identical, but there are patterns and logics that flow through both.

Concentrating large numbers of animals together for slaughter began as an industry practice long before the EPA's naming of CAFOs in the 1960s. New technologies allowed for this to occur, including railroads, and later refrigeration methods along with other preservation techniques. Situated at a nodal intersection between the eastern and western United States, Chicago in the nineteenth century became the primary destination for American cattle from the western frontier to be sold. Prior to extension of the railroad system, massive cattle drives haphazardly brought herds through paved city streets, resulting in losses that kept ranchers from bringing their cattle to the city. Railways not only gave ranchers the ability to access the larger market of Chicago, but also to use Chicago as a hub to then transport the live cattle across the country. The advancement of rail transportation led directly to the creation of feedlots and stockyards just outside of the city. This alleviated concern about driving cattle through the city, and a majority of western beef came to be manufactured in Chicago.²⁰ Feedlots were established around the slaughterhouses so the cattle could keep on weight while awaiting slaughter. At first feedlots were hardly more than a practical business necessity, ensuring that the animals did not starve while awaiting their slaughter and packing, but as early as 1860 the stockyard itself became a monopolizing factor within the meat industry, specifically the Union Stockyard and Transit Company of Chicago. Built by several of Chicago's largest rail-road companies in conjunction with meat packers, the Union

²⁰ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 208-209.

Stockyard eventually grew to one hundred acres and boasted the ability to handle “21,000 head of cattle, 75,000 hogs, 22,000 sheep, and 200 horses, all at the same time.”²¹ By the 1870s another new technology came onto the scene and revolutionized the meat trade: ice, and specifically refrigerated rail cars. Previously the meat industry was limited to markets relatively close to the place of slaughter, shipped mostly living animals (which was more costly than shipping meat alone), and harvested most frequently in late fall and through the winter. Soon, beef that was slaughtered and dressed in Chicago made its way all around the east coast and drove monopolization of the market. Chicago meat producers were prepared to sell their meat below the cost of production to monopolize the market and put pressure on local butchers to choose between either selling Chicago meats at the counters, or face going out of business. In addition, the ability to ship and sell already butchered beef or pork allowed for a level of abstract commodification that could not be applied to living cows whose weight and quality varied immensely.²² Despite consumer skepticism toward meat that was slaughtered thousands of miles away, Chicago's massive meat packers were able to sell and ship their dressed meat at such a low price that consumers were inclined to at least try it. Here it can be seen that the seeds of factory meat farming were sown well before the middle of the twentieth century, and many of the problems associated with CAFOs were found in the meat packing districts of Chicago around the turn of the century.

Some of the most egregious results of industrial agriculture can be found in the late nineteenth century meat packing industry. Although it was not necessarily “factory farming,” because it was not where the animals were born and bred, the groundwork for

²¹Ibid, 210.

²²Ibid, 233-237.

confining a massive number of animals in small crowded spaces was laid. Environmental issues associated with contemporary CAFOs abounded in Chicago's meat packing districts. Upton Sinclair described Chicago's Bubbly Creek in 1906 as “a great open sewer a hundred or two feet wide” where concoctions of animal waste and chemicals used to treat meat went through “all sorts of strange transformations.”²³ This is similar to how waste lagoons surrounding contemporary pig farms are described. The domination of the western frontier in America was another historical action that allowed for this to take place, for the death of the American bison opened the prairie for domination by cattle ranchers. Through the 1870s and 1880s urban markets for buffalo hide sent hunters across the plains in waves, and perceived abundance led to an absurd level of killing by not only hunters, but also people identifying as 'sportsmen' shooting buffalo from moving trains, and leaving carcasses to rot. “The very market forces that had led hunters to nearly exterminate the species now encouraged other people to find a suitable replacement so that the rich fertility of the western grasslands should not go to waste.”²⁴ Without the railway system the buffalo's prairie could not have been cleared so hastily and so completely, nor could it have been so quickly occupied by longhorn cattle. These developments were distinctly modern, and relied on both the enlightenment rationality and industrial society. Without the technological advancements of rail and refrigeration, the concentration of production could not have occurred. Similarly, without a society of “manifest destiny” driven to dominate, exploit, and consume everything from the landscape that could be, the tragic industries may never have been established.

²³ Ibid, 252.

²⁴ Ibid, 218.

The crucial point to recognize here is that not only were the foundations of factory farming and CAFOs laid well before the twentieth century, but many of the foundational technologies and mentalities that not only allowed for, but encouraged their creation came to fruition well before the EPA first designated the first Confined Animal Feeding Operation. Baseline technologies and mentalities of industrial agriculture created an environment that called for innovations like the use of antibiotics, or policies like the farm bill. Antibiotics that quelled the spread of disease in high volume farms did not alone create the motivation for high volume farms, and neither did corn subsidies allowing for extremely cheap feed. These factors worked synergistically throughout the twentieth century to increase the scale of slaughter, production, suffering, and corporate farm practices, but did not change American agribusiness in itself. It takes the creation of “agronomy” or “agribusiness” itself to foster practices like the overuse of hormones and antibiotics or to have the kind of political sway to affect government policy and supply chains as they do now. Enlightenment and industrial logics permeated the farm. As is common with the business sector, higher production and lower cost became the ends that could be justified by any means. Attempts to overcome natural features of plants and animals were, and still are, widespread; plants were being engineered to grow tougher and more uniform. As exemplified in one agricultural journal “machines are not made to harvest crops; in reality, crops must be designed to be harvested by the machine.”²⁵ The same could be shown in animal production as livestock is consistently bred or genetically modified in attempts for it to grow faster. This can be understood as the process of instrumentalizing animal life, and as Horkheimer explains, “according to

²⁵Paul Roberts, *The End of Food*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 20-22.

formalized reason... ..cruelty [and] oppression are not bad in themselves,”²⁶ and distrusting a scientific method that leads to higher levels of production is essentially a “failure of nerve.”²⁷ Contemporary industry’s relationship with nature functions in similar ways. Just as animals are dominated “nature is today more than ever conceived as a mere tool of man. It is the main object of total exploitation that has no aim set by reason, and therefore has no limit.”²⁸ This is very apparent in today’s corporate industrial agriculture as Weis notes, capitalism and industrialization in the late nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century changed the essence of farming and by utilizing the “rising use of synthetic fertilizers, agrochemicals, enhanced seed varieties, farm machinery, concentrated feedstuffs, animal antibiotics and hormones, and the expansion of irrigation system allowed industrial techniques to override previous ecological constraints.”²⁹ Domination of nature became not only possible, but under market logic, necessary for the common good.

Agriculture’s precarious relationship with investment and political economy lays out a self-reinforcing problem for farmers, especially for workers and owners of small to medium sized farms. Since the industrial revolution any farming operation above the level of sustenance requires a substantial capital investment in land and equipment. Movement away from agrarianism in the United States led to fewer people growing their own food, and more people farming for profit. From a Marxist perspective, this is the point at which food becomes positioned as a commodity. The input of agriculture into the commodity market resulted in a seemingly irreversible drive toward increasing

²⁶ Horkheimer, 22.

²⁷ Ibid, 40.

²⁸ Ibid, 74

²⁹ Weis, 29.

production each quarter and year, because as new inputs, technologies, or tools for production come onto market the costs of production increases. As the cost of production increases, farmers produce more as an attempt to cover the new input costs.

Unfortunately, when a majority of farms in the industry attain the new technology and attempt to out-produce themselves each year, the market is flooded with product and thus prices go down. While this can manifest as price decreases for the consumer, it can ultimately result in the farmer producing more per acre, and making less per acre, or per animal. The average farmer's response to the sinking costs of their product is to try and produce even more to counter-act the price drop, creating an inescapable (due to debt because of land and equipment) vicious cycle that Horkheimer saw as part of not only agriculture, but western society as a whole when he claimed "the more devices we invent for dominating nature, the more we must serve them if we are to survive."³⁰ This process has been described as the "technology treadmill" and applies to plant production as well animal products. Unlike many industries, in many cases due to market saturation and/or debt obligations agricultural producers cannot reduce supply in an attempt to increase demand.³¹ There are many results from this phenomenon that can have unforeseen consequences. While big agriculture rakes in record profits along with record production, the mechanization and emphasis on speed (especially in meat processing) created immense danger for laborers who are work along the slaughterhouse's disassembly line.³²

This results in a requirement for farming operations to increase scale to keep up with the

³⁰ Horkheimer, 66.

³¹ Thomas A. Lyson, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community* (Lebanon, University Press of New England, 2004), 26.

³² Katy Mamen, "Current Issues and Trends connected to the Vivid Picture Goals for a Sustainable Food System," Vivid Picture Project 2004, http://www.vividpicture.net/documents/4_Current_Trends_and_Bkgd_Info.pdf.

lower profit per cow, or bushel of corn. Out of the need to make enough profit to survive or stave off foreclosure, even on family farms agrarian ideals can give way to an industrial ethos that has devastating costs for the farmer, consumer, and especially for the animal.

Currently, there is a deep concentration corporate control of cattle by the meatpacking industry, as highlighted by Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation*, “the top four meatpacking firms –Conagra, IBP, Excel, and National Beef slaughter 84% of the nation’s cattle.”³³ Additionally those four own roughly twenty percent of live cattle in the United States, and can thus flood the market anytime prices go up, effectively neutralizing bargaining power of independent ranchers. This is made possible because cattle trading is not subject to public information laws, so the real price of exchange between wealthy owners of the largest ranches and the meat-packers are totally secret.³⁴ Thirteen slaughter houses produce a majority of American meat. Such concentration is an invitation for diseases such as e-coli and mad cow disease.³⁵ Schlosser’s ultimate conclusion that a major influence on the concentration of power in meat packing is the fast food industry: uniformity, conformity, and cheapness (the same principles that made fast food successful to consumers) were insisted upon by first McDonalds, and then the smaller fast food chains until the entire American meat production system was revolutionized with the emphasis on mass production, efficiency, and concentrated centralized control. The interconnection between big money manufacturers and the food

³³ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 137-138.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 138.

³⁵ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009), 224.

(over)production system (sometimes by exploited farmers, sometimes by other big money firms) is essential for the current industrial food system to exist as it is today.

While this has all been documented, simply blaming corporations for CAFOs is a bit too simplistic. As examined by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization contemporary confinement methods for raising animals became standard practice by the 1960s, before large corporate owned farms became the norm.³⁶ In addition, corporate owned farms are not nearly as ubiquitous outside of the United States. While scale of farming operations has increased outside the US in the twentieth century it has happened with individually owned large scale farming operations. In fact, the introduction of highly concentrated chicken farming came in the early twentieth century from a, Celia Steele, a Delaware egg family farmer, decided to try raising adolescent chickens to sell for meat. She first tried raising 500 chickens, then 1,000, by 1926 10,000, and by 1935 the Steele family farms could raise 250,000 broiler chickens in a season.³⁷ In 1964 (a full 4 years before McDonalds opened its 1000th restaurant) factory farming and commodification of animals was under scrutiny by Ruth Harrison, in *Animal Machines*, who saw the first big step against healthful and ethical animal farming in “divorcing animals from the soil,” and the second as enclosure, taking away fresh air, the sun, rain, and the ability to exercise.³⁸ Concentration of corporate power fostered the emergence of CAFOs and the exploitation that comes with them, but corporatism did not act in a vacuum. Larger edifices within society such as rampant commodification, consumerism, industrialization, and the drive to violently dominate all forms of life

³⁶UNFAO Readings in Ethics: “Animal Welfare and the intensification of animal production: An alternative interpretation,” 6.

³⁷Jonathan Foer, *Eating Animals* 105.

³⁸Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 113-114.

allowed for and set the foundation for the creation of CAFOs.

That is not to say that concentration of wealth or production in the hands of a few does not contribute to exploitation of both human and non-human animals. In a critique of industrial agriculture in California Carey McWilliams observes

Today, “farming,” in its accepted sense can hardly be said to exist in the State. The land is operated by processes which are essentially industrial in character, the importance of finance... ..steadily increased as more and more emphasis has been placed on financial control; the “farm hand,” celebrated in our American folklore has been supplanted by an agricultural proletariat indistinguishable from our industrial proletariat; ownership is represented not by physical possession of the land, but by ownership of corporate stock; farm labour, no longer pastoral in character, punches the clock, works at piece or hourly wage rates, and lives in a shack or company barracks and lacks all contact with the real owners of the farm factory on which it is employed.”³⁹

“Today” for McWilliams was 1935. Until his book was published, the use of the term factory in regards to farming generally was not negative or disparaging, but rather was seen in agribusiness or agricultural economy journals as a sign of progress towards greater efficiency.⁴⁰ Greater efficiency often leads to greater exploitation, and severity of worker exploitation can be seen in contemporary political debate where there is a large demand for migrant labor to handle farming and meat processing. Immigrant labor has become integral at many CAFOs and factory farms because conditions are so bad and pay so low that many citizens, even those unemployed, refuse to work there. Ironically, immigrants have been vilified and legislated against in xenophobic communities, which has resulting some of these workers are literally walking off the field due to anti-immigration laws in states like Alabama and Arizona, and produce was left rotting on the

³⁹Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 48.

⁴⁰Chad Lavin, “Factory Farms in a Consumer Society” *American Studies*, Vol 50, ½ 2009, 72.

vines.⁴¹ The very consumers that are benefiting (even if very superficially) from the exploitation of immigrant labor harbor such bellicosity toward the immigrants that they are driven away by discrimination. The treatment of both humans and non-human animals are inextricably linked.⁴²

As Bob Torres argues in *Making a Killing*, animals simultaneously be laborers, be exploited, become alienated from each-other as well as their own bodily processes, and be commodified.⁴³ An understanding the interconnected struggles of alienated life is necessary for any re-organization of society. In the words of Frank Reese, a radical turkey farmer, “It's possible that you can't afford to care, but it's certain you can't afford not to care.”⁴⁴ How then, can we conceptualize factory farms in an industrial capitalist consumer society along with the constant forgetting or willful blindness of them, and how can they be fought against? An easy answer may not be possible, but Herbert Marcuse's analysis of industrial society can point in the right direction.

Immanent Critique

Marcuse's theory will be useful to identify some of the diffuse and hidden mechanisms within society that lead to exploitation of all members of society as well as the apparent apathy toward the each other's exploitation. For Marcuse, one probable result for a society organized by rational capitalist principles is oppression through reason, “the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the façade of objective

⁴¹ Center for American Progress Immigration Team, “Top 10 Reasons Alabama's New Immigration Law Is a Disaster for Agriculture,” Center For American Progress 2011, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/alabama_agriculture.html.

⁴² Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

⁴³ Bob Torres, *Making a Killing* (Oakland CA: AK Press, 2008) 40-44.

⁴⁴ Frank Reese, quoted in Foer *Eating Animals*, Foer, 210.

rationality.”⁴⁵ Domination of society by the industrial revolution led to a technological rationality, which, along with technological, progress creates an immense amount of production in society that allows for new liberties and comforts, but essentially creates “unfreedom.” To draw from an earlier example, railroads and refrigeration created the opportunity for freer movement of people and goods, but also played a major role in destroying the western frontier and actually limited choice by providing an infrastructure for large-scale meat-packers to dominate the market. Pointing to technicization and mass production, Marcuse notes “the novel feature is the overwhelming rationality in this irrational enterprise and the depth of the reconditioning which shapes the instinctual drives and aspirations of the individuals and obscures the difference between true and false consciousness.”⁴⁶ Collective and individual interests become recklessly separated as the false consciousness and alienation permeate modern society. Implications for agriculture’s producers manifest as the drive to produce as much as possible at all costs and for consumers to consume the product with the lowest cost and least effort required, both disregarding ecological implications.

Out of the notion of false consciousness, Marcuse allows for an examination of subversive control of the populace from not only government, but also corporate industry, which requires a consumerist society to keep producing and progressing at absurdly high levels. “Late industrial society increased rather than reduced parasitical and alienated functions (for the society as a whole...).”⁴⁷ People are increasingly alienated from others, and increasingly disengaged from the lives or struggles of others. This is true in modern capitalist industry and requires not only mass production, but also mass

⁴⁵Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 32.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid, 49.

consumption. Capitalist industry thus creates false needs through advertisements, public relations, sponsorships, planned obsolescence, philanthropy, and much more, to manipulate consumer citizens to buy whatever it is they are peddling. One-dimensional society drives consumerism, and the “one-dimensional Man,” embraces false needs and within the liberal framework finds freedom in consumer choice, and fulfillment in leisure time along with material wealth. This is ultimately “unfreedom.” According to Marcuse, to conquer one-dimensionality, one needs to engage in “negative” thought, where the “ought to be” or other better realities should be imagined, and theorized.

The consequences of high input industrial agriculture in society are numerous, but what this means is that the modern subject often opts for food that is the most convenient and requires the least work. Citizens are less likely to plant even modest gardens, or even cook for themselves, because family gardens are not a commodity, and neither is cooking for one’s family, as Marx tells us, a product of human labor can exist without exchange value, and thus is not a commodity.⁴⁸ When a family member makes dinner the product of that labor is not a commodity and the food produced is not a commodity, even though one could go out and buy that same meal at a restaurant, and it would be a commodity. Moreover, when someone eats food from which he/she is alienated, or accepts that food from the capitalist industrial food system is the only food available, and eats it because it is easier, cheaper, or more convenient, we find the makings of an alienated meal. The alienation of the public at large from the industrial food system is neither completely a product of consumerism, nor simply a happenstance of industrial society. Although Marcuse shows how an illusion of choice becomes a method of control, there is also

⁴⁸Karl Marx, “Capital Volume One,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 1978. 305-306.

direct conscious effort by an oligarchical industry to supersede that could even come close to being understood as democratic authority. According to a Pew Commission report, “we found significant influence by the industry at every turn; in academic research, agriculture policy development, government regulation and enforcement...”⁴⁹ The list goes on. The level of detachment on the part of the average citizen toward the food production system is so severe that many people still believe in the image of the Jeffersonian agrarian individualist and cowboy as food producers, but worse still is that people actively work to believe it. One-dimensional citizens have become so attached to a contrived ethos of freedom, tied to an illusion of consumption choices between the different sameness of Wendy's and McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Dominos that they believe it to be the epitome of modern freedom and they refuse to acknowledge the severe exploitation of the animals, farmers, and environment that go into making that food system.

The self-blinding is at once a cause and symptom of these injustices. As Dana Harrison astutely points out, “If one person is unkind to an animal it is considered to be cruelty, but when a lot of people are unkind to a lot of animals, especially in the name of commerce, the cruelty is condoned, and once large sums of money are at stake, will be defended to the last by otherwise intelligent people.”⁵⁰ This aphorism is easily extrapolated to the agricultural pollutants, including both runoff and feces. False consciousness acts almost like a vortex where people are taken in, and once inside they fight to stay there. Despite the naivety of some alluded to above, there are others who know about or participate in the relentless merciless slaughter and exploitation of

⁴⁹Pew Commission, quoted in Jonathan Foer's *Eating Animals* p. 87.

⁵⁰Harrison, *Animal Machines*, 151.

animals. Jacques Derrida states that

Such subjection... ..can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term... ..No one can deny seriously or for very long that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or hide it from themselves in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence.⁵¹

Of course there are others who learn about the glorified animal death camps that supply much of the developed world with its meat and change themselves right away, but for a system so entrenched in contemporary society, how can this be changed?

One must interrogate the logic, firmly grounded in a capitalist framework of viewing the natural world, which allows for animals to be viewed as commodities. From this perspective, CAFOs are a new trend, a concentration of energy, or a success, of an old logic. One may ask then, as this project has attempted to, if CAFOs are a perversion of old agricultural techniques, or simply a success of their aspirations and logic, facilitated by the technology to finally allow for an exponential increase in profit from animal based farms? Again, this is not to say that CAFOs somehow represent a normalcy and that they should be viewed begrudgingly as the “next step” in a set of practices that humans have been living with for thousands of years. In fact, quite the opposite is true. CAFOs are not the only problem. If we remove CAFOs from large scale agriculture, would all of the problems be solved? An overemphasis on the CAFO as a deviation from agricultural thought and practices allows for this risk. If McDonald's does indeed phase out gestation crates, which they claimed they are planning to do in early 2012, while it is a small success, it is not the elimination of the problem. Getting rid of gestation crates, or allowing “free range” chickens to live just as cramped as before, but roaming around

⁵¹Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” Marie-Louise Mallet Trans. David Wills (NY: Fordham University Press, 2008) 25-26.

concrete rather than in cages, does not address the logic which allows these practices to happen in the first place.

Investigations into the practices of CAFOs are necessary. Yet, viewing CAFOs as a decontextualized phenomenon often allows for a short-sighted focus on the manifestation of a problem, rather than a focus on the problem itself. Resisting the imbedded logics and practices at CAFOs can be politically satiating. Yet, CAFOs can become an excuse to avoid engaging with deeper questions about how they have arrived, through an increase in scale, from older, more deeply entrenched, logics of agricultural production. It is in this way that this section has attempted to draw attention to the underlying assumptions and logics of capitalism and modernity, which should be viewed through a Marcusean frame of analysis to better understand modern relationships with food and agricultural practices, led to the existence of the CAFO. Without this perspective, simply easing the numbers of animals in CAFOs, or tightening standards for animal welfare will not address the ultimate concern. Instead, it is vital to draw attention to the way in which CAFOs have long been imagined, and only recently been willed into their current form through economies of scale and alienation between society and its food system.

Agriculture in the United States today has become dominated by large scale production. While in 1885 a majority of United States citizens farmed, 100 years later less than 3% worked the earth.⁵² This is due in no small part to industrial farming, and technological advances in agriculture. The processes of specialization, technicization, and rationalization within farming lead to the explosion of an food industry in which production takes place off of the farm. This includes companies that develop genetically

⁵² Paul, Roberts, *The End of Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 23.

modified organisms (GMOs), food manufacturers, large scale meatpacking, and chemical companies. The specialization of agribusiness further alienates the average citizen within the United States from his/her food and its production. Therefore the one-dimensional citizen is no longer intimately connected with the “true need” of sustenance. False needs are those “which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression,”⁵³ and in relation to the food industry these false needs are “convenient” food, such as fast or pre-packed ready to eat foods, “cheap” foods (that have costs greater than their exchange value) or “healthy” foods (as defined by the USDA that is influenced by the food industry). Here we find a food “unfreedom.” In the post-industrial society many people are driven by false need of obtaining a alienating underpaid low unstable job that results in leisure time that “thrives in advanced industrial society, but it is unfree to the extent to which it is administered by business and politics.”⁵⁴

What are some possible solutions to this dilemma? If simply erasing the CAFO as it stands is not enough, what is to be done? Are we locked into a nihilistic battle with a trajectory of thoughts and practices that cannot be overcome? One solution that is often advocated is “smart consumerism.” Over the last decade there has been an increase in the participation of movements like Slow Food, Snout to Tail, Locavore, or “voting with your fork.” These are, of course, all positive movements in many ways, but are very interesting societal shifts, which still often work within a framework of capitalism. Yet, as this thesis shows, while potentially helpful, “smart” or “green” consumerism is not a satisfactory solution to an edifice within society that have been entrenched for centuries. Furthermore, this type of “solution,” which is firmly based in the logics of markets, fails

⁵³ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4-5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

to draw attention to underlying logics of the human/nature divide which allow animals to be viewed as sources of food, through profit. That is to say, land and animals did not become viewed as commodities with the rise of the first CAFOs or even industrial agriculture. It would be erroneous and naïve to characterize animal husbandry and agriculture before the twentieth century as necessarily clean, pure, ethical, or that animals were not commodified before.

CAFOs provide the contemporary height of instrumental rationality in animal agriculture, the current pinnacle of instrumental rationality in vegetable growing is the GMO monoculture. Modern industrial food production is mostly caught up within monoculture and, in the United States, additionally inundated with GMOs. The introduction of monocultures, particularly as seen in contemporary practices of agricultural production, is often rationalized through discourses of efficiency and productivity. For example, this language of efficiency can be seen in the dominant views regarding GMOs which posit that “innovations through biotechnology enable agricultural producers to reduce production costs and/or enhance product quality for livestock and crop commodities such as milk and maize.”⁵⁵ The creation of the “ideal” or uniform piece of produce not only makes it easier to be packaged and sold, but makes it able to be mass-produced, as if it were a manufactured product. Yet, these practices should not be viewed through a framework of technological rationality that places its value increased productivity at nature’s cost. Arguments claiming increased productivity can be illusory, as Vandana Shiva argues:

⁵⁵ Kristin Kisel, David Buschena, and Vincent Smith “Consumer Acceptance and Labeling of GMOs in Food Products: a Study of Fluid Milk Demand” In *Consumer Acceptance of Genetically Modified Foods*. eds. R.E. Evanson and V. Santaniello (Wallingford, UK: CABI Publishing, 2004), 9.

Monocultures are in fact a source of scarcity and poverty, both because they destroy diversity and alternatives and also because they destroy decentralized control on production and consumption systems.⁵⁶

Thus, genetic monoculture provides an important example for an analysis of scarcity and poverty. Rather than a method for yielding more products in a shorter time, monocultures should be viewed as mechanisms of poverty, not production.

Moreover, this emphasis on efficient, concentrated, and cheap food in reality ends up being very expensive in a myriad of ways. The irrationality of rational thought is manifested in non-health and non-safety. Heavily processed foods are not nutritious, and corn or soy being in virtually everything compromises a diverse diet, which is essential to health. Uniformity and cheapness inevitably result in declines in quality of taste and nutritional value. Further monoculture permeates the diet itself. Corn is easily the clearest example as Michael Pollan aptly illustrates in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan's analysis begins with a chicken nugget that:

Piles corn upon corn, what chicken it contains consists of corn of course, but so do most of a nugget's other constituents, including the modified corn starch that glues the thing together, the corn flour in the batter that coats it, and the corn oil in which it is fried. Much less obviously, the leavenings and lecithin, the mono-, di-, and triglycerides, the attractive golden coloring, and even the citric acid that keeps the nugget 'fresh...'⁵⁷

While a stark and perhaps stirring example to a fast food eater that may have never really considered he/she was eating calories that are mostly derived from corn, Pollan, as he often does, drives the point home by deepening his example with excruciating detail even

⁵⁶ Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology* (New York: Zed Books, Ltd., 1993), 6.

⁵⁷ Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 18-19.

more corn products that are not anywhere near obvious, starting with high fructose corn syrup laden soda with which you can:

Wash down your chicken nuggets... ..to have some corn with your corn. Grab a beer for your beverage instead and you'd still be drinking corn, in the form of alcohol fermented from glucose refined from corn. Read the label of any processed food, and provided you know the chemical name it travels under, corn is what you will find. For modified or unmodified starch, for glucose syrup and maltodextrin, for crystalline fructose and ascorbic acid, for lecithin and dextrose, lactic acid and lysine, for maltos and HFCS, for MSG and polyols, for the caramel color, and xanthan gum, read: corn. There are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn, this goes for nonfood items as well—everything from the toothpaste and cosmetics to the disposable diapers, trash bags, cleansers, charcoal briquettes, matches, and batteries, right down to the shine on the cover of [a] magazine.⁵⁸

The sheer magnitude of ways corn can be used is a marvel of modern science, and a prime example of how the “the social controls of technological reality ... extend liberty while intensifying domination,”⁵⁹ and from here the illusion of choice has never been clearer. While at every grocery store there exists an abundance of products, the fact remains that most are made of, or at least contain corn. Ultimately there is not much of a difference between a Pop-Tart and Toaster-Pastry, and the grocery store full of dozens of different brands of potato chips, hundreds of candy bars, and thousands of corn products is a monoculture of abundance that exemplifies the illusion of freedom and choice that is presented to the American consumer. Indeed, the “American consumerist dream” which is tied discursively to freedom and liberty is based on the myth of choice. Freedom, it is asserted, is defined through access to endless choice in the marketplace between “different sameness.” Yet, the emphasis is not on quality choices for politicians, or policies, or health care, but for products. The ability for the average consumer to walk

⁵⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 72.

into Kroger and go to the chip aisle, overwhelmed by and a seeming endless array of shiny chip bags with all types of “technology” to increase the crunch, and the “maximum” flavor possible conditions us to believe that this is what *real* choice is about.

It does not matter if there are only two presidential candidates to choose from, because one can go to the store and exercise their freedom through the market; one can subscribe to the illusion of redefining him/herself or asserting his/her personality through what type of potato brand he/she shows loyalty to. Yet, it must be recognized that this myth of freedom of choice is exactly that- a myth. Individuals do not have access to a *variety* of different types of vegetables and fruits or protein sources that are from different farms or companies. In reality, there is an oligarchy within the food system. A surprisingly small number of very large corporations own, produce, and/or sell most of the food in our country. The monoculture of production has created a deep democratic deficit to which most Americans are blind.

The interests of these companies intertwine to both demand and foster overproduction from farmers. The best way to sell the expanded crop yield was to prepare it for the customer. The food manufacturing industry exploded in the latter half of the twentieth century offering convenient ready-made meals or snacks for working families eager to spend less time in the kitchen. Currently the food manufacturers take in roughly \$3.1 trillion in revenues annually. The power that these manufacturers hold over food producers is unprecedented. Without an outlet for direct to consumer sales (as many staple crops cannot be eaten before being processed) food manufacturers can essentially set the price for food. The manufacturers essentially work to add value to a raw agricultural product, and then sell it to the consumer at a premium. Processed food like

corn flakes or food products like soy lecithin started out as an outlet for farmers to sell products during a glut, but the power of these food manufacturers lead to a system that heavily favors the manufacturer at the expense of the farmer. As Roberts points out in “1950 about half the retail price of a food product went to pay the farmer or other producer for raw materials, while half went to adding value. By 2000 this farm share had fallen below 20 percent.”⁶⁰ Farmers who are being exploited should opt out, but it is, unfortunately, not that simple. Most subsidized food in today’s agricultural markets cannot be sold directly to the consumer. For instance an overwhelming majority of the corn in the US cannot be eaten by humans off of the stalk, it is produced to be processed or to become animal feed and myriad other products. Making a switch is for producers because the corporate agricultural industry tends burdens farmers with debt and simply put, one of the most difficult things about alternative farming is creating one’s own market.⁶¹ So how does a one “get out” or make changes to avoid the pitfalls of corporate farming? This is precisely the topic of the next section.

⁶⁰ Roberts, *The End of Food*, 31-37.

⁶¹ Jerry Buckland, *Ploughing Up The Farm* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 152.

Part II: Refusals and Slow Modernity

A great refusal of the industrial food system is certainly a necessary, and could be an effective way to combat the exploitative modern food system. Marcuse offers another solution for injustice in society as a whole, which can be applied to food:

“To a great extent, it is the sheer *quantity* of goods, services, work, and recreation in the overdeveloped countries which effectuates this containment. Consequently, qualitative change seems to presuppose a quantitative change in the advanced standards of living, namely, *reduction of overdevelopment*... ...the elimination of profitable waste would increase the social wealth available for distribution, and the end of permanent mobilization would reduce the social need for the denial of satisfactions that are the individuals own.”⁶²

Ultimately a critical understanding of food systems, and a realization of the illusions of consumerism put upon contemporary society is essential to breaking away from the unfreedom imposed by industrial food, by refusing to participate in the exploitative industrial system whenever possible. Further using Marcuse to problematize alternative food movements can help keep them from being co-opted by corporate industrial capitalism. The organic movement in particular demonstrates the remarkable ability of capitalist markets to translate subversive movements into its profit-motivated logic and language and turn the subversive into the normative.

It is important here to engage with some contemporary theory that Marcuse inspired, particularly that of Ben Agger, and his conception of “fast capitalism.” Agger sees the ubiquitous nature of information technology (specifically of pagers, cell phones, email, and other devices that extend the workday into time normally spent ‘off the clock’) and the colonization of the private life as detractors of quality of life. Resistance toward, or rejection of postmodern “fast” capitalism and the administered life is crucial for any

⁶² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 242.

emancipatory project. As Agger points out, though, Luddism, idealization of the past or pre-modern, and the like can abound when rejecting modernity or contemporary capitalism.⁶³ A nuanced resistance that produces a sort of alternative modernity or as Agger calls it “slowmodernity,” can be realized when critical theory is applied to deepen something like “slow food.” What Agger is calling for, and this author agrees is necessary, is “an existential, Marcusean, and feminist theme of transformation,” that requires a realization that “public and private, outside and inside, are now thoroughly implicated in each other.”⁶⁴ This insight, according to Agger, “is the bridge between food theory and critical theory, which swallows food theory whole, both preserving and extending its alimentary insights into the importance of body politics for the body politic.”⁶⁵ While a depoliticized consumerism will not provide emancipatory potential for contemporary society there is something more going on here than a reinforcement of neoliberal ideals.⁶⁶ Wealthy consumers taking part in slow food will never itself create widespread change, but a break in the alienation between the neoliberal subject and his/her food can lead to a break in alienation between that subject and other parts of his/her life through enhanced reflexivity brought on by the realization of illusions surrounding food commodities that can be extrapolated to corporate commodities more broadly. Of course this is not a guarantee, but it is likely that a critical awakening regarding food can lead to critical thought in other areas of contemporary life.

Additionally, while consumers cannot change the foundations of a societal mode of

⁶³Ben Agger, *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism: Cultures, Jobs, Families, Schools, Bodies* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Pub. 2004) 150.

⁶⁴Ibid, 157

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Madeline Fairbairn, “Framing transformation: the counter-hegemonic potential of food sovereignty in the US context,” *Agriculture and Human Values* (2012) 29:217–230.

production, if agricultural producers (farmers, not corporations) are not granted a living wage and the ability to sustain their lives, families, and environment then there cannot be change either.

This is the power of concepts like food sovereignty: poking holes in the (constructed) barrier between man and nature, and in resonance with Marcuse, showing that there is an intrinsic link between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of people. Agger does not spell this out, but slow modernity will require more farmers as well as the widespread implementation new and different modes of production such as agro-ecological techniques, permaculture, and vertical growing. A respect for nature and respect for the body most likely go hand in hand. Realizations of the internal contradictions and the exploitations of fast capitalism can, at times, start with food and then seep into other parts of a subject's life. If something as “wholesome” as the Big Mac is so wrought with injustice and exploitation, than what of the iPod, the cheap gasoline, or any other false need? Food provides an arena where alienation is at once hidden as well as easily uncovered; consequently it provides a place for refusal that can be engaged in both. Food can be an entry point, a beginning, for people to start acting based on ecological concerns, and because of this, ecological movements and food movements are often thoroughly intertwined. It is hoped that analysis of these movements and/or organizations can provide examples of Marcuse’s great refusal, or at least steps toward Agger’s slowmodernity. From this theoretical foundation the thesis examines specific cases of potential resistance including alternative farming in Southwest Virginia and a farmer/activist involved with the National Family Farming Coalition and its mission to spread food sovereignty.

Proponents of food sovereignty as a whole are deeply skeptical of neoliberal and developmental economics, WTO planned agriculture reform, transnational corporations, NGOs, and discourses of food security. Founded as a peasant movement based in Central and South America La Via Campesina has become a vast network of farmer-activists intent on giving peasants a voice on the global stage where previously non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spoke for them. Perhaps the most radical and transformative part of their platform is “food sovereignty” which is a paradigm that infers the right of people, states, and/or organizations to have control over their own food systems and policies without influence from dumped foreign agricultural commodities, and for production and consumption of food to be organized according to the needs of local peoples rather than the global market. Proponents of the food sovereignty movement seek justice for the rural poor and landless farmers, promote sustainable agro-ecology, and focus on culturally relevant foods.⁶⁷ Farmers in the nations that have been exploited by the corporate industrial food system are certainly not ignorant to their exploitation, and resistance has manifested in different ways, a major one being the aforementioned food sovereignty movement, which manifests as a complete radical rejection of the foreign food system. La Via Campesina fits the three qualifications for “total” refusal and rebellion according to Marcuse: first the “insistence on a break with the continuity of domination and exploitation—no matter in what name; insistence not only on new institutions, but on self-determination,” second “distrust of all ideologies including socialism made into an ideology,” and finally “rejection of the pseudo democratic process sustaining the dominion of corporate capitalism.”⁶⁸ La Via Campesina operates through

⁶⁷ Schanbacher, *Politics of Food*, 54-56.

⁶⁸ Marcuse, *Reexamination*, 30.

International Working Commissions (IWCs) where elected members from each region (North America, South America, Central America, the Caribbean, Africa, East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Europe). As of 2010 those commissions were working on:

(i) Agrarian Reform, (ii) Food Sovereignty and Trade, (iii) Biodiversity and Genetic Resources, (iv) Climate Change and Peasant Agriculture, (v) Human Rights, (vi) Sustainable Peasant Agriculture, (vii) Migration and Farm Workers, (viii) Women and Gender Parity, (ix) Education and Training, and (x) Youth. In addition, the Via Campesina has campaigns that address some of the issues: (i) the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, (ii) Seeds: Heritage of Rural Peoples in the Service of Humanity, (iii) the Campaign to End All Forms of Violence Against Women, and (iv) The Campaign for an International Charter of Peasant Rights⁶⁹.

Clearly La Via Campesina is not defined by food alone, but agriculture perhaps the major uniting feature of the organization. When it comes to growing, for La Via Campesina there is a strict adherence to agroecology (which is for them essential to food sovereignty) it turns modern farm production upside-down. In agroecology there is not nearly as much of a human/nature divide and La Via Campesina incorporates indigenous agricultural methods with modern advances (excluding GMOs of course) in agriculture. The way agroecological balance is achieved through recycling of biomass, securing soil conditions, minimizing loss of air, water, and nutrients, increasing biodiversity, and fostering ecological interaction for instance that between field and forest.⁷⁰ Finally the last crucial way that food sovereignty represents a way to resist the global industrial food system is through cooperation. Food sovereignty promotes cooperation, seed sharing, and a strong community between and among producers, processors, and consumers.

⁶⁹ Maria Elena Martinez-Torres & Peter M. Rosset, "La Via Campesina: the birth and evolution of a transnational social movement" *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 37, Issue 1, 2010.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 57-58.

Because neoliberal logic is totally dominated by competition, there is a camaraderie that is sought after by the food sovereignty movement that neoliberal markets simply do not have the capacity to foster. A clear example is El Movimiento Campesino a Campesino, or the farmer to farmer movement. Established among farmers in Central America, the hierarchical and centralized nature of agricultural knowledge is challenged by direct support of farmers by other farmers. There are community-organized workshops to share knowledge, and exchanges to share strains or seeds between small or family farmers.⁷¹ The cooperative nature of the movement promotes a culture of everyone being in the fight against hunger and poverty together.

Food sovereignty is not limited to peasants, of course. There are groups, some not directly affiliated with La Via Campesina, who have adopted the term. Madeleine Fairbairn conducted an in-depth study of groups in the United States who use the term food sovereignty on their website with the intent of seeing how food sovereignty is framed in the peasant context versus the US context.⁷² Considering the wide range of samples (a farm-to-table restaurant, some farm supporting civil society organizations, some local food organizations, and some other charitable organizations) it is not surprising the framing of food sovereignty in the US varies widely, for instance the National Family Farm Coalition still holds on to the original meaning coming down to local control, but then there are some local movements that ironically transform a transnational concept into a tool for hyper-localization. The biggest problem may be commercialization or consumerization of the term, but as of 2010 there are no real signs

⁷¹ Ibid, 67-68

⁷² Madeleine Fairbairn, "Framing the Counter-Hegemonic potential of food sovereignty in the US Context," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 29:217-230

of that happening to any significant degree. Advocates of food sovereignty have categorically rejected neoliberal economic orthodoxy, but this does not mean that food sovereignty is exactly the same when used in the US as abroad. The important take-away though, is that in both contexts the food sovereignty retains its counter-hegemonic potential.⁷³ Fairbairn contends that the most important task for organizations in the US that are invoking food security is to balance the frame so that it applies to northerners who do not identify as peasants and also does not totally decouple it from its roots and result in an “unreflexive localism.”⁷⁴ The morally grounded nature of food sovereignty makes it an excellent example of a counter-hegemonic theory from which to refuse global capitalism. Food sovereignty, in its best sense, is a negation of globalized neoliberal trade policy, but in its application as a transnational concept keeps it from the trappings of regressive localist politics. It certainly appears that food sovereignty and the farmer to farmer movements could be a tangible example of cooperation that is “the social expression of the liberated work instinct” which is “grounded in solidarity.”⁷⁵

Some examples of actual farming techniques that are utilized in the practice of alternative agriculture are agroecology and civic agriculture. Agroecology started out as an agricultural science that sought to understand the ecological processes in farming systems. According to Miguel Altieri ‘Agroecological research considers interactions of all important biophysical, technical and socioeconomic components of farming systems and regards these systems as the fundamental units of study, where mineral cycles, energy transformations, biological processes and socioeconomic relationships are

⁷³ Fairbairn, “Framing Transformation: the Counter-hegemonic Potential of Food Sovereignty in the US,” *Journal of Human Values* 29:217-230, 227.

⁷⁴ DuPuis, E.Melanie, and David Goodman, “Should we go ‘home’ to eat?: Toward a reflexive politics of food localism,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 21(3): 359–371.

⁷⁵ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 91.

analyzed as a whole in an interdisciplinary fashion.”⁷⁶ What this means in practice is that on the farm there is a search for a deep understanding of long timer processes such as soil recycling and microbiotic life. Agroecology does not use artificial inputs, and focuses on integrating crops that help each other grow through pest or weed management and is extremely biodiverse. Biodiverse crop planting allows for much higher total output (than monoculture cropping) and matching mutually beneficial crops with soils and climates reduce nutrient depletion. Finally, the agroecological approach is particularly unique and desirable “because it is more sensitive to the complexities of local agriculture, and has a broad performance criteria which includes properties of ecological sustainability, food security, economic viability, resource conservation and social equity, as well as increased production.”⁷⁷

According to Thomas Lyson, civic agriculture is the “rebirth of locally based agriculture and food production” that is organizationally manifested in “farmer’s markets, community gardens, and community supported agriculture.”⁷⁸ For Lyson civic agriculture “represents a sustainable alternative to the socially, economically, and environmentally destructive practices that have come to be associated with conventional agriculture.”⁷⁹ Lyson claims that “through active engagement in the food system, civic agriculture has the potential to transform individuals from passive consumers into active food citizens.”⁸⁰ Civic agriculture is deeply rooted in community, and opposes the

⁷⁶ Miguel Altieri “Agroecology in Action” http://nature.berkeley.edu/~miguel-alt/what_is_agroecology.html.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Lyson, 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 77.

corporate agriculture model. Both models are used in alternative agriculture, sometimes not by name, but the principles tend to permeate ecologically conscious farmers.

The co-opted Refusals: Organic and Local

An easily recognizable and now longstanding ecological food-based movement that was a pushback to the high input industrial food system is the organic movement. The “organic turn” became popular within counterculture and manifested for many reasons, among them the retaliation against the industrial capitalist system, fighting to keep food safe from DDT and harmful chemicals, and of course, the proverbial goal of protecting the environment. In the 1960s, the organic movement was in many ways part of a refusal on the part of consumers in regards to a polluting and unjust food system. On the outset, organic farms turned industry ideas upside down. Bigger was no longer better. High production was no longer the ultimate goal. According to Samuel Fromartz “organic food was supposed to be pure, wholesome, natural, and small-scale, a true alternative to conventional food.”⁸¹ While this was largely the goal for organic farmers, co-ops, and communes in the 1960s and into the 1970s, their success was marginal. Despite its ideological roots, fairly rapid growth over the course of the 1990s the organic movement transformed into the organic industry.⁸² Consumer concern over the health threats of pesticides was revived, and demand for organic food was abundant. Much of today's organic industry is owned by major food producers like Kraft, Tyson, Con-agra, and Archer Daniels Midland, and that presents many of the same problems that have been brought up above in regards to the conventional food industry. Certainly in the case of

⁸¹Samuel Fromartz, *Organic Inc.* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 2006) ix.

⁸²Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took On The Food Industry*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press. 2007) 186.

the “big organic” companies, that are now subsidiaries of the previously mentioned industry giants, there is a sense that they fill a niche marketing gap more than satisfy a political or social end, and may even play a role of placating actors who would demand better standards if readily available corporate organic foods were not so readily available.

For example, there is a certain easing of anxieties that takes place when a consumer buys organic that can result in a similar found in households that recycle and see that as "doing enough" for the environment, and there is concern that both may be doing more to assuage consumer concerns than to foster environmental health.⁸³ This sense of security which is found in “ethical” forms of consumerism obscures an investigation into deeper logics and frameworks through which the world is organized, and ultimately allows for a deepening of market practices. Undoubtedly if every farm in the United States was organically run the resulting reduction in pesticides and herbicides would be a huge positive step for the environment, but it would fail to address the underlying problem within the US’ corporate industrial food system. Even if USDA qualifications were met, there is no limit to farm size and monocultures could still be prevalent. A look into Whole Foods can provide an interesting perspective to the organic system, as it now provides people with a choice for organic food, but it is still a choice within the corporate administered capitalist system. The consumer then goes to Whole Foods, buys organic or fair trade goods, and finds euphoria in a ‘happiness’ that is sustained by consumption that is actually linked to a deeper unhappiness. Alienation is still rampant; it is still unfreedom. Whole Foods could provide a healthier, safer, and/or

⁸³Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 131-134.

better option than conventional food sources, but it is just an easy and/or convenient choice that further brings people into the rational capitalist system of overproduction.

This corporatization led to the complete and subsumption of organics into the industrial food system. What could be considered moment of pacification for the revolutionary potential of organics is the USDA organic certification. The rules for USDA organic place no limit on size and in are no small part influenced by corporate food manufacturing giants. Here we see a false consciousness develop for consumers of organic food, although they may feel as if the collective action of enough people buying enough organic food is potentially transformative, in fact “the power of corporate capitalism has stifled the emergence of such a consciousness and imagination”⁸⁴ that is capable of making change. From a Marcusean standpoint, an act that was once subversive, in this case organic agriculture, becomes administered by the state, and thus unfree.⁸⁵ State subsumption of subversion is nothing new, but it is easy to see how simply buying organic does not provide any sort of negation toward global neoliberal capitalism, and especially not corporate-industrial agribusiness. For Agger too, contemporary conceptions of organic consumption fall short of providing an alternative or coercing individuals into more reflexive thought about their food, it has become part of the massive illusion of choice between different sameness that simply has the benefit of not being produced with pesticide, herbicide, or fertilizer. Sometimes though, there is not even that assurance. Julie Guthman illustrates the limits of organic agriculture in California through an analysis of very large-scale organic food producers. She examines u growth practices that include exemptions to fertilizers that drain soil, and as well as the

⁸⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 15.

⁸⁵ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 42.

mistreatment of immigrant laborers.⁸⁶ Criticisms of the organic movement and/or industry have come from all sides, both conventional industry discourses of inefficiency as well as mainstream dismissal of organics as mostly for “hippies,” and leftist critique of its routinization and subsumption.⁸⁷ These factors, along with others such as the concept of “food miles,” the rise of “community food security,” and the urge to know one’s farmer has helped foster the growth of the local or “locavore”⁸⁸ movement in recent years.

Locavorism is in many ways an attempted re-appropriation of farming from industry back to the producerist ideals of family farms, or just smaller farms in general. There is a distinctly Jeffersonian character, a definite distrust of the federal government and caution towards large industry. Distrust of politics in general can be found in both the early organic movements, and the current local movement, but once the “organic” label became a government certification the local and small farm advocates came to be wary of it, and perhaps even skeptical. Subsumption of the local movement is certainly harder to identify than the comparison with rise and fall of organic subversion. By its nature, the local movement is anti-industrial, non-corporate and less ecologically harmful than conventional agriculture, but certainly does not necessarily contain negation of

⁸⁶ Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 124.

⁸⁷ Robin O’Sullivan, “Organic Farming and the Routinization of Subversion,” *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The American Studies Association, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Philadelphia, PA.* 10/11/2007

⁸⁸“Locavore” was the Oxford word of the year in 2008 and can mean a few things, sometimes it regards “food miles” and only eating meat that was produced within a certain radius of the consumption location. In a deeper sense being a locavore can mean eating seasonally, and specifically not eating industrial food products. Meat is often the focus for locavores. For an investigation of Locavorism and especially its meat see: Kathy Rudy, “Locavores, Feminism, and the Question of Meat,” *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 35, Number 1, March 2012 For a hard-hitting critique of shallow locavorism and its potential for xenophobia and regressive politics see: Vasile Stanescu, “‘Green’ Eggs and Ham?” The Myth of Sustainable Meat and the Danger of the Local,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, Vol. VIII, Issue: 1/2 2010.

neoliberalism. Many of the problems for alternative agriculture producers are actually distribution related. Farms that are geographically closer to cities are more likely to be able to opt-out of the corporate commodity crop growing system simply because of the availability of buyers.

One of the most visible and outspoken farmers in the local movement Joel Salatin is an anomaly, and while “everything he wants to do is illegal,”⁸⁹ he does not have any issues finding buyers for his meat, especially not since he was featured in *The Omnivores Dilemma* and *Food Inc.* Salatin has helped to popularize rotational grazing techniques that counter conventional industrial methods by producing beef with zero grain intake, however by selling to corporate entities he cuts out some of Polyface Farm’s subversive potential against capitalism. However, the grass-based farming is arguably ecologically subversive as it requires less oil, inputs, (although more man-power) and is a step closer to Agger’s slowmodernity as it can provide meat much more ethically (when considering the environment and animal welfare) for conscious eaters. Ultimately though, buying local is not a form of resistance. Localized agriculture does not qualify as a Marcusean negation except, perhaps, for the producer, and only if that producer is insistent “on a break with the continuity of domination and exploitation—no matter in what name”⁹⁰ which requires an emphasis on worker’s rights and a recognition of the role of agriculture as cooperating with what we call nature, rather than falling victim to instrumental rationality and attempting to dominate or control nature. Salatin wrote that he sees himself as cooperating with nature in direct contrast with “Greco-Roman Western linear reductionist systematized fragmented disconnected parts-oriented individualized

⁸⁹ Joel Salatin, *Everything I Want to Do is Illegal*, (Swoope, Va: Polyface Inc. 2007).

⁹⁰ Marcuse, “Reexamination”³⁰.

culture.”⁹¹ This is at odds with the generally reductionist logics that governed the development of modern agriculture.

It is important to note here that the “local movement” is extremely diffuse and dispersed. Depending on who is talking about it, ‘locavore’ can simply mean trying to eat as much in-season food as possible that is grown within 100 miles, or 200 miles. There is also the conception of local movement as made up of urban farmers, or people who only eat local meat, or perhaps a locavore is someone who shops at the farmers market often and has a bumper sticker that advertises just that.⁹² It is a term that is fairly difficult to sharply define, but for the purposes of this thesis the “local movement” will be broadly defined as people who consume and/or produce regional food with ecologically concerned methods, such as organic, permaculture, and/or rotational grazing as much as possible. It is one assertion of this thesis that the method of production is much more important than the place of production.

In order to address concerns about the alternative agricultural practices as politically important or relevant, I will address the movement’s critics. First, Greg Sharzer, whose book *No Local: Why Small Scale Alternatives Won’t Change the World* is a Marxist critique of what he sees as localism. Admittedly, Sharzer raises some important questions about the economic viability of localism and questions the ability of widespread change to occur based on independent local change. He claims that localists “are wrestling with powerlessness: faced with the unpalatable conclusion that small

⁹¹Joel Salatin, *The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer*, (Swoope, Va: Polyface Inc. 2010) xiii.

⁹² Two books that are highly popular among locavores include the aforementioned: Pollan, *Omnivores Dilemma*, and Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). Some examples of various not so positive views on the ‘local’ in regards to its transformative potential include: Sharzer, *No Local*; James E. McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009); Melissa Walker, “Contemporary Agrarianism: A Reality Check,” *Agricultural History* 86 no. 1 (Winter 2012): 1-25.

alternatives won't outcompete or destroy capitalism, localists cling to a fierce faith in communities to band together and do it yourself."⁹³ For Sharzer, localism has a distinctly upper middle class character, and while eating from farmers markets and obtaining anything that is called artisan is usually an expensive endeavor, he fails to acknowledge the food justice movements. Former food desert bound urban gardeners in Oakland and Detroit come to mind. It is not necessarily clear how they are part of the upper middle class, and for that matter he is quiet on trends like CSAs that are pay-as-you-go (as opposed to upfront) or farmers who accept food stamps. Ultimately, Sharzer is quite Manichean in his view of whether or not a movement challenges capitalism, and thus has value as part of the Left. This is ironically pessimistic considering he argues that:

Hidden beneath localism's DIY attitude is a deep pessimism: it assumes we can't make large-scale, collective social change. Those with the correct ideas can carve a niche outside the system, but for most people, the machinery of capitalism will continue to be oiled with the blood of its workers.⁹⁴

Sharzer neglects the connections made between people in the endeavors he is criticizing.

While the localisms he identifies probably are not going to quickly transform global capitalism, it is difficult to understand why they cannot be an educational tool to raise class consciousness, an organizing medium, or even simply a way to help people's lives improve *before* the Marxist revolution he is pining for.

As Timothy W. Luke argues in *Capitalism, Democracy, Ecology: Departing From Marx*, an ecologically based populism with "an alternate set of practices to answer government and market failures by organizing and ecological, democratic, and self-reliant way of life in modern communities out of the anti-environmental, managerialist, and dependency-generating lifestyles concocted by new class designers, advertisers, and

⁹³ Sharzer, 121

⁹⁴ Ibid, 10

executives over the past century.”⁹⁵ Agroecology and civic agriculture certainly both fit into this model, and both would act as resistances that create “alternative modernities with entirely different relations of independent producership, communal competence, and individual power/knowledge.”⁹⁶ Whether or not these alternative agricultures can constitute instances of “comprehensive critique of instrumentally rational corporate capital” that is populist rather than proletarian and exist as an ecological negation of transnational modes of production⁹⁷ is a central question of this thesis, and the final section will attempt to discern if farmers believe they are resisting capitalism and instrumental rationality, creating new alternative ecologies, and analyze their motivations for political implications to their choices.

⁹⁵ Timothy Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, Ecology: Departing from Marx*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Illinois, 1999). 7

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 19

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 52

Part III: Cultivating Resistance

Introducing the Subjects

As mentioned in the methods section before, the scope of this project is limited to a convenience sample. Four interviews were conducted. All of the interviewees allowed for their interviews real names to be used in this and any subsequent projects; this shows their strong commitment to and openness in regards to their ideals and production methods. Of the four, Griffin, Mosser, and Horodyski are grass fed beef farmers who own their own land. Griffin and Mosser's farms are both mainly livestock producers. Horodyski also grows certified organic produce. Snipstal, the fourth is a food sovereignty advocate and vegetable farmer who co-manages a biodiverse farmer-owned cooperative in Maryland that over the course of the growing season cultivates nearly 100 different vegetables, including varieties. His farm is currently transitioning to USDA certified organic, and the land is leased.

Griffin and Horodyski are both multi-generational farmers. Griffin's father had an apple farm and "farmed to be self-sufficient. We had a milk cow, had our own chicken meat and eggs, and we raised just a couple pigs a year."⁹⁸ Oddly enough, she is the first of her family to raise beef cattle. She and her husband decided to get into beef farming mostly because of the farmland they were able to buy "very mountainous and [they] would do other things if [their] land lended itself to that, but [their] land is very hilly, very rocky, almost not tillable at all. [They] both love working with the animals."⁹⁹ As opposed to raising feedlot beef like most farmers in the area, Griffin initially planned t

⁹⁸ Abbott, Field Notes: Griffin.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

raise breed-stock, but she “never could agree to raise cows for feedlots.” She says quite matter of factly “that’s just against my moral principles.”¹⁰⁰

Griffin, as it turns out, is starkly opposed to feedlots: “I think feedlots should be against the law, I think they’re inhumane, they’re not good for the animals, and I do not think the product is healthy in the long run, but it is mostly the unethical treatment of the animals. I just think that’s the root of it. I would never sell cows to end up in a feedlot.”¹⁰¹ This sentiment was the driving force that led her to grass fed beef production.

Horodyski’s father was a first generation American, and raised hogs on pasture because, according to him, that was how it was done at the time. Horodyski took over the farm at age 15 and has little formal training. Today he produces organic spelt, soybeans, corn, and hay as well as organic grass fed beef. Horodyski, like Griffin, does not see conventionally raised livestock as an option. “It’s basically twisted Franken-food that they grow unhealthily in crowded conditions” he says of industrial agriculture, “its not even livestock anymore they’ve twisted it so much.”¹⁰²

Mosser and Snipstal are both first generation farmers. Mosser was for a number of years a conventional feedlot beef producer. Health was the main driver of his decision to transition to grass fed beef. He started totally grass-feeding because he wanted “to grow some good beef for ourselves, because my whole life I’ve been told ‘beef is bad for you,’ you know, eat venison, but don’t eat red meat...”¹⁰³ His transition happened around the same time he got a computer and could actually go online and start researching information. The turn toward full grass fed farming was a partly opportunistic:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski.

¹⁰³ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

I started learning about grass fed/finished beef and raised one for ourselves, and as I learned more about how to finish them and what to look for, and I was doing some good beef, and friends starting asking for the beef, and I started raising more animals that way, and one year I raised more than I had friends, and so I started a website and started selling quarters and halves and it's been about 5 or 6 years ago I started going to the Blacksburg farmers market, and it was about that time that I decided to just get out of the cow-calf and just concentrate on all grass-finished beef, and not sell my young animals into the feedlot industry.¹⁰⁴

While it is not a common practice for him, he does not share the same disdain for feedlots as Griffin and Horodyski. "I am still thankful they have those markets," he admits, "what I sell into the feedlot system is one that doesn't look like it will finish well, or old cows."¹⁰⁵ So while he is not fundamentally opposed to the conventional methods to the point that he refuses to interact with the industry entirely, he essentially lets the conventional market pick up his scraps. All of the beef farmers in this study reject the use of conventional methods, as well as conventional inputs for their herds.

Points of Resistance in Grass Fed Beef Production

None of the cattle farmers interviewed for this project use industrial feed, although some sort of dietary supplement is required, whether a mineral blend, Utah salt, or kelp meal for the health of the cattle and tenderness of the meat. As I argue, this movement represents a space where livestock producers have a clear opportunity to reject the corporate industrial food system and in the "fast-expanding source of pollution caused by industrial farming practices stemming from factory farms and feed lots."¹⁰⁶ The most obvious ecological benefit is the fact that the farmers are refusing to take part in the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Weis, 33.

“temperate grain-livestock complex”¹⁰⁷ which is one of the drivers of corporate agriculture and a significant polluter when it comes to farm runoff from herbicides, fertilizers, pesticides, et cetera. The second significant polluter is manure. Waste is a huge issue for feedlots and factory farms, but these small scale beef producers effectively use manure to replenish nutrients in their fields. In recalling his decision to stop raising beef conventionally, Mosser remarks:

Everything is production, to the point of not considering any of the health parts of it, and the culmination of that is the feedlot, where I hear all kinds of justifications and logistics, feed the world... whatever. Let's think about the problems with putting all these animals in a small area where the manure actually becomes a liability, so instead of it becoming a fertilizer on its farm, you have to move it somewhere else. So they're standing in their own feces so we give them antibiotics because you know they're going to get sick, but instead of changing the environment, trying to fix [the symptom]. We should look at it with common sense... ..[feedlots] shouldn't be there. Why not find a way to do this that is beneficial for the animal?¹⁰⁸

When the feedlot is understood as the culmination of conventional agriculture,¹⁰⁹ it can then become an easy target for refusal. The beef farmers are all going against the grain in very similar ways.

Their outlook on other farmers how other farmers view them are intriguing. None of the beef farmers are outwardly active in educating other producers about their methods, but rather they are open to helping educate if the opportunity comes. When asked if her rejection of industrial farming has been a struggle in light of being surrounded by conventional farmers, Marilyn Griffin responded:

¹⁰⁷ Weis, 47, 70. Weis explains the temperate grain-livestock complex as the transnational corporation dominated grain export regime that makes CAFOs possible and is demanded by them. The surpluses and industrial advancements, according to Weis, have contributed greatly to the concentration of agricultural production into corporate TNCs and made it harder for small farmers in the US and out.

¹⁰⁸ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

¹⁰⁹ Weis refers to factory farming as the “apex of industrial agriculture,” 59.

People look at us strangely; they don't understand what we are doing. A beef extension specialist sees our farm and he doesn't get what we're doing, because in his mind the way to raise beef is to grow it as fast as you can, slaughter it as soon as you can, to reap the profit as much as you can, [but] quite frankly I don't care or think about what people think about what we're doing. Because we're serving a very special population and they know what we're doing, and they appreciate what we're doing, and they don't think we're crazy and that's all that matters. I'm fascinated at the difference between us and other farmers, but I really don't care what the other farmers think. I can tell you that there are a few farmers in our area that over the years that have copied a lot of the things that we've done and that actually feels really good.¹¹⁰

Horodyski is even more ambivalent when it comes to the industrial food system, "I just don't participate in it, [and] they don't force it on me." When it comes to spreading the word or educating others Horodyski is fairly cut and dry. Whether it's buyers or other farmers, he is available "for anyone who has questions, the ones that are interested will ask, and the others won't."¹¹¹ Mosser, on the other hand, has participated in a publically funded cost-share for cross-fencing and a water system, and in exchange his farm is available for demonstration to anyone in the area that wants to see how it works. Others have implemented the water system and cross-fencing, but the organic method does not seem to take. "They think I'm nuts,"¹¹² Mosser notes.

Considering these interpretations of their fellow farmers entrenchment in their ways, and lack of interest in figuring anything else out, the situation of farmers who did decide to transition begs the question: what *does* convince farmers who have been conventional to change their ways? For Mosser, the moment was fairly distinct. Recalling the Oklahoma City bombing, Mosser remembers thinking: "isn't that pretty amazing he figured out how to take fertilizer and make a bomb out of it," and not too

¹¹⁰ Abbott, Field Notes: Griffin.

¹¹¹ Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski.

¹¹² Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

long after, while reading Sir Albert Howard's *Soil and Health*, he realized the inverse was actually true, "really, we learned how to take bomb material and make fertilizer out of it! It was a bomb first. You know, ammonium sulfate. I was shocked."¹¹³ Horodyski had a similar realization in "1996... that was the year that you were required to get training before getting herbicides. After I went to the training, I wondered to myself why in heavens name would I risk doing this because of all the dangers involved, so then we started looking at organic."¹¹⁴ Both farmers acknowledged a slow transition period, but are happy they did it.

Griffin made it clear that for her the quality of life for the animals is the main reason she produces grass fed beef. For Horodyski and Mosser it is not quite as cut and dry, but certainly part of the reason the change happened for Horodyski's and Mosser's mindsets where it has not occurred for others is their relationship with the land, or how they view nature. Horodyski said, "I consider [the soil] to be part of me, I deal with it every day. The guys that are conventional it's all about numbers, they're very effective; their output might be twice what mine is. It's not what the ground wants to do; it's what they force it to do. Mine is more of a gentle prodding than a force."¹¹⁵ This is in direct contrast from how Horodyski views most conventional farms where "soil is just simply a medium, they give their crops everything they need artificially, unfortunately they give it to them in excess. The only concern they have for the soil is that it will drain and that it will hold the seed. What they do to it is absolutely ruthless."¹¹⁶ Looking back on his experience as a conventional farmer Mosser reflects "I tried to dominate nature for years

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

and I lost. So my thinking has become more about how can I work in nature, and within the bounds of nature, rather than trying to overcome the obstacles of nature.”¹¹⁷ The sentiments expressed by these two farmers are a clear example of ecological resistance of the production-driven corporate industrial food system, and the wider instrumental rationality that is so prevalent in western thought. This could even be understood as developing directly because of “the contradictions of technoscientific capital.”¹¹⁸

Their views on the organic methods are fairly aligned, but all three see the certification somewhat differently. Neither Griffin nor Mosser have obtained or really desire to obtain the certification. They both feel that it is more trouble and money than it is worth. According to Mosser, “I kind of feel similar to Joel Salatin, I’m not organic, I’m better than organic. Some of the organic things I don’t totally agree with, and with animals then you have to get the animals certified, and you have to take the meat to an organic slaughter facility, and it’s tough enough to find someone to work with.”¹¹⁹ From the other point of view, Horodyski sees a lot of value in the third party validation process, and thinks the lack of oversight does the consumer a disservice. At the market he sees farmers who market their goods as sustainable, but he is not comfortable with that because:

Sustainable isn’t clearly defined, and there’s no real guidelines, and they don’t have any organization that proves they are, that’s basically a marketing ploy (*sic*). It’s not a traceable business. I can show you that all of my livestock and produce are certified by an agency, and I have documentation to prove that that’s true. For the sustainable guys it’s a business for them, they use catchphrases, but there’s no way to prove that they actually did that or not. Sustainable is rather broadly defined so I don’t like to use that term.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

¹¹⁸ Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*, 47.

¹¹⁹ Abbott, Field Notes:, Mosser.

¹²⁰ Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski,

Clearly, Horodyski feels that there is some validation or oversight that is necessary for an effective ecologically minded farm production. Mosser has a similar sentiment when it comes to “local” food:

I was involved at the farmers market, and there was a lot of talk about local, but if its local and it's not organic what are you doing? If there's a feedlot here, and you buy from your local feedlot or if you buy vegetables grown conventionally locally that might help the local economy, but organic, I'm talking about health benefits to animals, to the humans, to the earth, all these things. If that's not part of the local plan, then I don't think you're serving as much as you could. And that's always been part of my argument for local [because] I've noticed that at many of these functions it's just local, there's no speaking of organic or naturally raising and using organic methods.¹²¹

Low inputs characterize a lot of what Horodyski and Mosser are looking for, and they are fairly critical when it comes to other farmers who claim to be utilizing more ecologically based methods.

All three beef producers agreed on the biggest challenge when it comes to raising grass fed beef. “Creating your own market,” says Horodyski, “the biggest challenge is finding a market for your products.”¹²² All three utilize the farmers market and sell half or quarter cows to make the up the majority of their sales. There is some wholesaling, to health food stores mostly, but it is a much lower percentage. “It takes a lot more work I'll tell you that,”¹²³ warns Mosser in reference to direct sale versus conventional sale. Other challenges include the extremely high price of arable farmland and the sheer unavailability of organic land. Additionally, the (relatively) slow growth of cattle can be frustrating for some grass fed beef producers. For instance, Griffin makes harvest in about 2 years, females in 3.5. Lastly, the high cost of starting up a farm is prohibitive for

¹²¹ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

¹²² Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski.

¹²³ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

new farmers who want to get started. Horodyski dreams of a day when the Farm Bill subsidies shift to make it

possible to start off with agriculture and still make a livable income. Instead of giving \$2million to someone who has already made \$50million, give \$40,000 to somebody who just starting out farming. For a lot of people it's impossible, unless you've inherited land, to buy equipment and buy livestock and then over the next couple years to make money.¹²⁴ This is quite far off from becoming USDA policy, but it could become necessary considering the constantly rising average age of the American farmer.¹²⁵ Even though there are not many direct payment subsidies for grass fed farmers there are opportunities, and Mosser is the only of this project's subjects to take advantage of it. He was able to put in cross fencing and a new water system with a generous government subsidized cost-share in exchange for being a display farm for others who want to see how it works. Unfortunately, he rarely has visitors, but it did help him move along toward the grass fed method.¹²⁶

On the thought of whether or not there is more interest in grass fed beef or pasture raised livestock or whether their popularity is increasing, Griffin definitely thought so, but is concerned "that if corporate farming sees that as an opportunity they can exploit," they will. Mostly because of her experience in agriculture she has no love for corporations and is afraid of what could happen if somehow they got in on grass fed beef, "because you look at places like Wal-Mart, that are so ruthless, and they cut corners any way they can. The quality is so poor because they continue to cut corners, even the products are not food, they are adulterated. Anything that's big business or big for-profit

¹²⁴ Abbott, Field Notes: Horodyski.

¹²⁵ USDA, "2007 Census of Agriculture: Farmers By Age" (Washington DC: USDA, 2007) http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/Fact_Sheets/Demographics/farmer_age.pdf

¹²⁶ Abbott, Field Notes, Mosser.

I don't trust it."¹²⁷ Despite that, she is hopeful: "every Saturday I go to the farmers' market and I meet one or two families that are deciding to try the farmers market, whether its meat or produce or whatever, and I spend time with them promoting buying from the farmers' market."¹²⁸ She believes in the importance of creating a relationship between consumer and producer, and

anything that does that is very positive because both from an economical [sic] standpoint and from a quality standpoint. It's a lot harder to stand there and talk to a customer that you meet face to face; it's a lot harder to give them an inferior product and then try to get by with it, as opposed to if you're a corporation and you never have to meet the people who are consuming your product.¹²⁹

In this idea we can see the beginning of arrangements "based on shared common goals captured in everyone's backyard."¹³⁰ Mosser agrees with Horodyski's assessment of sustainable agriculture at large, noting that:

[Sustainable] means a lot of things to different people, everybody has a different definition of that, and it's important that people understand what someone else means by sustainable... . . . in conventional publications they say that organic agriculture is not sustainable... . . . the actual definition is that it can be carried on indefinitely, and for me that means without a lot of other inputs. If I can't go to town, will my animals die? I still buy feed for hogs and chickens I could do less chickens, I couldn't do as many as I do now without feed. The cows, they got their grass, and I'm trying as time goes on, grasses get better and better, I have to feed less hay during the winter.¹³¹

When asked, "what is it about conventional agriculture that keeps it from being sustainable?" Mosser replied that:

Well it seems more product-driven rather than method driven. There are organic products, but for the most part organic systems are method-driven rather than product-driven. For years for every problem I had there was a product to solve the problem, but that was something else I had to buy,

¹²⁷ Abbott, Field Notes: Griffin.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*, 16.

¹³¹ Abbott, Field Notes: Mosser.

and that usually caused another problem and another product... ..it all hinged on fertilizer.¹³² Ultimately, by refusing industrial inputs and selling directly, these farmers are “resisting the unconscious bargain that has been struck with transnational business,”¹³³ and further realizing their local ecological conditions and taking advantage of the area’s ecological propensity toward pasture based beef production. By selling directly within a local community they create awareness of alternatives to industrially raised corporate controlled beef, and thus make opportunities for other members of the community to become inquisitive, or hopefully critical, of the status quo corporate production. The choices made by these farmers are difficult to comprehend under a neoliberal framework, because the choices that they are making are not motivated by profit alone. While Horodyski and Mosser both turn a profit each year, Griffin has minimized losses, but has yet to actually make any money through beef farming. This evidence points to the idea that for all three ecological concerns, health concerns, and animal welfare concerns play a bigger role in their decision making than simply profit or industrial norms. While some¹³⁴ may dismiss this as agrarian gentrification within neoliberalism, I contend that is a far too simple outlook. None of these farmers said they chose to do grass fed or organic beef so they could mark up the product and sell it in upscale markets to wealthy consumers. Based on these cases, it is clear that there are motivations behind these models that need to be further fleshed out to see what it could mean for global neoliberal capitalism.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*, 62.

¹³⁴ Sharzer is one example, Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, *The Locavore’s Dilemma* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012) XXIV, is another.

Both Mosser and Griffin cite being able to access the internet as a key part of their ability to make the transition into grass fed production. Both rely on the internet along with a couple magazines (Acres USA and Stockman Grass Farmer among them) for much of the information on techniques for raising the grass fed animals. Mosser's first direct sales (other than friends and family) were over his website.

It is quite clear that these three farmers are seeking to find a 'new sensibility' that is "aesthetic, life-affirming, and liberatory in character,"¹³⁵ to provide the conceptual categories and moral values needed to reintegrate humanity with Nature in an environmentally rational society where technology is art, work can be play, and ecology provides freedom.¹³⁶ To foster this 'new sensibility' mass conceptions of reality need to be altered, and immanent critique and a drive toward change in the food system can be a part of that, but will not necessarily be the answer. There is something that provokes us to be actively engaging in the transformation of reality, shifting toward an ecologically sound reality that maintains a sense of place.

Food Sovereignty in the US

The Snipstal interview stands alone for a couple reasons. First, he is not a beef farmer, so he does not fit as cleanly with the others, and second, and perhaps more importantly, he is more politically and socially active than the other farmers. Snipstal is the only interviewee who does not own the land he farms on. Although his parents did not farm, he was hesitant to call himself a first generation farmer, instead saying that he "considers [himself] a returning generation farmer, because framing it within a historical

¹³⁵ Luke, *Ecocritique*, 146.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 152.

context we all have come from an agrarian background.”¹³⁷ Although he went the University of Kansas, he did not study agricultural science. The reason being he “came to realize that farming and working on the land and being a farmer is many things other than putting seeds into soil and to locate political, economic, and cultural systems [he] wanted to understand the historical ramifications of this current moment.”¹³⁸ As a member of the Food Sovereignty movement (specifically La Via Campesina’s International Youth Commission) he is able to deliver a concise working understanding of food sovereignty that this author has never seen published that is theoretically quite refreshing. Thus, it is important much of the transcription intact to preemptively stop any violent dissection or misreading from being done to it:

Food sovereignty is not just a concept, it’s a reality, but the paradox is when you talk about food sovereignty and the context from which it comes from, you have to realize that our context in the US is much different, we have 1% of the population that is engaged in agriculture, that’s roughly 1.2 million farmers as the census defines it, so that number can be skewed. So when you have a situation in which coupled with 15% of the country being rural countryside and the rest being urban with 1% producing the food you have a dynamic in which people are no longer associating themselves with an agrarian, rural, or land-based reality, and when you look at food sovereignty in the context of where it comes from, it comes from all of those contexts, and so when you describe it here in the US the framework that it will be understood in is going to be very different than the framework it was created in.

So food sovereignty not an element of speech, for one. Two, it can’t just be described on the street other than simply the right to control and have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. Now that is well stated, but then there’s all these other different dynamics and structural things to food sovereignty because food sovereignty came from a context of La Via Campesina and La Via Campesina came from a 500 year history of resistance against imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy... And so when you have this 500 year process from 1492 and people are understanding that process when they come together in ’93 to form LVC when they introduced Food Sovereignty as a concept, the thing is that food

¹³⁷ Abbott, Field Notes: Snipstal.

¹³⁸ Abbott, Field Notes: Snipstal.

sovereignty is located within this 500 year process, you see, and so when you have a situation like that, the narrative drastically changes into a social movement narrative, into a narrative about liberation, and about emancipation. So food sovereignty has become a concept but also a mirror or a reality that is slowly being eroded away by the dominant modes of production in society. This is why I say it's not just a concept, it arose on the world platform because it needed to be pushed as theoretical framework because the interests of the majority of the people of the planet were not being represented, but on the contrary, they were being trampled upon.¹³⁹

Snipstal makes an important point here, and that is the importance of historicity when it comes to Food Sovereignty. Without a deep understanding of its historical roots, Food Sovereignty becomes, as he calls it, “an element of speech.” Arguably, without a critical understanding, food sovereignty could become a boundless term, that could be co-opted much in the way “local” was discussed earlier. Next he elaborates on what food sovereignty could mean in a US context:

“In the US we have a very different but interconnected history in the sense that our grand history is quite different, because the first initial land grab was in 1492 up into the constitutional convention and an initial land grab of the genocide of the indigenous of this continent, and so when you have that process take place, you bring folks from another continent, Africans, you create an agrarian dynamic that is hinged upon free, cheap, or exploitable labor, (i.e. slavery) and so when you hit reconstruction at the end of the civil war, and you hit 1920 you start to see a shift that society is starting to take, and mind you that this has happened over 200 some odd years, and food sovereignty quickly erodes out of the green revolution that hits the rest of the world after WWII. It has taken us in the US about 200 years to get where we are, and it only took about 50 years for the rest of the world to get there. So you see it's such a fast evolution, food sovereignty is a necessity to retake our rights that are being taken from us through violence. That gives it a different type of quality within this story. It gives it quality of understanding when we talk about food sovereignty we're not just talking about policies and price supports to make sure we're don't just keep losing farmers and farmers don't keep getting into debt, not just that we can get more farmers, but so that we can get farmers who are producing agroecologically or 'organic' so that we can transform the model of production. Because the industrial model of production, the conventional or export-capitalist model of agriculture is at the root of all

¹³⁹ Ibid.

of this. So La Via Campesina and food sovereignty presents itself not as the alternative, but rather as a rehashing of the predominant model that for the majority of the world existed prior to the dawn of World War II.

Would you mind elaborating on agro-ecology and the relationship with the land that the farmer has?

So, I want to be very clear here... I'm going to talk about industrial farming, and I'm not talking about industrial farmers. I'm talking about the system of industrial farming, I'm not talking about or attacking the industrial farmers. I see myself aligned with them and their struggle. I'm not attacking the farmers. So, agro-ecology, much like food sovereignty, arose at the dawn of the twentieth century, because what happened at this time on the verge of WWI was the intro of the input model, that there was a German scientist that found that within the bean plant there are three main nutrients (macronutrients) based upon his metric, was nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus. Based on his model they began to produce a gospel of these three nutrients are needed for plant vitality, will increase yields, etc. This was at the dawn of WWI, which was in Germany, and toward the end of WWI the same minds were found within the US. Birth of Monsanto, birth of DuPont, birth of these extractive industries that essentially that were war industries, because they found that N, K, Ph, were all chemicals used during WWI. And so once the war was over they re-entered agricultural markets and they preached the gospel of inputs, and convinced people that you could increase yield by decreasing the number of crops you're growing in the field.¹⁴⁰

What can be seen here is recognition, in the same vein that of Mosser (and to a lesser extent Horodyski), in regards to farm inputs. Inevitably many industrial products come from the same processes and materials as bombs, they are, in some ways, products of war. So what we can see here is, once again, a direct refusal of chemical inputs that attempt to basically override natural processes and resulting in ecological exploitation. The negative affects can be more than just environmental. These industrial processes force people off of the land, which result in the dissociation of people and a "land-based reality," and contributes to alienation between food consumers and food producers. In Marcuse's terms this can be seen as the creation of false needs for farmers, the rise of

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

chemical inputs and industrial methods became economic necessities over the course of the twentieth century according to agronomists and the sentiment of mid-century US Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson's message to US farmers to "get big or get out."¹⁴¹ This along with Earl Butz' (in)famous declaration that farmers need to be planting "fence row to fence row," created an agricultural industry that was ripe for corporatization. As Snipstal is quick to mention, as the corporate industrial system was brewing, alternatives were forming as well:

So for us in the US you'll see pictures of the 1920s prior to the dust bowl so people on tractors with nine plows behind them. So this is that type of model and a bunch of resources and research began be pumped into this model of production. Well simultaneous to this in the late 20s and early 30s there was a Mexican scientist¹⁴² who began entering the fields of peasants in Mexico, and he began document the ways of the peasants and he began to write about the type of planting that was happening there and the densities, and the interactions between the ecosystems and the environment the biological activity, all those different things, and he began to document *the way* these people live. He didn't separate these things, he said they were all interconnected. He began to articulate agro-ecology and study in this way of the people at that time. Over the last 100 years agro-ecology has really exploded in a litany of ways, but to get to the essential point of your question, is that, *agro-ecology is not just a science, it's not just agronomy or ecology, it's not just agriculture, and it's a philosophy that has political and social dimensions* (emphasis added). And it has economic dimensions along with the ecological and biological and agricultural components, so it's an entire system that interfaced with society that provides us with a new model of development because of several things.¹⁴³

This passage has several implications. Food sovereignty, as it is understood by Snipstal, and I believe it is safe to say most food sovereignty advocates, requires reconciliation

¹⁴¹ James Earl Sherow, *The Grasslands of the United States*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO), 139.

¹⁴² Further research after the interview leads me to believe he was referring to Efraim Hernandez Xolocotzi, who was a Mexican ethnobotanist. Further reading on the foundations of agroecology and Efraim Hernandez Xolocotzi can be found in: Stephen Gliessman, *Agroecology: the Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems*, (Boca Raton: CRC press, 2007) 346.

¹⁴³ Abbott, Field Notes: Snipstal.

with the human and ecological violence and oppression that is found contemporarily in corporate agriculture, and historically with structural adjustments as well as colonialism. Food sovereignty, as such, forces a critical reassessment of what many understand as unproblematic historical and cultural norms. So it is possible that an honest interaction with food sovereignty as a paradigm by a member of one-dimensional society would foster resistance that goes deeper than planting a backyard garden or simply going to the farmer's market. The questions presented by food sovereignty are ontological as well, as Snipstal notes,

The question is how will us, the north, begin to dismantle this false individualism that's been seeded into our minds and be able to think and work and act collectively in a serious way, not just organizations or signing letters or showing up to rallies together, but really collectively building things, when can we have a poor people's camp again?¹⁴⁴

The questions run deeper, not just for citizens of the global north at large, but especially for farmers as mentioned above, and the masses of locavores, foodies, and/or urban homesteaders who are already sympathetic with the alternative food production for one reason or another. Snipstal recognizes this:

I consider myself an organizer, I use farming as an organizing tool...
...I'm a black farmer so, I use it to start conversations, to reintroduce the notion that agriculture is not just slavery. I use that as a healing tool as well, show that it is something we can take pride in as people. People of color, we can take pride in agricultural activity and more broadly we can all take pride in agriculture because we like to eat good food, and so, you know, I use it as entry point, because there is a growing consciousness in our country, for better or for worse, because of whatever motivation, surrounding food. People are talking more about food, about the health determinants that are related food, talking about environmental constrains that limit people's access to food, they're talking about attention and childhood and the ramification of having access to certain types of food.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Increasing evidence of climate change and peak oil together form an ecological crises that is functioning as “as the material catalyst for an economic and political transformation that could reverse the state-corporate colonization of the lifeworld and create forms of life in which the potential of modernity could be utilized in a more balanced fashion.”¹⁴⁶

It is quite clear that the proponents of food sovereignty are seeking to find a ‘new sensibility’ that is “aesthetic, life-affirming, and liberatory in character,”¹⁴⁷ to provide the conceptual categories and moral values needed to reintegrate humanity with Nature in an environmentally rational society where technology is art, work can be play, and ecology provides freedom.¹⁴⁸ To foster this ‘new sensibility’ mass conceptions of reality need to be altered, and immanent critique and a drive toward change in the food system can be a part of that, but will not necessarily be the answer. In Snipstal’s words activism and organizing are both “about love [being] at the core level of who we are as part of the human experience. There’s something that provokes us to be actively engaging in the transformation of reality, so that encompasses activism, organizing, farming, playing music, it encompasses whatever it is that you choose to do to bring life to the world.”¹⁴⁹ So the corporate industrial food system can be a previously normative subject matter that is shown to be highly problematic and is used to educate people about exploitation in normative parts of contemporary society, and hopefully driving them toward attempting to foster change. What could make coupling agroecology and food sovereignty together conceptually so powerful is that it, as Snipstal put it, “roots us in understanding that the

¹⁴⁶ Stephen K. White and Timothy W. Luke, “Critical Theory and an Ecological Path to Modernity,” in *Critical Theory and Public Life*, ed: John Forester, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 29.

¹⁴⁷ Luke, *Ecocritique*, 146.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 152.

¹⁴⁹ Abbott, Field Notes: Snipstal.

whole system has got to change, not just one little place, people can't just be planting community gardens all over the place, that's part of it, we also have to be changing our power dynamic."¹⁵⁰ While critics may look at agroecology or food sovereignty as protectionist or backwards and make outlandish claims like "the road to agricultural, economic, environmental, and food safety and security hell [is] paved with allegedly fresher and more nutritious local meals,"¹⁵¹ which is a stirring claim considering the agricultural, economic, environmental, and food safety and security issues that are caused by the current farm inputs, monocultures, CAFOs, structural adjustment, and export dumping. As with any movement proposing a shift in an existing, entrenched paradigm, the success of food sovereignty as a new sensibility will most likely be judged on the ability for the movement to obtain widespread support.

It is this author's belief that the decentralized and inclusive nature of the food sovereignty movement may prove to be its greatest asset. Because it is only steadfast on progressive issues it should not alienate a terribly large portion of the population, and hopefully its openness will allow for more hard-hitting critiques of global capitalism. All of these subjects very are very clearly acting outside the profit motive, and have an obvious ecological sensibility. Their initial motivations for starting to farm in non-industrial ways are somewhat varied, treatment of livestock (Griffin), distrust of poisonous inputs (Horodyski), health concerns (Mosser), and social justice (Snipstal) make up the main reasons for their choice. The fact that they all chose to refuse the corporate industrial food system for different reasons shows that these alternatives cannot

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu, *The Locavore's Dilemma*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012) XXIV. While these authors were directly critiquing the "local" movement, they also later claimed to be targeting promoters of sustainable, organic, and ethical foods as well.

just be explained away as gentrification or unimportant in relation to neoliberal capitalism. This project has identified alternative models of production that deserve deeper investigation. These results cannot predict the fall of corporate industrial agriculture, but rather shows refusals of that system that cannot be explained by neoliberal logic.

Conclusion

To conclude, while this project does not have much to say about the assurance of widespread transformation or toppling of corporate agriculture, these concentrated sites of resistance can speak to some trends that are ongoing in the contemporary food system. First, there are a variety of motivations that brings farmers to alternative production and often it is not about nice marketing or value added products. Second, ecology plays a major part for the farmers interviewed, even if it is not the primary reason they decided to refuse industrial agriculture. Third, their act of refusals almost necessarily creates interactions with other individuals whether it be at the farmer's market or through CSAs, farm visits, or however. These interactions can lead to education about the problematic food system and increase reflexive thought, that hopefully, will lead to more action past the simple consumption of grass-fed beef or organic produce. Initially it is the farmers who are refusing and the consumers of their products are making it possible, but the act of consumption plays only an auxiliary role in the refusal. Taking the act past consumption is necessary for any conception of a 'great refusal,' and could manifest as more people deciding to farm, political action related to agricultural issues, and of course abstinence from the products of exploitative industry.

Getting back to the farmers, despite these their tendency to set aside the profit motive and general disagreement with the imperative of perpetual economic growth their resistance is more ecological than it is economic. One of the most important things to take from these interviews and this project is that each of these farmers are fostering a new sensibility, a multi-dimensional sensibility that breaks can lift the one-dimensional man into a new social collectivity. Their acts of production are counter to the norms of

industry and in many ways each of the subjects interviewed are creating new social relations of production. They are transforming farming, which has for centuries been stigmatized as toil, into a craft, or even an art. This change could be monumental, because for there to be widespread change of the corporate industrial food system there has to be more people producing food than 1% of the population. If that were to take place on a significant scale, there could be a shift back to what Snipstal called a “land-based reality.”

It seems that these some of these movements are hinting at the same problems that Daniel Bell saw in the 1970s, that a lack of religion or spiritual foundation creates a gulf in culture resulting in a destructive nihilism.¹⁵² While neither Marcuse nor Agger address spirituality *per se*, Marcuse is especially sensitive to the nihilistic subject (aka one-dimensional man) that fails to recognize or lacks any sort of reflexive tendencies. The creation of new imaginings of society is precisely the power that the transition movement provides, whether it continues further or stays on the fringe, the education and awareness building could lay the groundwork for something greater later as “it is precisely the preparatory character of this work which gives it its historical significance: to develop, in the exploited, the consciousness (and the unconscious) which would loosen the hold of enslaving needs over their existence, needs which perpetuate their dependence on the system of exploitation.”¹⁵³ A conception of food sovereignty would give a great political education to the grass fed farmers, and help society move toward Agger’s slowmodernity through a great refusal of hegemonic corporate neoliberal capitalism. The more these organizations, especially ones focused on educating people go, the more they

¹⁵² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 4.

¹⁵³ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 57.

answer part of William Connolly's call for "positive existential orientations, relational tactics, local strategies, academic reforms, microeconomic experiments, large social movements, media strategies, shifts in economic and political ethos, and cross-state citizen action"¹⁵⁴ to counter the destructive nature of global capitalism and its resonance machine.

Applying Marcusean theory to these social movements helped clear up a lot of questions as far as how radical they are (or could be) and if there is emancipatory potential. It is the belief of this author that without a negation of hegemonic capitalism changes toward a positive sociological or ecological widespread substantive change cannot happen. None of the movements discussed in this paper are perfect, nor are they lost. Each one presents a method with which to step toward slowmodernity and the biggest lessons are that consumption cannot fix the problem, individuals are important, but working together people are much more powerful. Food can be an excellent starting point for people ultimately obtains a greater reflexivity in regards to their life as a whole. Even if it starts as consumption based habits, that can hopefully lead to a greater engagement with the environment. Recognizing agriculture's major role in the production of society is a major part of widespread social justice. How food is produced tells a lot about the priorities and tendencies of a culture at large, that society's relationship with nature, how it treats laborers, and through the health of the food, how it views itself.

The globalized nature of the current corporate-industrial food system provides a potential site for resistance because as Marcuse tells us "it is precisely in [capitalism's]

¹⁵⁴ William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 144.

global structure where the internal contradictions assert themselves.”¹⁵⁵ So, food production is at once a place where much can be learned and a rejection, resistance, or *refusal* can be manifested that can create an alternative worldview or lifestyle that contrasts with contemporary global capitalism. The central question of this project is whether or not instances of a Marcusean refusal can be found within alternative agricultural production. Marcuse’s agents that are to engage in the refusal, must insist “on a break with the continuity of domination and exploitation—no matter in what name,” and “insist not only on new institutions, but on self-determination.”¹⁵⁶ So from what groups can these refusers emanate? According to Marcuse “the proletariat has been largely incorporated and is no longer the privileged agent of classical Marxism,” then other “marginal groups, such as women people of color, students and the colonized can provide a critical perspective and subversive drive that could rescue the possibility of emancipation.”¹⁵⁷ Each of the farmers interviewed for this thesis emphasized the importance of youth coming to change the face of farming, for that to happen the youth has to be educated or informed about the contingent nature of the food system as it exists today, and its exploitative and violent past

Additionally Marcuse wrote “*The character of the opposition* in the centre of corporate capitalism is concentrated in the two opposite poles of the society: in the ghetto population (itself not homogeneous), and in the middle-class intelligentsia.”¹⁵⁸ It is my contention that small- and medium-sized farmers belong among these marginalized

¹⁵⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “Reexamination of the Concept of Revolution,” *New Left Review* I/56 (July/August 1969) p. 33 Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ John Ehrenbergh, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea*. (New York University Press: New York 1999) 213.

¹⁵⁸ Marcuse “Reexamination” 33

groups, and thus have potential to be part (perhaps a large part) of Marcuse's 'opposition.' While, for some, it may seem difficult at first to imagine farmers as subversive actors, but both historically in the United States and contemporarily in Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia farmers have been at the front of marches, have been the organizers of protests, and provided a critical lens with which to view oppression, and then actively resisted it.¹⁵⁹ So in the cases examined by this thesis there is a negation and a refusal on the part of the agent that is subverting instrumental rationality and the resultant exploitative industrial capitalism. While the farmers are refusing the corporate industrial food system, there are at the same time stuck within the global capitalist system they are resisting. Just farming in a certain way will not alone be a threat to global corporate capitalism, but it does provide an alternative, and it is an alternative that could be a foundational part of slowing down fast capitalism for its refusers.

¹⁵⁹ US context see: John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961)
For the European see: Jose Bove and Francois Dufour, *Food for the Future*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2005)
For the South American see: Annette Aurelie Desmarais, *La Via Campesina*, (Pluto Press: London, 2007)
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 18, 2013
TO: Bryce Abbott, Joyce Rothschild
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires May 31, 2014)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Cultivating Agricultural Resistance: Alternative Farming and New Social Ecologies
IRB NUMBER: 13-150

Effective March 15, 2013, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**
Protocol Approval Date: **March 15, 2013**
Protocol Expiration Date: **March 14, 2014**
Continuing Review Due Date*: **February 28, 2014**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Cultivating Agricultural Resistance: Alternative Farming and New Social Ecologies

Investigators: Joyce Rothschild and Bryce Abbott, Department of Government and International Affairs, Virginia Tech

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

This collection of interviews is part of a larger project: studying motivations of farmers who choose alternative styles of farming. These interviews will supplement published academic literature by providing ground-level primary source information on the motivations, struggles, and stories of farmers that choose to grow organically, implement agro-ecological methods, and/or raise livestock with pasture-based methods.

For the purposes of this project I will be interviewing farmers as well as members of farm-supporting organizations.

II. Procedures

Participation in this project will involve taking part in an open-ended, digitally-recorded interview. The investigator will pose general questions about your experience as a farmer or farm supporter and allow you to answer as you wish and to speak for as long or as briefly as you like. The investigator will record the interview on a digital audio recorder; no video recordings will be made. Interviews generally run from one to two hours, although some may run longer if you so desire. You will also have the option of dividing an interview into several short sessions if you believe it will run too long for one sitting. The research will take place at a time and place of your choosing.

III. Risks

There is no more than minimal emotional or psychological risk in participating in this research project. Since remembering unpleasant experiences may cause emotional distress, you are free to stop the interview at any time that you choose.

IV. Benefits

No promise or guarantee of personal benefits have been made to encourage you to participate. This project's findings will provide a larger societal benefit by bringing the story of alternative farmers and farm supporters to wider academic and public attention.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

These interviews are neither anonymous nor confidential. I will quote from them in my publications and will attribute statements and observations made by you to you, with your consent.

Interviews will be audio recorded on a digital recorder and then transcribed by the investigator. You will receive a copy of the transcription, which you will be able to edit and correct, before I use it in any publication. Interviews will not be destroyed. I will store copies of the recordings and transcriptions on my computer and in my office.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

There will be no compensation for participating in this research project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are also free to decline to answer any questions that you choose or to stop the interview.

VIII. Subject's Responsibility

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Your only responsibility is to answer questions posed by the investigator.

IX. Subject's Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I agree to allow the investigator to use my name in the preservation and use of material from this interview, and grant him permission to archive this material for his professional use. I have had all of my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge and give my voluntary consent to participate in this project:

Subject Name (Printed)

Subject Signature (Consent to be Interviewed)

Date

