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The agrarian origins of authoritarian rural populism in the United States: What can we learn from 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles in California and the Midwest?

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# The agrarian origins of authoritarian rural populism in the United States: What can we learn from 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles in California and the Midwest?

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## Abstract

*The 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president came as a surprise to many people – but generally not to farmers and rural communities. In this paper, we interrogate the politics of rural places in generating both support for and struggle against authoritarian populism. We ask: Why do the politics of the rural US seem so regressive at this current moment? What explains the rise and growth of white supremacist language, organization, action, and power? Looking to histories of small farmer and farm labor organizing in two key agricultural regions – California and the Midwest – we find some answers. California, we show, has been a principal site for honing the discourses, strategies, and tactics of consolidating right-wing power in the US. From ‘Associated Farmers’ front groups of the 1930s through Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, we follow the roots of authoritarian rural populism now re-emergent with Trump. The Midwest, in turn, sheds light on a rich tradition of rural organizing. Though often considered a bastion of right-wing sentiment, Heartland politics have successfully linked rural peoples to contest low crop prices, exploitative labor conditions, and regional disinvestments. In synthesizing lessons across cases, we provide a functional lens through which to understand contemporary prospects for emancipation. How can Othering and similar racialized constructs that have long been used to divide the working class and undermine rural organizing be dismantled? Can we meaningfully confront authoritarian rural populism without confronting the political-economic foundations of its development: notably, capitalism, its current manifestation in hegemonic neoliberalism, and failed approaches for reform? From these kernels of inquiry, we build towards a second paper focused on contemporary efforts to define and practice emancipatory change.*

**Keywords:** Trump, agribusiness, authoritarian rural populism, labor organizing, California, Midwest, radical agrarianism, Othering

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<sup>1</sup> \*These authors contributed equally to this work.

## 1 Introduction

On the presidential campaign trail in 2016, Donald Trump, a New York City billionaire and the unexpected Republican Party nominee, spun himself as a savior to a base of white working-class voters, many of them in rural areas. When he was elected as United States (US) President, in a victory that was a shock to city people and unsurprising to those tuned into rural America, these voters were blamed, and continue to be painted as irredeemable racist hillbillies not smart enough not to vote against their own best interests (e.g., Rich 2017; Krugman 2016).

Rural white voters have taken an outsized portion of the blame for a complex election cycle that included, among other factors, Democratic Party arrogance, racialized voter suppression, misogyny, and free media airtime for the billionaire candidate. In the end, while whiteness was the clearest predictor of a vote for Trump, his base was more middle- and upper class suburban voters than rural working class; the latter were simply those who tipped key states and thus the Electoral College. Still, caveats aside, the hard truth is that small-town and rural voters went 60 percent for Trump (Balz 2017). Whether those votes were because of, or in spite of, his racist, xenophobic nationalism, that fact deserves our attention.

Rhonda Perry, a cattle farmer and the program director of Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC), was one of those not surprised by the election's outcome. MRCC has been organizing farmers and other rural Missourians since 1985. "Nothing happened in November overnight that was not there on October 31", Perry says (pers. comm. 2017). The election, she indicates, should tune our ears to an alarm that's long been clanging – about poverty, dispossession, and alienation of rural people even in the heartland of Empire.

Consider these two facts side-by-side: A majority of white rural working-class citizens voted for Trump. Today, most of the white rural working class is not technically 'agrarian'; meaning: employed in agriculture or food system activities. What began in the post-World War II-era with the collapse of the New Deal agricultural system, including protected national grain markets, supply-side management, and international monetary controls, had by the 1980s coalesced into a full-fledged neoliberal order. Internationally, the ascendancy of the World Trade Organization ushered in an expansion of intellectual property rights, increased financialization of commodity markets, and accelerated liberalization of global trade. While the US is generally seen as imposing these conditions on the world, largely transnational corporate actors now control much of the farm and food system, aided by governments that work to ease regulations and 'free up' markets. As a result, most US farmers – and the rural regions in which they live – today are squeezed by the unprecedented power and profits of oligopoly agrifood companies. Since just 2013, according to US Department of Agriculture statistics, net farm income for US farmers has declined by 50 percent, and median income for 2017 is projected to be negative USD \$1325. Promised the bounties of 'comparative advantage', rural communities have instead received a surplus of insecurities: absentee land ownership, contract farming, structural indebtedness, scant social welfare supports, and precarious migrant labor.<sup>2</sup>

For folks remaining in such "transnational frontier towns" (Ortiz pers. comm. 2017), these stresses have taken their toll. In 2016, a study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that people working in agriculture – including farmers, farm laborers, ranchers, fishers, and lumber harvesters – take their lives at a rate higher than any other occupation (Weingarten 2017). The data suggest that suicide rates for agricultural workers in 17 states are nearly five times higher compared with those in the general population. Agricultural spaces in the US, then, offer an excellent opportunity to interrogate the rise of authoritarian populism – to understand why, as one of us recently wrote, "Rural America is mad" (Chrisman 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> If migrant labor is 'precarious' for the farmer, it is always more precarious for the laborer. According to USDA statistics, between 1999 and 2009, an estimated 50 percent of hired crop farmworkers in the US were non-citizens working without legal authorization.

Yet there is also more to this story than economic backlash of the white rural working class. In a country founded on Indigenous genocide and black slavery, the surge in Trump's popularity was also a neocolonial scapegoating. White communities in the US, particularly in the more racially homogenous suburbs and rural areas, already manifest a "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz 1998) and harbor 'Us-versus-Them' tendencies at the best of times. At the worst of times, these tendencies easily become full-fledged, spread, and go viral. Indeed, in patterns now being seen across Europe, India, the Philippines, and the US, authoritarian populists excel at using neoliberal crisis to inflame latent strains of fear-based hatred. Racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, and a range of anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and nativist sentiments are wielded very effectively by Trump-types to deflect attention from elites, turning marginalized white farmers against yet other marginalized communities.<sup>3</sup>

"[T]he panic of white slavery lives on in our politics today", writes Ta-nehisi Coates (2017). He points out that the post-2016 election US media obsession with the white working class has painted them as sympathetic victims in need of help and understanding, while the fact that black communities face poverty, joblessness, addiction, and other challenges has long been portrayed as the normal way of the world. We agree that this construction is all too common and reject how the narrative upholds a white supremacist order. Contradictions between race and class alliances abound in US society, far beyond the Midwest. Our examination of and focus on rural white working-class hardship seeks not to "award grievance and moral high ground" (ibid) to their struggles, but to elevate moments when their response – their organizing strategies – has gone beyond "bonds of whiteness" (ibid) to work with and for others in larger emancipatory struggles. We also take inspiration from Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, who on intersectional organizing writes, "It is one thing to respect the organizing that has gone into the movement against police violence and brutality ... but quite another to conceive of black oppression and anti-black racism as so wholly unique that they are beyond the realm of understanding and, potentially, solidarity from others who are oppressed" (2016:187). Interracial solidarity has had important historical successes at shifting bases of power and material conditions, and we focus on these vital moments of exception to the long history of racial oppression and brutality exposed by Coates, Taylor, and so many other activists and scholars, known and unknown.

To understand the conditions that gave rise to the current manifestation of authoritarian rural populism (ARP) under Trump, we examine the longer-term development of rural politics over the previous century in two of the country's leading agricultural regions: the US Midwest and California. We have chosen these areas as they represent the two most productive agricultural regions in the US – indeed some of the most productive on Earth. Moreover, in both regions, racialized constructs of entitlement have long been used to divide the working class and undermine class-based organizing and emancipatory political change. Their differences are also important. As we will show, the peculiar history of agrarian capitalism in California provides insights into the longer history of authoritarian populism in the US wherein the strategies, discourses, and tactics of consolidating right-wing power developed through a combination of racialized propaganda and policy, Cold War fearmongering, and liberal defusing of more-radical possibilities offered by Left movements. Turning to the Midwest (often considered contemporarily as a bastion of rightwing sentiments), we will examine its relatively unknown history of Leftist organizing. In looking at the Midwest through the lens of rural farmer struggles from the 1920s through the 1980s, we will explore how such efforts successfully linked rural discontent over low crop prices, exploitative labor conditions, and regional disinvestment to broader narratives regarding class conflict and capitalist trajectories. The loss of these rural movements, we argue, has left a gap that white nationalist organizing has filled, building a populist base for the Right, and eventually Trump's mobilization of ARP rhetoric.

Our paper develops as follows. First, we sketch a theoretical framework to help guide this story. We then introduce the US Midwest and California cases, noting how their distinctive agricultures were produced by patterns in US settlement more broadly. Second, we look to California as guide for the proto-history of authoritarian populism, briefly reviewing key trends in the 1930s and the 1960s-

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to acknowledge, of course, that the rural US is not homogeneously white or pro-Trump – facts with key political implications, as we explore further below.

1980s. Next, we turn to the Midwest, where Leftist agrarian agitation is traced back to the 1870s, through a particularly active period of organizing in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, we analyze what these cases collectively say about dynamics between ARP, agrarian change, and struggles for emancipation. From this analysis we propose a functional lens through which to understand contemporary prospects for ‘emancipation’.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, our aspiration here is not to explain how specifically Donald Trump ascended to the presidency, but how the lineage of ARP – of which Trump is merely the current, visible, and arguably most frightening example – informs political possibilities in the present. What is particular – and what is generalizable – about this agrarian moment?

## 2 Theoretical Framework: Othering, World Ecology, and Inklings of Emancipation

ARP, at its base, has thrived on the creation of one or multiple ‘Others’ (Said 1979). In the words of Said (2000: 577), to build a conceptual framework around the Other is in effect to accept an Us-versus-Them mentality:

...to pretend that the principal consideration is epistemological and natural—our civilization is known and accepted, theirs is different and strange—whereas, in fact, the framework separating us from them is belligerent, constructed, and situational.

Frequently pitting marginalized Whites against seemingly advantaged immigrants and communities of color, authoritarian populism prevails upon both nationalism and racism to construct a ‘People’ whose rights and entitlements are constantly besieged by threatening crowds. Authoritarianism is not of course unique to populism, but popular support helps to consolidate authoritarian rule. In ARP, authoritarian militarism, violence, surveillance, and criminalization of dissent combine with economic interventions to reinforce elite hegemony. These interventions are both justified and obscured through rhetorical appeals to the People, frequently on the basis of perceived exceptionalism, entitlement, and belonging.

Locating these US-specific dynamics within the longer *durée* of capitalism, we can see a common origin and extended lineage of these multiple forms of Othering. An historical ‘world-ecology’ perspective illuminates capitalism’s co-evolution with the emergence of colonization and state-formation, war-making and finance, gender roles and patriarchy, and racialization and white supremacy. These combine with imperatives for exploitation and separation from ‘Nature’ propelling capitalism as a world-making ecology along ever-expanding frontiers (Moore 2015). Moore’s key insight here is to see how capitalism requires not just the incorporation of labor and resources *into* circuits of capital in order for accumulation to take place, but also the continued *cheapening* or *nonpayment* of human and nonhuman natures, and their work. That is, capitalism requires people and nature to be systematically undervalued in thought and practice – from the slaves of Africa, to the indigenous of the New World, to women of patriarchal households, to the resource bases underlying industrial development (Moore 2017a). Othering, we argue, has formed a vital tool to maintain this cheapening for colonizers and capitalists ever since – whether the Othering of people to become less than human, or the Othering that comes with the dualist conception of ‘Nature’ versus ‘Society’.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, to counter the Othering that is key to ARP *and* to capitalism writ-large, we propose that an essential role of (rural) organizing is to build new forms of power that work across multiple hierarchies of difference and domination. If Othering has historically worked to constitute ideas of Self and non-self, and therein to legitimize human genocide, dispossession, and surplus extraction; if it has constituted ‘nature’ as Other than ‘people’ – therein making extraction, exploitation, and accumulation possible – then an emancipatory politics begins with countering these dichotomous understandings.

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<sup>4</sup> In a follow-up paper, we will apply this paper’s historical and theoretical analysis to a contemporary study of rural organizing in our same case locations.

<sup>5</sup> While the ‘Society/Nature’ interface is an important element in the rural origins of ARP, and for prospects of emancipation, we do not in this paper deal in depth with this immense topic.

‘Emancipation’, in this sense invites us to rewind some 228 years to a seminal treatise in Western political thought: the eighteenth-century *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. Influenced by ‘natural rights’ discourses, the text – which later inspired the first ten amendments to the US Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights – proposed that the rights of all men are universal, valid at all times and in every place, and are intrinsic to human nature itself. Half a century later, in *The Jewish Question*, Marx (1844 [2008]) grappled with the contradictions buried deep in this credo of Western ideology. “Liberty”, he observes, “consists in being able to do everything which does not harm others”. But just as the limits within which anyone can act are defined by law – “as the boundary between two fields is determined by a boundary post” – the right of man to liberty, appears to be based on a profound separation:

...not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself... The practical application of man’s right to liberty is man’s right to *private property*.

Centuries later, scholars and activists continue to grapple with the same question: why is it the right of *separation*, rather than the right of coming together, that informs our basic patriotic notions of liberty – or emancipation? Critical agrarianism (Wittman 2009; Carlisle 2014), counter-histories of liberalism (Losurdo 2011), and feminist critical theory (Fraser 2000; 2017) all provide insights we briefly consider here. Reviving Marx’s provocations, critical agrarianism traces a Western liberal lineage of ‘old white men and property’ – from Locke through Jefferson to now – in which “labor and soil, converted into property, beget political standing, expressed as citizenship” (Carlisle 2014: 136). Although rooted in individual, one-White-man-to-one-unit-of-land relationships, the influences of environmental stewardship, food justice, and food sovereignty have profoundly shifted the way agrarianism is practiced and analyzed. Wittman, for example, has coined ‘agrarian citizenship’ to describe patterns of social-ecological solidarity among the Landless Workers Movement (MST) of Brazil: “By contesting the equation of property with citizenship, agrarian citizenship, as expressed and enacted by members of the MST, goes beyond traditional or liberal conceptions of rights linked to individual property, production, or possession” (2009: 121).

As the work of Wittman, Carlisle, and others suggest, agrarian emancipation grows partly through *freedom from* this liberal cosmivision, where private ownership and individualism form the crux of citizenship rights. It also emerges from thinking agroecologically, penetrating staid binaries between nature and non-human nature. Thus, instead of Jefferson’s vision of multiple one-to-one tethers between farmer and landscape, these agrarianisms configure a dense socio-ecological network of community/human relations, which is in turn both produced by and tightly bound to land (Carlisle 2014).

If the critical agrarianism literature has taken a hatchet to ‘old white men and property’, philosophical inquiries remind us of the co-produced natures of emancipation and un-emancipation. Arguing that liberalism and slavery were born of the same womb, Losurdo (2011) tracks exclusions from the liberal polity through the US South during and after the Civil War; across the British domination of Irish paupers in workhouses after the Glorious Revolution; and within the French colonial exploits of 1848. Here, Losurdo suggests, we encounter the underbelly of liberal political freedom – the discourse of universal suffrage, human rights, liberty from arbitrary state power. Such freedoms have always entailed some communities’ exclusion from the liberal polity, from the ‘community of the free’. Importantly, the fact that inclusion and exclusion from emancipation are mutually interdependent, mutually causal, and internally related is not in fact a contradiction or the result of hypocritical politics; it is simply the foundation for the modern liberal-statist order.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patel and Moore (2017) and Agamben (2005) make similar points regarding sovereignty and rights under liberal states developed during the ‘long 16th century’: rights are always incomplete, subject to retraction, or simply not applied to certain people. Liberal states do not guarantee liberal rights for all, or for all time.

Feminist critical theory further brings us into contemporary times with a critique of emancipation vis-à-vis ‘progressive neoliberalism’. Referring to the turn in the 1990s in which liberals enthusiastically embraced ‘diversity’, ‘multiculturalism’, and ‘inclusion’, while continuing to enact neoliberal policies that increase inequality and produce racial polarization, Fraser (2017) contends that emancipatory politics have been stripped of their original radical potential. In strokes that created an alliance between mainstream currents of new social movements for feminism, civil rights, LGBTQ rights with business sectors of Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and Wall Street, putatively liberatory forces were effectively joined with finance capital. Progress for women, blacks, and queers became based on meritocracy instead of equality, and ‘emancipation’ was distorted as the rise of a few talented ladies, people of color, and gays in a cutthroat corporate hierarchy. Gone was the notion, Fraser suggests, that we might abolish hierarchies altogether (Fraser 2017). Lost was the possibility of conversation about *all* inequalities – structural, cultural, epistemic, ecological – and the ways they are imbricated.

These strands of theory help situate the historical cases to which we now turn. Looking at 20th century struggles over land, labor, rights, cultural dominance, and political power in California and the Midwest, we ask where, how, and under what conditions did authoritarian populism emerge? In which ways was it slowed and countered? What can we learn?

### **3 Key Agrarian Histories of 20th-Century California and the Midwest**

#### *3.1 A brief sketch of California and the Midwest*

The United States of America’s Midwest region and the state of California encompass some of the most productive agricultural land on earth; together they produce the vast majority of US food and fiber. The regions are separated by a third of a continent and have starkly different climates, farm products, demographics, and histories, but were built on a common foundation of ‘manifest destiny’, with all of its political and cultural imperatives.

In the nineteenth century, as the US government cleared the lands west of the Mississippi of their indigenous inhabitants, it offered land and other enticements to European immigrants to repopulate the taken territory, through the Homestead Act and other provisions. For the settlers – many of whom were given legal title to agricultural lands – a role as colonial shock troops for national expansion dovetailed with their role as pioneers of a new agrarian capitalist class. Euro-descended settlers ‘became white’ (see Dunbar-Ortiz 2015), an important currency in their new land. A Christian moral ethic also became enshrined in family farming. Skeptical of ostentation, lauding perseverance through hardship, and not least, reifying man’s dominion over nature (and woman), the homesteading farmer grafted ‘God and country’ onto the roots of the Midwestern agrarian imaginary.

From 1820 to 1860, the US white population west of the Appalachian/Allegheny mountains grew from 1.8 million to 15 million (Dunbar-Ortiz 2011) – and kept pushing westward. By the time it settled into California, the implications of manifest destiny had shifted. In the post-Gold Rush era, vast tracts of land, once controlled by Native California tribes, Mexican rancheros, and the US government, were divvied up into private holdings. To meet the relative worker scarcity, “amber waves of labor” (Walker 2004: 66) involving one hired group after another were brought to California fields. Mostly non-white and immigrant labor, they were pulled through the farmgate “in repetitive cycles of recruitment, employment, exploitation, and expulsion” (ibid). As a result, California’s agriculture was more capitalist from the get-go: its political economy revolved around high crop values re-capitalized into high land values and rents, leaving growers with few options but to squeeze surplus value from niche commodities, new technologies, and not least, wage labor.

In both California and the Midwest, racialized constructs of entitlement have long been used to divide the working class and undermine class-based organizing and emancipatory political change. While prejudices appear to conveniently map onto social realities – a white worker who quits milking at the local dairy due to declining wages is not inaccurate if he says the Mexican immigrant who fills his position has ‘taken my job’ – they maintain hegemony by obscuring structural causes of rural

degradation. Wage loss, debt, rural outmigration, and psychological stress cannot easily be traced to roots of surplus production and liberalized trade when near-hand human culprits are blamed instead. Powerful agribusiness elite have often therefore created and promulgated tropes of racial inferiority and undeservedness, stoking anger and resentment among the white working poor and rapidly shrinking middle class. But while white workers may feel temporary reprieve or vindication, what often gets masked instead is precarity of *all workers* (including many farmers) in rural company towns.

As the two principal agricultural areas in the US, our case study regions share these historical basics. Their differences are also important. In the sections that follow, we elaborate on characteristics unique to each region as they pertain to our project at hand: to understand the ways in which ARP has developed at the intersection of agribusiness capital, the state, and a spectrum of rural and working-class interests and struggles.

### ***3.2 California: ‘Like the rest of country, but more so’***

*A handful of land barons seized the arable lands, mobilized an army of farm workers to operate the vast estates, secured governmental programs to tame the arid environment and chaotic markets, and freely used repression to block challenges. (Jenkins 1985: 29)*

California offers a rare case of an agricultural society that developed as dominantly capitalist from its early origins (Walker 2004; Guthman 2014), and thus (unlike the Midwest case) offers a view where there is not an idealized ‘family farm’ agrarian past to go ‘back to’. California alone accounts for 11 percent of total US agricultural output, virtually all of which is concentrated in three areas: the Central Valley, the Central Coast, and the Imperial Valley. In the center of the state, the Central Valley is an 18,000-square-mile region supporting production of dairy products, cattle, vegetables, fruits, and nuts. California’s farm economy has been structured around large grower owners and an Other-ized labor class, comprised, with some exceptions, of people of color. Today, the state is forty percent Latino, and Central and South American immigrants, whether permanent residents, guest workers, or undocumented, comprise the majority of the farm labor force. Utopian and otherwise alternative and contrarian efforts in food systems reform have most often been reincorporated into these dominant relations rather than fundamentally reconfiguring them (e.g. Guthman 2014).

The solid rooting of agricultural dynamics in capitalist relations within the state has been consolidated by a rather entrenched system of grower political power. ‘Growers’ – i.e., economic bosses of the agribusiness sector – are in some ways (ethnically, countries of origin) relatively diverse, but politically have tended to unite as blocs around common issues that manage or threaten their continued class power. Using the parlance of contemporary politics, the grower class in California is solidly ‘conservative’ or right-wing. This is rather unsurprising, as class interests as owners of the means of production and heavy reliance on flexible and underpaid labor to ensure profitability of specialty crops have led to a stark and antagonistic grower/worker politics. California is thus like the US farm economy as a whole, but more so.

These capitalist origins go back to the wheat era of the late 19th century, when the global market introduced large-scale monocultural production and associated labor regimes. Since this era, there have been moments where the family farm imaginary was relevant, and where smaller-scale enterprises were economically viable. However, labor being provided by the farm family, applied on land owned by that family, has for California largely existed not as reality of economic structure or character of farming operations, but as a myth and a marketing tactic to sell products. The real contours of farming were formed by post-Gold Rush capitalist market development, along with land and water laws advanced at the federal and state levels. As Brown and Getz (2008: 1185) note:

*Historically, the state apparatus has been utilized to subsidize agribusiness interests, from the initial commodification and distribution of land, to subsidization of land improvements (especially water) and technical assistance through the land grant universities, to the management of labor flow.*

In California, that labor flow has largely consisted of serial attraction and expulsion of immigrant and non-white populations. Just as occurred nationally, early government policy supported vigilante murder of indigenous peoples and was a precondition for all later rural ‘development’ in California (see Lindsay 2015). As others have analyzed in depth, race and racism are therefore central to understanding the making of ‘California Ag’ and with it, the state’s broader political-economic history (Almaguer 2008; Street 2004). Anti-Chinese white worker populism had its roots in early San Francisco, and included both urban and rural elements (Saxton 1971). The ‘Valley of Heart’s Delight’, also known as the Santa Clara Valley, became a fruit production bonanza only due to the inputs of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and other (mainly Asian) immigrant laborers; when these workers organized themselves, as they often did, race-based reactionary movements emerged (Tsu 2013). In this context, grower and political elite responses to farm-centered crises have been laden with racism, xenophobia and violence.

Particularly since the early 20th century, ARP as a specific form of hegemonic power has developed out of reactions by political and economic elites (particularly, the grower class) to struggles by working class non-elites, at times buoyed by sympathetic interventions from elite non-Conservatives. In the following two examples, we illustrate how organizing by primarily agrarian labor but also civil rights, racial justice, and antiwar movements have provoked reactions in the form of authoritarian populism – the result of which were expansions of right-wing power in the state and nationally.

*1930s: The rise of right-wing power through agrarian struggles*

Some of the most important histories of emancipatory efforts among working class populations come from 20th-century struggles of farm labor. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were an early effort to bring Californian rural workers together around an emancipatory program, starting in the first decade of the 1900s (Hall 2001). As an essentially anarchist pan-international labor union, the IWW sought to organize farmworkers for immediate material gains and to foster a post-capitalist future. They shared this larger transformative vision with communist and socialist trends in worker and political agitation nationally, which grew among the working class in the first few decades of the 20th century despite harsh repression by state and private authorities.

Nationwide upheavals around the labor politics inflected by this radicalism – strikes and workplace organizing in particular – brought about a response from the liberal political elite. That response became codified in the 1930s New Deal package of laws, an uncommon instance of federal legislation that was developed and implemented in favor of worker interests, rather than narrowly on behalf of capital (Piven and Cloward 1978). Admittedly, for political elites like Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal was seen as necessary for dampening the subversive potential of socialism: give workers a welfare net, and they are less likely to foment political revolution. Offered increased ability to form unions, access to pensions through work, and access to affordable state medical insurance, large segments of the previously restive working class were effectively diverted from Communist insurgency.

In a classic instance of the perennial ‘reform versus revolution’ debate, reform won out. At the same time, the New Deal had an unintended mobilizing effect on farmworkers in California. Though they technically were technically left out of the New Deal’s labor protections (along with domestic workers),<sup>7</sup> due to an unholy alliance with Southern Democratic politicians whose votes were needed to pass the legislation, farmworkers began to assert themselves in the fields. They were emboldened by the general context of a society increasingly accepting of workplace organization, unions, and workers’ rights. A strike wave began “spontaneously” in California’s fields in 1933: “In all, thirty-seven strikes involving almost fifty thousand workers delayed or destroyed the harvests of about two-thirds of the

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<sup>7</sup> Domestic workers were left out of the New Deal for similar reasons to farmworkers: to Southern congressmen it was imperative to keep the black labor force that comprised most farm and domestic workers in the US South subjugated and marginal.

state's fruits, vegetables, and cotton" (Olmsted 2015: 41-42). The cotton strike itself, "the largest farmworkers' strike in US history" (ibid, 40) led to US government intervention to mediate.

While the New Deal also served the grower elite in California (notably, it was during this time that the Central Valley Water Project was constructed with federal funds to deliver cheap water to capitalist agriculture across the Valley), overall the effect was to bolster labor's position relative to capital. In this process, the liberal regime at the federal level, fostered and protected by mass investment in its reformist intent among the national populace, came up against an illiberal regime of the grower class in California. Already used to squashing the rights of rural workers, the grower class formed the base of incipient ARP in the state, against the incipient pro-labor New Deal regime.

It is during this period that new political strategies for the Right emerged, particularly in response to labor organizing by Communists in California's Central and Imperial Valleys. Growers moved beyond the initial ad hoc (and tried-and-true) tactics of raw violence and repression. Brute force no longer worked, due to critical attention from the New Dealers and increasing public support for labor against capital (particularly industrial capital). Instead, as Kathryn Olmsted describes in her book *Right Out of California* (2015), growers and other business allies formed the 'Associated Farmers' front group, and through it developed key practical and ideological tools that led to a reframing of politics, linking conservatism to populism and de-legitimizing the emancipatory Left. These tactics and strategies have since underlain the current ascendancy of ARP as seen in Trumpism.

#### *Culture Wars: the holy alliance of social conservatism*

The central advance of California's grower class, however, was not based on class-driven narratives or economic appeals. Instead, it relied on forging political alliances around socially conservative values. Tying communism to racial upheaval and to nefarious social forces undermining Christianity and women's role in the household, "The growers designed their propaganda to exploit anxieties about challenges to racial, gender, and sexual norms" (ibid, 128). This tactic succeeded in getting white workers – especially the middle class – to oppose Central Valley worker struggles, on premises that these were leading inevitably to the destruction of the white social fabric. Protecting family, community, and nation became tantamount to supporting growers' interests. Similarly, growers benefited from the specter of 'outside agitators' who interfered in local issues; those outsiders included Jewish labor organizers who arrived from New York City (Jews at the time being considered an inferior 'race' to whites) and Mexicans who formed much of the striking agricultural workforce (Mexicans described as "childish foreigners who needed a firm hand and little pay" [ibid, 111]).

White reactionary populism was of course not new to this era. But the Associated Farmers' social conservative political line – spread through radio, leaflets, newspapers, civic groups of women and men – effectively used longstanding divisions and tensions in society to engender a white grassroots populism opposed to anything that could be associated with 'Communism', including even liberal reforms to the labor system pushed by New Dealers.

#### *Spinning Stories: mass media and manufacturing populist common sense*

Socially conservative values, of course, did not arise from nowhere. The discourse of conservatism depended deeply on institutions of civil society to create and affirm a populist 'common sense'. In the 1930s, the mass media and the emergent industry of 'PR' – professional consultants, campaign advisors, and advertisers – helped fulfil this role. A central maneuver was to equate labor organizing with communism. At the time, local prosecutors had begun acting in concert with the growers, informants, and anticommunist military intelligence operatives to bring charges against known labor organizers, accusing them of "criminal syndicalism" under California anti-sedition law (Olmsted 2015: 198). Aside from the outcomes that largely fell in favor of the growers, these court cases had the effect of mobilizing political fear about communists and radicals at large. Many of the trials were in fact show trials, based upon vacuous accusations, designed by experts, and paid for by growers. Along with similarly bankrolled election campaigns against liberals like gubernatorial candidate and author Upton Sinclair, they had the effect of turning public sentiment against worker unrest. Anticommunist narratives achieved major impact, supported by continuous editorials in the state's leading newspapers,

including the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and *Fresno Bee*. Majority owned and published by economic elites, major landlords, and capitalists, the media was literally directly invested in industrial agriculture.

Moreover, the Right began to treat liberals (New Dealers) as an arrowhead tip for radicalism (Communists and others). In equating the two positions – which then, as now, were mostly antagonistic – the Right managed to push politics rightward. If all pro-labor policy could be framed as communism, and communism was anathema for large swaths of the US populace, then the anti-labor position became ‘common sense’. Ironically, as Olmsted (2015: 105) points out, the author John Steinbeck and other liberal cultural icons inadvertently abetted the right-wing project of undermining a wider politics inclusive of racial and gender justice or revolutionary internationalism. While Steinbeck brought rural labor conditions and struggles to public attention, he also vilified Communist organizers and erased non-whites and women from his descriptions of the era’s social conditions and justice-seeking leadership. Reinforcing an assumption that achieving rights for native-born white working-class men was the horizon of political possibilities, the liberal artistic and political work of the New Deal-era (including Steinbeck’s) indicated that inclusion of women, people of color, or immigrants in political vision was at best foolhardy, and at worst ‘un-American’.

From Olmsted’s keen analysis of this era we can outline some of the key aspects of ARP that were developed and trialed in the early 20th century. ARP at its base relies on Othering, in this case, of (racialized) workers, communists, and certain kinds of privilege. In a textbook case of appealing to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ordinary folks would be protected against outside agitators interfering in local issues, against the breakdown of socially conservative values, and against the threat of incipient Communist rule. Liberal New Dealers who validated worker struggles all too easily became spun as communist enablers. Meanwhile, liberals’ own narrow visions of race and gender in forming an alternative hegemony were inadequate to cope with ascendant authoritarian power – especially when the Left-baiting narratives were paid for and crafted by California’s grower elites.

In sum, while storybook histories of the 1930s inevitably draw attention to Roosevelt bolstering a nation in times of crisis, the kernels of authoritarian populism were produced in the cauldron of New Deal liberalism, farmworker struggles, and conservative narratives that hitched both to the specter of an always-worse Communism. This demonization of radical insurgency relied on hegemonic forces of both coercion and consent: the former through a spike in vigilante violence, policing, and anti-labor legal actions; and the latter through cultural persuasion, mass media and a nascent PR machine. An additional important aspect of institutional support was the convenient absence of liberal leadership from the Roosevelt administration, when more active intervention on labors’ behalf could have tipped the scales away from ARP’s staunchest proponents, the growers. In that gap of federal pressure, ‘the State’ at local and regional levels helped entrench ARP hegemony. Grower political power was thus consolidated and maintained over opposition in processes that did not *start* in the 1930s but were *deepened* in this period through new strategies, enabling national expansion over the next 80 years.

#### *1960s-80s: New labor movements, urban/rural interactions, and consolidation of the Right*

Exhibiting the expected cyclical nature of response and counter-response, the insurgency of the United Farm Workers (UFW) came about in the 1960s following decades of failed attempts by other groups to organize farmworkers. Much has been written about the UFW (*inter alia* Ganz 2009; Jenkins 1985), but germane to this discussion is how these rebellions differed from the more communist-influenced efforts of the 1930s. Formatively, UFW struggles emerged alongside the Bracero Program of the US government, wherein from the 1940s to 1960s, Mexican workers were allowed into the country for temporary work (Mitchell 2010). Promised but never delivered pay equal to native US workers, the Braceros were harshly treated by employers and disliked by factions of the farm labor movement that saw them undermining local labor power. The Braceros were also demonized by conservative politicians who saw in them fearsome dirty foreigners, tainting white America. Under assault from both sides – by critics of Braceros’ presence in California, and by movements concerned with their dignity and rights – the program was fought over decades and finally ended in 1963.

The UFW, then, was not an internationalist workers movement like that envisioned by the Communists or the IWW. It was a unionization movement to achieve better wages and working conditions for certain parts of the agricultural labor force. Because that force was dominated by Mexican-Americans (or ‘Chicanos’), the movement linked itself more to the surge in ethnic struggles for recognition and representation (i.e., citizenship) rights than to a larger transformative political vision. It has therefore been justifiably described as parallel to the ‘civil rights’ movements focused on blacks. While it has been defensibly lauded for achieving those rights much more than farmworker movements before and since, those gains have been limited and tentative. Forty years later, UFW membership is small, few UFW union contracts remain, and farmworkers remain notoriously exploited (Brown and Getz 2008: 1186). Notably, distaste for the Bracero Program led into a distinctly anti-immigrant positioning of the union: supporting immigration and immigrants was considered antithetical to achieving farmworker rights, even if most of the Mexican-American and Filipino UFW members were from immigrant families themselves. This indicates the challenge of pursuing ‘emancipation’ across multiple axes of oppression, when ethnicity, migration status, and socioeconomic class are both overlapping and at odds in particular moments.

Though the UFW effort was solidly domestic and seeking rights for only a narrow band of workers, it did create certain new connections that had not existed in previous rounds of Californian farmworker organizing. Partnering with progressive churches, students, and groups of concerned consumers – groups generally more urban than rural – formed an essential strategy to build oppositional power to the grower class. Without the economic pressure of the UFW’s boycotts (particularly on the fresh-grape industry) that came out of these partnerships, it is unlikely they would have succeeded insofar as they did. An example was the mutual support between the UFW and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Though the BPP “was African American, militant, urban, and socialist and therefore differed in nearly every way from the largely Mexican American, nonviolent, rural, and Catholic UFW ... [the two groups’] willingness and ability to find class-based commonalities across racial lines ... enabled the UFW and the BPP to form a successful, mutually beneficial alliance” (Araiza 2009: 200).

### *The Reagan Lens*

US President Ronald Reagan provides a lens to see how right-wing strategies consolidated into an effective counterforce to the UFW and other insurgent and reformist initiatives from below.<sup>8</sup> Reagan was a vocally anticommunist actor during the McCarthy era, and made his mark by delivering his 1964 speech, “A Time for Choosing”, in support of far-right Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. In this speech, Reagan spoke to a vision of politics where government was the problem, and individuals and the market were solutions. Thus began a backlash to both Keynesianism and Communism that was repeated throughout his later campaign for California’s governorship, where he effectively whipped anti-Soviet zeal, US patriotism, and white supremacy into a glide towards Chicago School economic policy. In his run for Governor of the state in 1966, Reagan sounded some now-familiar tropes: he promised to ‘clean up the mess at Berkeley’, while deploying racially coded terms for blacks in ‘sending the welfare bums back to work’. Later, in 1969 during the grape boycott, he ate grapes live on television, a direct affront to the UFW and its supporters, but giving solace and energy to his white resentment-filled base. (This performance in some ways prefigures the contempt of the neo-fascist ‘alt-right’ for what they derisively call ‘social justice warriors’.)

As Governor of California, Reagan cracked down on popular insurgencies of the late 1960s. Student movements against racism and the Vietnam War and for ‘free speech’ (particularly at University of California, Berkeley) were causing such disruption as to require a ‘law and order’ response. Liberals like the University of California’s president Clark Kerr, in Reagan’s view, were only enabling the rabble to cause trouble. Those same liberals – whom Reagan called “a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol” (Reagan 1964) – were using government to run roughshod over “our rights” to “plan for ourselves” (ibid).

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, space limits prevent a full discussion, but historically significant efforts in this time period to advance land and water reforms were nearly successful, yet failed in the 1980s when Reagan became president (Barnes 1975; Welch 2017).

These tactics were taken further during Reagan's eventual election to the US presidency in 1980. To this point, Reagan was best known as a populist. Entering the political limelight through a career in television and film and brief military detour (based in the US) helped win him lasting recognition as a guy with an "avuncular style, optimism, and plain-folks demeanor" (Dreier 2011). Pivoting from an Roosevelt-supporting Hollywood actor to a Goldwater-conservative, Reagan quickly settled into the laissez-faire philosophies and free-market logics that would define his legacy. Together with UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Reagan helped neutralize the political foment of the 1960s and 1970s – anti-Vietnam unrest, the civil rights movement, the free speech movement, the environmental movement – by splitting their critique of capitalist corporations away from their indictments of an interventionist state. In an uncanny manipulation, Reagan and his surrounding backers captured ideals of individual freedom and turned them against 'Big Government', seen as bloated, inefficient, and hostile to freedom.

The hitch, of course, is that neoliberalism has always needed government (and arguably big government) in order to function (Harvey 2005; Busch 2010). On one hand a "*utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism" and on the other, "*a political* project to restore the power of economic elites" (Harvey 2005: 19), neoliberalism embeds dual, sometimes contradictory, tendencies. While the utopian economic design posits an invisible hand with little state intervention, the political project knows better – and so did Reagan. As president, he refined the notion that a neoliberal state performs essential functions. It must provide the legal and institutional apparatus to ensure private property rights. It must bolster industry through investment, research and infrastructure, and tax (alleviation) policy. Importantly, it must use the coercive powers of intelligence, military, and police to surveil, make war, and keep restive populations in line.

Reagan and his circles thus ushered in contemporary global capitalism through strategies developed from ARP of the 1930s and honed under his governorship of California. Across a career that had him sending in the National Guard to suppress university uprisings (resulting in one death and many injuries), supporting a repeal for Second Amendment protections (specifically to take away Black Panthers' ability to protect themselves from police), and continually squashing the rights of brown immigrants, he continued to maintain the glowing profile of the country's most popular leader ever. This potent mix of authoritarianism and populism, we suggest, aided his ability to unleash neoliberalism: the most socially and ecologically corrosive political-economic project of modern times. Beginning with the welfare state – and its supposedly corrupt and illegitimate support for racially-coded populations of welfare queens' – Reagan proceeded to cripple most state functions that did not favor the 'pure market' system he claimed to advocate.

In California, these political tactics still reverberate. A decade before he rose to the Presidency, resentful property owners (largely white) launched the so-called 'Tax Revolt' of the late 1970s. Supported by Reagan, they voted for Proposition 13, which froze existing property taxes and made it nearly impossible for the state to create new taxes. Thus, while Reagan projected neoliberal ideals of deregulation and minimal state interference, he simultaneously leveraged experience as an authoritarian populist in California to bring state power forward in a different way – where it could restore and expand elite rule.

### ***3.3 The US Midwest: Blocking highways, badgering politicians, and penny-auctioning in corn country***

In contrast to California, where a powerful 'grower class' honed authoritarian populist tactics against organized farm labor, in the Midwest, farmers themselves have often been on the subordinate side of struggle. While most often depicted as a land of sleepy main streets, conservative Christian family values, and American patriotism, the rural Midwest has a long history of emancipatory, farmer-based movements. If in California class authoritarian politics tended to pit capital against labor, in the Midwest, the region's developmental history created a finer crosshatch of antagonistic lines: growers have frequently been divided by scale, with larger farmers (perhaps defined most simply as those

farming the most land, though the acreage considered ‘large’ has changed significantly over time), often allied with industrialists touting a technology-reliant future, working not only against smaller farmers but also against rural labor and the rural poor more generally.

The Midwestern ‘corn belt’ is comprised of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin; some accounts also include North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and northern Oklahoma. Those first eight states have over 127 million acres of agricultural land, 75 percent of which is now in corn and soybeans (USDA 2017a). Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) account for much of the output as well. Despite an expanding population of Latino, Karen, Somali, and other migrants lured by jobs in meatpacking plants and dairies, the region is overwhelmingly white. Most farms are still family-run, but changes in federal agriculture and trade policy – which dismantled supply management and price supports while entrenching corporate and transnational export markets – have caused farms to grow in recent decades, concentrating wealth in fewer hands and increasing inequality (FWW 2012). In Iowa, for example, the number of hog farms dropped from 49,000 in 1982 to 8800 in 2007, while the total number of hogs raised in the state in that time nearly doubled; the remaining hog farms grew by a factor of nearly 11 from 1982 to 2007. Similar patterns of corporate (and land) concentration can be seen across all farming sectors and related industries.

Critically, the legacy of Midwestern farming built on a base of family-owned and -run farms also presents a different cultural and political baseline than in California. In the Midwest, agriculture prefigured capitalist agribusiness, as farms often functioned both as homesteads and for market production, providing a stronger sense of productive relationships surpassing exchange value. Of course, this legacy was itself predicated on the dispossession of land from indigenous peoples and the erasure of settler colonialism from the agrarian imaginary.

The formation of an agricultural production system predicated on a settler-colonial landholding elite and transient labor forms the terrain upon which small farmer and rural labor alliances have struggled to form and gain power in the agricultural Midwest. Landscape simplification and agricultural industrialization were co-produced alongside key ideological developments that cemented an ethos of production, efficiency, and personal responsibility – an ethos primarily driven by the corporate interests that stood to benefit (see, e.g., Ritchie 1979). As farm size grew and farm production became increasingly dependent on mass-produced inputs and global trade, the popularity of production controls, conservation, and diversified farming techniques decreased, along with non-monetary value of vibrant rural communities. Rather than a critical analysis of either dynamics *in situ* or the manipulations of agribusiness, the supposed threats of outside influences such as Communism, urban elitism, or black and brown immigrants were juxtaposed with an ideal of white-led, Heartland production to form solid blocs of fiscal, social, and political conservatism. Today, the industrial model of agriculture is well-entrenched culturally in the Midwest as well as economically, as groups like the Farm Bureau and commodity associations (which represent agribusiness) have successfully intertwined the narrative of their own interests with those of the ever-declining numbers of farmers and rural residents who remain. Industrial agriculture is ‘patriotic’ and required to ‘feed the world’; to question that doctrine is anathema to the cultural mores and dominant intellectual and business institutions extant in the rural agricultural Midwest. In these conditions, ARP has thrived in the last decade: with the exceptions of Illinois and Minnesota, all Midwestern states’ electoral votes went for Donald Trump.

These outcomes are not incidental, but are rather results of a long history of large-scale agriculture and industry colluding against smallholders, workers, and the rural poor in the Midwest. Roy Robbins (1942: 268) argues that rather than supporting smallholders, the Homestead Act, besides robbing dispossessed Native Americans, squarely subordinated the interests of the farmers it purported to help to corporations and speculators:

The actual settler, the placer miner, the hand logger, and the individual grazer were all at a disadvantage in competing with the corporation and moneyed interests ... Legal regulations

were evaded, the honest settler was thwarted; in fact, a system of landlord-tenant and land concentration was growing upon American soil.

Thus, the ability of alternative, populist political movements to change material, cultural, and social relations in the countryside has long been challenged by policies and powerful actors favoring capital accumulation and resource concentration. Yet, time and again, farmers across the Midwest have risen to contest these trends, creating cross-sector alliances that sought to re-establish farmer control over land, community, and capital-building institutions for transformative social and political change in the Heartland. We focus here on two periods of radical farmer organizing in the upper Midwest: (1) Left agrarian populist movements between 1910 and 1930 in response to diminishing farm profitability and low farmgate prices; 2) rural agrarian responses to what was known as the 1980s farm crisis. The ways in which these farmers and organizers combined grassroots protest tactics and Left populist political ideologies links these case studies across time. In the early 20th century, the common ideology of 'Equal Rights' facilitated recognition and solidarity between farmers and workers, both groups self-identifying as 'producers' who fought victimization at the hands of economic exploitation (Brody 1983). During the 1980s, the primarily white farm movement also created broad alliances, including with black farmer groups and organizers, urban populations, and faith organizations. We also discuss how political possibilities during both periods were constrained by antagonisms between farm interests and unionized labor, the mobilization of racialized scapegoating to explain structural economic and political problems, and both overt and covert forms of State and industry control of rural spaces.

*Left Agrarian populism: The Non-Partisan League and the Farm Holiday Association in the upper Midwest*

Left agrarian movements can trace their roots to the late 19th-century Populists, which therefore merit a brief mention. In opposition to the unchecked rise of monopoly corporations driving down farm prices in the 1870s, farmers from Texas to the Plains states began to form cooperatives in order to set their own prices. Allied from their beginnings with the workers' union, Knights of Labor, the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union founded the third-party People's Party in 1890. Two years later, their Presidential candidate received eight percent of the vote and carried five states; in 1894, they won eight Congressional seats, 21 state executives, and 465 state legislators. (Judis 2016: 27) In their efforts to unite the "producing classes" against "organized capital" (Goodwyn 1978: 118, 115), the party saw workers and farmers as natural allies. They also had success in recruiting black farmers, including some who became traveling lecturers for the cause, though in the virulently racist post-Reconstruction South, curbing corporate monopoly did not have the same ring of salvation for black farmers as it did for white. A philosophical and strategic rift eventually divided the national party and led to its downfall. While some local leaders embraced anti-immigrant and white supremacist rhetoric, the construction of a multisectoral movement to combat the ruling class had a profound and lasting impact on US rural politics.

North Dakota's Non-Partisan League began in 1915, building on Populist and rural Socialist networks, and quickly spread across the region and into Canada. The group's central grievances concerned the widening gap between price received by producers and prices paid by consumers, becoming an anti-middleman, anti-urban grain traders' alliance of farmers (Hannan 2004). The League successfully used class-based political pressure to build electoral power, developing a well-articulated Left populism on the Northern Plains. It fueled resentment

toward the existing elite by condemning them as the oppressors who used patronage and controlled railways, banking, and grain elevators in order to ensure the continuance of their economic dominance. League propaganda then damned party politics as the machinery that allowed such oppression to continue (Hannan 2004: 15).

Its efforts resulted in increased farm wages (at least temporarily), formation of a political party, and the founding of a State bank and rural electrification projects, which still exist. Significant to the architecture of rural emancipatory political formations, the NPL built alliances between farmers and workers. For example, Minnesota NPL agrarians and state labor federations supporting a transit

workers' strike combined forces to found the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party in 1920 (Brody 1983: 145).

The Farm Holiday Association (FHA), the most successful Depression-era agrarian social movement in Iowa and Minnesota, built upon the farmer networks from the previous decades, responding to the rural economic devastation wrought by the 1930s. While never constituting a majority of rural farmers, the core concept focused on raising commodity prices above the cost of production (Vollan 2011). The FHA gained power and momentum through dispersed radical tactics such as blocking highways, badgering congressional representatives, and using 'penny auction' techniques to cushion the disastrous effects of farm foreclosure. As farmer Harry Terrell recalled in an interview with Studs Terkel (1971a), solidarity among farmers during the Great Depression included "10-cent sales", in which neighboring farmers would show up at bank auctions, buy items at negligible costs and return them to the farmers. At that point in Plymouth and Cherokee counties in Iowa, corn was "cheaper than coal to heat houses". The FHA movements also consisted of actions to hold items off of the market, as farmers sought to increase the prices they received. Recalls Terrell (ibid.),

...they stopped milk wagons and dumped milk, and they stopped farmers hauling their hogs to market and they undertook to stop the whole agricultural economic process. And they thought if they could block the highways and block access to the packing plants that they [agricultural traders] couldn't buy these hogs at 2 cents, at 2 and 5 cents a pound and all that kind of things...

Short-term relief for slumping commodity prices during the Depression in the form of a national corn loan program initiated by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace effectively erased the FHA's momentum. Government payments renewed some farmers' hope of escaping debt and underpayment cycles but it largely divided FHA members, with a majority of relief flowing to farmers with large acreages (Nielsen 1989). While some late New Deal programs effectively organized social services and conservation, with significant farmer control and autonomy at the local and regional level, even these reform attempts faltered as war-time policy tilted its focus back to maximizing production (Gilbert 2015). The rise of the American Farm Bureau Association<sup>9</sup> to prominence in the 1930s revolved around its successful lobbying for Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), ensuring price floors for a large variety of commodities for US farmers. Yet, the Farm Bureau prioritized membership of commercial farmers, with six percent of low-income farmers belonging to the Bureau in 1942 compared to 30 percent of high-income growers (Brody 1983: 160). In the presence of active agrarian organizing, New Deal programs and the mainstream agrarian organizations it enrolled effectively limited solidarity by exacerbating wealth inequality among farmers and then erasing the institutional memory developed within movements.

For the many farmers they helped, however, the New Deal programs establishing 'parity' or equality were critical, and their erosion decades later led to another wave of organizing. Just as FHA had advocated, 'parity pricing' set a floor price for commodities (grains, some storable other crops, and dairy products) based on their cost of production, guaranteeing farmers a fair price and the ability to make a living from the farm. The system worked through supply management practices, whereby the government bought surplus commodities to maintain the floor price and stored them in a food security reserve, to be brought back on the market at times of scarcity, speculation, or hoarding. Mandated conservation programs also helped limit supply, and, immediately following the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the need for keeping land out of production was obvious. Extensive transformation of the

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<sup>9</sup> The American Farm Bureau Association has been central to the development and normalization of agro-industrial control in the Heartland. The group selectively recruited commercial farmers and embodies the contradictory position between business support and government dependence found in conservative discourse broadly – it gained its first policy victory in effectively lobbying the Roosevelt administration to pass the Agricultural Adjustment Act in the 1930s yet styled itself as a "bulwark against government intervention and leftist populism" (Rosenberg and Stucki 2017: 23). Progressive leaders and analysts have pointed to ongoing Democratic Party support for the Farm Bureau and its pro-agribusiness interests as a factor in the rural vote for Trump (Rosenberg and Stucki 2017) and a continuing stumbling block for the party's rural future (Dayen 2017).

prairie into annual agriculture had destabilized the soil across the central and southern Plains and in combination with severe droughts, had created one of the most devastating environmental disasters in human history (Wooster 1979). In the ‘parity years’, when the program was in full effect from 1941 to 1953, the floor price was set at 90 percent of parity (i.e., purchasers were mandated to pay 90 percent of the cost of production) and the prices farmers received averaged 100 percent of parity. (Naylor 2011). The program meant that purchasers of commodities paid the actual price of their production, while the cost to government, responsible only for purchase of the surplus, was much lower than it has been in the decades since parity was eliminated (Ray et al. 2012).<sup>10</sup>

*1940-1970s: Pacifying radicalism and fostering agribusiness*

The notion of farmer movements *thwarting* production through grain dumping and withholding production, as the FHA did, complicates the paradigmatic conception of a monolithic bloc of productivist American farmers enrolled in a patriotic pursuit to “feed the world”. The logic of productivism has been used to legitimize mechanization and industrialization of agriculture during the latter half of the 20th century (Berlan and Lewontin 1986; Vanloqueren and Baret 2009). While the agro-technologies and financial instruments facilitating these agricultural changes have been theorized as geopolitical tools to contain the rise of Communist sentiment in rural areas *outside* the United States (e.g. Patel 2013, Cullather 2010), little has been written about their role in disrupting opposition to capitalism *within* American borders. Yet, as can be seen by the spread of populism and farmer movements such as NPL and FHA, the popularity of Socialist and Communist third-party alternatives (University of Washington, 2015), and the accelerating militancy of farmers, such as the tar-and-feathering of judges enforcing foreclosures (Terkel 1971b), the rural Midwest was a highly volatile space.

In tandem with structural changes to agricultural policy, mainstream farm and labor organizations heavily influenced a perceived antagonism between farmer and wageworker interests – previously a central bloc of solidarity in radical rural politics. The American Federation of Labor, for example, advocated against farmer-labor politics because farmers were “middle-class, propertied, often employers of labor” whereas the Farm Bureau and National Grange sought to distance themselves from labor concerns as industrial worker wage increases “influence farm wages and farm hours in the same way, and still further decreased farm production and increase farm costs” (Brody 1983: 148). The perception that wage rate gains made in agricultural industries such as meatpacking would put pressure on farm wages frequently led to farmers and farm-laborers acting as scabs and union-busters, severely undermining solidarity (Fink 1998). Relative financial security stemming from State support in the 1930s also solidified commercial farmers’ wariness of farm labor unionism, with the Farm Bureau functioning as an anti-union force.

The technological and social trajectories articulated to the rise of ‘agribusiness’, urbanization a key consequence, created the conditions for an ideological and socially contained bulwark against rural agrarian radicalism. The coinage of the term ‘agribusiness’ in 1955 by USDA assistant secretary of agriculture John H. Davis, upended the political debate regarding rural policy, eliminating Left populist and more centrist New Deal rhetoric in favor of international and commodity-oriented corporate capitalism. USDA adoption of the term signified a key moment in US agricultural modernization (Cullather 2010: 105). ‘Agribusiness’ did not imply unfettered free-market capitalism,

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<sup>10</sup> Price floors and production controls were eliminated in the 1996 farm bill, the ‘Freedom to Farm’ Act (and dubbed ‘Freedom to Fail’ by some farm activists in the years since). Farm policy today, at its most basic, lets farmers get whatever price they can find for their product on the open market. The problem is that according to free market laws of supply and demand, at the peak supply of harvest time, the price drops – and the greater the supply, as in ‘fencerow to fencerow’ planting, the lower the price is likely to go. Farmers invest in seeds and other inputs in the spring; with low prices at harvest, they are unable to recoup even their costs of production. Indeed, in the last decade, the prices farmers received for their commodities on the open market have hovered around 37 percent of the cost of production (USDA 2015). The much-maligned system of farm subsidies, crop insurance, and other supports is an effort to fill the gap between prices received and prices paid. Those supports and off-farm income are what keep the remaining commodity farmers on the land, while purchasers of commodities (agribusiness corporations) pay far less than the cost of production for their raw materials.

but rather “...technological determinism to justify a combination of minimal government oversight and maximum state subsidization to help vertically integrated corporations consolidate their market power” (Hamilton 2014: 564). The Cold War spectre of Soviet-influences in the countryside bolstered backlash against the remnants of New Deal-era farm programs, further providing support for policies aligning agricultural production with large-scale agribusiness.

Following WWII, those agribusiness interests, along with other industrialists, began advocating in earnest to remove the agricultural production controls and price supports that had kept rural areas solvent – and relatively passive – for decades. Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight Eisenhower, pushed for these reforms during his eight-year tenure, famously telling farmers to “get big or get out”, while business groups advanced policies to address what they saw as the inefficiencies of farming in an age of increasing technological advances. One of these, the Committee for Economic Development (CED), described the chief “farm problem” as a “persistent excess of resources, particularly labor” – that is, too many farmers. The CED plan detailed how to eliminate one-third of farm families, moving them off the land and into towns and cities, where their labor was now more needed (CED 1962). Federal and state policy soon followed these recommendations, telling farmers to plant “fence row to fence row” – and to “adapt or die” (Risser 1976). To companies seeking employees, the new labor force was advertised as docile: an Iowa Development Commission bulletin recruiting industry to the state promised, “These Iowa ex-farm boys are just plain God-fearing Sons of Toil. ... They aren’t radicals. Farm boys don’t believe in radicals” (Iowa Development Commission 1950). While farmers constituted more than one-third of the national labor force at the turn of the 20th century, these numbers precipitously declined; barely 25 percent by 1935 and less than five percent of the national labor force by 1970 (Brody 1983: 161).

Thus, the political and social framework underlying the mid-20th century large-scale transformation of the Midwest landscape from diversified smaller-scale farms to large grain enterprises was constituted by a confluence of conservative and mainstream farm organizations (e.g., Farm Bureau, large-scale cooperatives) and reformist New Deal policies that functioned to demobilize sites of radical agrarian struggle active from 1910-1940. Furthermore, as redistributive New Deal policies were then effectively construed as socialist, Conservative backlash against these policies accelerated a push towards agribusiness. This expansion of productivist logic, increasingly articulated to global grain markets and the spread of corporate control across input sectors (seed, fertilizer, herbicides, machinery, etc.) facilitated the dominance of an ideologically conservative farm sector. As small farmers (and in the South, black farmers) continued to lose their farms, rural chambers of commerce, grain cooperatives, and farm organizations served to represent the larger, dominant agricultural operations in each county.<sup>11</sup> As farms became larger, rural labor also faltered, unionization efforts stymied by globalization and anti-labor sentiments, such as the failure of the 1985 Hormel meatpackers’ strike in Austin, MN to increase wages, enshrined in Barbara Kopple’s documentary film ‘American Dream’ (Kopple 1985). In the face of these changes, the rural economic downturn of the 1980s saw an unexpected period of renewed agrarian organizing, with rural groups effectively linking slumping grain prices and farm consolidation to capitalist exploitation and unequal race relations.

#### *1980s: Return of Radical agrarianism*

Leading up to the 1980s, however, high global grain prices and land values meant that many farmers lived large through much of the 1970s, buying new equipment and taking care of long-neglected repairs. A few, though, saw how the gutting of federal supply management programs would raise their costs and lower their prices; some of these formed the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) in Colorado in 1977, pledging not to buy, sell, or produce farm supplies or commodities until Congress addressed farm prices through a return to parity pricing. With an understanding of their powerlessness in a marketplace dominated by agribusiness, AAM farmers looked for new allies to build their political leverage, including building relationships with striking unions who they may have criticized in the past, and adopting “the confrontational approach of groups they once reviled as ‘radical’”

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<sup>11</sup> Although David Danbom (1979) argues that this confluence of conservative rural actors was organized to support large-scale agriculture beginning several decades earlier.

(Levitas 2002: 168). These included two ‘tractorcades’ in which tens of thousands of tractors descended on Washington, DC; marches accompanied by farm animals; and many other protests. After a violent standoff with police on a bridge protesting Mexican produce imports, one Georgia farmer who was arrested said, “I used to think only Nazis and blacks were jailed like that. I felt like going to Martin Luther King, digging up his grave, dusting him off, and shaking his hand to apologize” (ibid.: 174). However, the conservatism of many group members, its ideology of agrarian fundamentalism, and its frustration with making headway via policy reforms made members easy targets for other racist viewpoints, like that of the Posse Comitatus, John Birch Society, and Ku Klux Klan. Many members got increasingly caught up in conspiracy theories about the Jewish-backed ‘One World Government’ and followed right-wing propaganda. AAM eventually split, with one side, AAM, Inc., focused on Washington strategy and repudiating violence, while Grass Roots AAM became increasingly and openly anti-Semitic.

The AAM founders’ fears about a future without supply management were proven correct as the decade turned. The farm crisis hit, a perfect storm of falling land values and skyrocketing interest rates and inflation, abetted by accelerated and sometimes illegal farm foreclosure activity by USDA lenders. Without a floor price to stabilize the market, farmers who had leveraged their land assets to make new purchases, often at the encouragement of lenders (Schwab 1988), suddenly found themselves with nothing as land values plummeted nearly overnight. By 1990, there were nearly 300,000 fewer farms than a decade earlier (USDA 1991); an average loss of more than 500 farms per week. The farms took the communities with them: factories, small businesses, schools, and churches closed and eventually whole towns dried up. The loss scarred those who remained, as mental health advocates at the time suggested it was so emotionally and financially significant that it traumatized not only families, but entire rural communities, leaving swathes of the country with chronic long-term stress and depression. Suicides, spousal abuse, and other violence spiked (Heffernan and Heffernan 1986).

The same right-wing, anti-government, militia groups that had infiltrated AAM again recruited farmers in distress. They were not without success (see, for example, Dyer 1997) but ultimately, they were out-organized in the 1980s by the Left. One of these organizers, Rhonda Perry of the Missouri Rural Crisis Center, says, “Missouri was one of the core states<sup>12</sup> where we were able to create the alternative – and that was that the fight back was going to be about hope, coming together, fairness, and the realization that we couldn’t win justice in isolation from the rest of people in society” (personal comm. 2017). Organizing began locally and organically, around kitchen tables and in church basements, as people tried to figure out what was happening and how to stem the tide of foreclosures, or at least help each other. They identified needs, from food pantries to raising awareness to political engagement, and founded local and state organizations to address them. These regional efforts were joined together through national networks, including the National Council of Churches and National Catholic Rural Life, and, importantly, Rural America, a Washington, DC-based non-profit with rural field offices around the country, which was founded by and had been training younger and college-educated activists since the mid-1970s (Mooney and Majka 1995). Organizers looked to their history, holding an ‘old-timer’s conference’ to learn from Farm Holiday Movement veterans, and reviving protest tactics like penny auctions.

Echoing a key civil rights-era strategy, the immediate help drew people in, where they could be educated and mobilized to action. Bob Zellner, discussing organizing in poor white regions of the Mississippi Delta with civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, puts it this way: “racism is very high up on the value system of a lot of white Southerners, but it’s not always at the top. Maybe a strong union or a good education or better income ... might trump their racism” (Barnes n.d.) making them willing to work with black neighbors to achieve material ends. In the rural white Midwest, this meant establishing an analysis of the farm crisis that presented solutions as only winnable through broad-based and multiracial coalitions. Their narrative, disseminated personally and through publications,

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<sup>12</sup> Missouri, along with Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, and even parts of Texas (via the leadership of then-Secretary of Agriculture Jim Hightower), were at the heart of the Left/progressive 1980s farm movement, though there was related activity across the Midwest and into the Great Plains and South.

focused not on the proximate causes of inflation, export markets, or land values, but on the pro-corporate changes to government farm policy since the parity years, linking the plan to move farmers off the land to anti-worker policies and disinvestment in majority-black cities. Movement allies included black-led farm groups like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives; Democratic Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson; the Black Congressional Caucus; the United Auto Workers and International Machinists; environmentalists, who had long been pitted against farmers; urban churches as far away as New York City; and musicians like Willie Nelson, whose Farm Aid concerts provided emergency living expenses for farmers, start-up funds for rural organizations, and a shot of hope to farm country that someone was paying attention (George-Warren 2005).

The farm movement's policy solution was to re-link farm prices to parity. In the deregulatory and free market haze of the Reagan years, supply management was an unlikely goal to advance, when even "most Democratic politicians were busily disassociating themselves from 'the old new deal liberalism', much less economic planning and production controls" (Summers 2001: 309). And yet, as testament to the political power the farm movement built, nearly all the Democratic candidates in the 1984 and 1988 presidential election cycles pledged to support the basic tenets of supply management. The Harkin-Gephardt Save the Family Farm Act, a 1987 farm bill proposal that included price supports, conservation provisions, and production controls, very nearly became law, with support from farm movement's allies in the Congressional Black Caucus and some farm state legislators who, because of the protests, "found it personally unpalatable but politically impossible" (Browne 1988: 222) not to vote for the legislation. In another tack, advocates including the National Save the Family Farm Coalition,<sup>13</sup> established in Washington as a policy voice for three dozen rural member organizations, advanced credit legislation to halt the most egregious foreclosure actions and give struggling farmers opportunities to restructure their debt. Reagan signed the Agricultural Credit Act in 1987, saving an estimated 70,000 additional farms from foreclosure (NFFC n.d.).

The passage of the Credit Act saved many farms immediately, and in so doing, removed some of the urgency of the moment. Further mollifying farmer discontent were a string of profitable years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, buoyed by federal corn ethanol mandates. These policies, in combination with ever-decreasing farmer numbers, meant that the active agrarian movement dwindled, despite farm consolidation and all its economic impacts continuing at a rapid clip. Additionally, Republican party base-building, including giving increased importance to 'cultural issues' like abortion and gun rights, focused in large part on rural areas like the Midwest. The national narrative about the Heartland thus shifted, erasing its progressive moments and thereby allowing the Right to use rural myths to construct its own authenticity.

Such historical distortions, as revealed in works such as *Black Rice* (Carney 2001) and "The Long Green Revolution" (Patel 2013) are far from innocent. Just as dominant narratives of white plantation-owner and Rockefeller-funded 'successes' enable the continued marshaling of consent for new dreams of 'feeding the world' to proceed, so too does the Midwest have its own myth-makers. It's vital that we reclaim the richer stories - tractorcades, parity pricing, radical agrarians, and all – because without such reminders, even imagining emancipation becomes impossible.

#### **4 Lessons learned: Redefining emancipation**

Looking at these cases together offers the following insights:

First, *ARP has provided capitalist growers in both California and the Midwest with key ideologies and strategies to assert class power and pave the way for later national right-wing successes*. As these tactics and ideologies evolved and took hold in California beginning in the 1930s, they underpinned the initial rise of Republican Party conservatism and the later entry of neoliberalism. In the Midwest, an ethos of religious and social traditionalism, farm consolidation and expansion, and the rise of agribusiness cemented a conservative bloc that gained power throughout the 20th century. In both

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<sup>13</sup> Now known as the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC).

regions, productionist ideology has been central to organizing authoritarian rural power. Whether in California, where accumulation was a constitutive feature of its agrarian origins, or in the Midwest, where a “productivist coalition” (Buttel 2005, 276) formed among farm commodity groups, land-grant administrators, agribusiness firms, and federal agricultural agencies, ARP has gone hand-in-glove with the “doctrine that increased production is intrinsically desirable and that all parties benefit from increased output” (ibid).

The cultural power of white rural identity has also been important in coalescing ARP in both regions. California’s experience, glimpsed through the revolving door of immigrant and non-white labor populations, is one in which an ascendant class of growers and business allies helped couple conservatism and populism while discrediting the Left. Jewish labor organizers and Latino farmworker leaders, for example, could be depicted as ‘outside agitators’ coming in to destabilize local politics. In the Midwest, Scandinavian and German immigrants homesteaded a landscape that had recently been populated by indigenous peoples. ‘Productive’ improvement of the land through agriculture legitimized white settlement, in juxtaposition to ‘illegible’ bison management, foraging, and subsistence Native land uses. Yet, the opening of the prairies also served as a release valve for class conflict on the East Coast with homesteaders acting more as the foot soldiers of imperial expansion than its architects. While many farm owners elided any mention of violent histories of dispossession facilitating their very existence, they often simultaneously maintained an astute analysis of capitalist development and exploitation. In this milieu, deeply racialized histories of land settlement and landholding combined with homesteading individualism and shifting class consciousness to shape white farmer identity through the 20th century.

Together, productivism and white rural identities helped wedge Reaganism into place nationally; the merger of authoritarian populism with neoclassical economics in the first major deployment of neoliberal state power (Harvey 2005). Ironically, if not unexpectedly, thirty years onward, it is the ramifications of neoliberal policy that has propelled new authoritarian populists to power. As Wall Street elites rack up outlandish profits while Washington remains deaf to farmer and rural needs; as farm debt balloons and rural outmigration increases; and as ‘free trade’ pits farmers worldwide in wars of surplus dumping, contemporary ARP manifests as *backlash* to neoliberalism. Farmers turned, with hope, anger, and/or frustration, to the candidate promising a new nationalist agenda, who made appeals to the rural and working classes, and who (unlike the reigning plutocrats) did not overtly treat farmers as if they lacked intelligence. An entrenched rural and agriculture economy of consolidated power has only further lent to division among the rural working class and thus the difficulty of organizing towards emancipation.

Second, *social conservative cultural norms and alliances formed a foundational space for building hegemonic political power for ARP, in combination (perhaps paradoxically) with liberalism*. Social conservative values do not appear or reproduce by themselves. In our cases, it took keen politicians, an active media apparatus, farmer organizations, churches, grassroots groups like women’s clubs acting in collaboration with industry front groups, and other forms of cultural production and dissemination, to generate identification with these values and keep them at the forefront of political decisions which have bolstered ARP. Religious piety, patriarchal family values, anti-gay sentiment, concern for abortion, and other ‘social conservative’ issues have long formed effective bases to align erstwhile populists with candidates that continued supporting economic elites through policy. Such values remain a powerful political force today, especially in the Midwest and South, but to a lesser degree across the country.<sup>14</sup> In the Midwest, egalitarianism, meritocratic ideals, and shared religiosity have subdued obvious triggers of social unrest: well-to-do farmers rarely flaunt their wealth, while shared rural social spaces such as local churches and school sporting events maintain community bonds despite widening wealth inequality. As a corn-soybean farmer mentioned to one of our authors,

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, while California rarely lands in media portrayals as a center for conservative politics, the state is no stranger to racism or authoritarianism, rural or urban. Outward white supremacist organizing has gone on for decades in the state, and remains alive in the present (SPLC n.d.). In 2016, Trump captured majorities in almost all the state’s rural counties.

overlooking a crowd of greasy, sweaty farmers at a mid-summer equipment auction in southwest Minnesota: “You do realize that everyone here has a net worth of at least a few million, right?”

These social conservative forces synergistically (though unintentionally) combined with the efforts of liberals, like Roosevelt in the 1930s, Clinton in the 1990s, and Obama in the 2010s. Liberalism has fostered ARP mostly by delegitimizing radicalism, acting as a bulwark against the further-Left through mollifying social policies (especially apparent in the New Deal’s effects on the emerging threat of communist contestation). Fraser’s more recent ‘progressive neoliberal’ form of liberalism has similarly undermined more emancipatory Left positions, but additionally has led rural whites to the Right by generating rural, white, and male resentment to progressive neoliberalism’s weak version of (pseudo-)emancipatory politics targeted towards the urban, non-white, and female populace. Both the Right and the ostensible Left (liberals) have thus contributed to an overall shift Rightward in US national politics.

While inadvertent, the work of liberal culture-creators and politicians also contributed to an emerging national ‘common sense’ that made nearly impossible many forms of emancipatory politics. This common sense centers on ideals of marketization – heard in the repeated concerns of Democrats (as well as Republicans) for efficient and rational government spending – but also includes taking for granted the non-viability of alternatives to capitalism, the ‘bootstraps’ individualism of American meritocracy, an emancipatory horizon limited to ‘jobs’ for the jobless, and the underlying ideology of perpetual economic growth. From the perspective of liberals, these are simply realist assessments of political possibility. From our analysis, these kinds of ideas leave ideological space into which the Right effectively asserts itself, while they simultaneously distract non-elites from Left analyses and proposals.

Third, it is clear that, historically, *working towards emancipation among non-elites required working across differences*. Urban-rural, worker-farmer, and racial divides all had to be actively undermined, countered with convincing alternative (non-Othering) explanations for those divides and visions for overcoming them through common cause. The Midwest’s Non-Partisan League’s unification of worker and farmer interests exemplified such collaboration in the early 20th century. Some of the UFW’s greatest successes came out of their partnerships with groups in urban sectors, even the more-radical Black Panthers. In the 1980s, white farmer activists reached beyond their comfort zones to build power; undermining the Othering of blacks and urbanites, as they developed and spread structurally critical explanations for the farm crisis.

In this way, we suggest, the histories of California and Midwestern rural struggles provide tracks in which wide-ranging emancipatory movements today can tread. Samir Amin notes that for too long, the disenfranchised, urban and rural, have remained on the defensive – always facing the “offensive of capital” to dismantle whatever they had conquered in previous decades. What they need, he argues, is a “convergence in diversity.” This means recognizing the diversity, “not only of movements, which are fragmented, but of the political forces that are operating with them, of the ideologies and even visions of the future of those political forces” (Amin 2011: xvii). For the Non-Partisan League, the UFW, and the Black Panther Party, encounters with ARP regimes and the forces of agribusiness meant embracing ideological differences over a broader spectrum of Left; wrestling with competing visions of development (urbanization versus agrarian progress); and, not least, facing the ‘political forces’ of patriarchy within their own ranks. What their efforts show us, then, is not merely an issue of strength in numbers, nor the heartwarming allyship of multiple powerless groups. It is a reckoning with capital as a force that, while global, is as diverse as every local terrain of its creation and destruction. To overcome such a system requires convergence across the popular classes, moving beyond defensive positions to build alternatives through heterogeneous social power.

Fourth, *emancipatory trajectories are not straightforward, challenging simplistic definitions of emancipation or expectations for it*. History, of course, is written in a long vacillation among two, three, or more opposing forces wherein one action towards emancipation may lead to counter-reactions that sets others back. As an example from our California case: communist revolution is an

emancipatory vision antagonistic to a vision based on achieving only basic worker protections. Achieving the New Deal's worker rights provisions – limited as they were in terms of race, gender, and occupation – undermined a larger communist push (as the New Dealers wanted). At the same time, it could be argued that the push for communism (by Communist union organizers) undermined the possibility of getting additional minor reforms for workers, by enabling the conservative reaction to succeed (by equating worker organizing to 'anti-Americanism'). By the same token, brutal counter-reactions can reinvigorate social solidarity anew. At what moment do we judge the 'success' of any one action – especially when its true implications may not be known for decades? Further, within a given social category, we cannot assume necessarily common interests vis-à-vis emancipation. Some migrant farmworkers, for example, merely wish to be left alone by authorities and be paid a decent wage. Some instead agitate for greater rights, while others aspire to ownership of land and the means of production.

Multiple lines of critical theory have grappled with such emancipatory trajectories: from Polanyi's classical double-movement, to Fraser's (2013) "triple movement" to Moore's (2017) world-ecological emancipation of nature-as-people. We find that many struggles can be helpfully situated in the framework of Fraser and Honneth's (2003) "three Rs": recognition, representation, and redistribution. These bring together processes of making and affirming identity (recognition); citizenship, democracy, and belonging (representation); and class, social difference, and material inequalities (redistribution). People who have been effectively categorized as Other have consistently fought for basic recognition, for political representation (and democratization thereof), for redistribution of resources, risks and opportunities, and increasingly for 'reparations': the repair of past harms (Patel and Moore, 2017). Members of the movements we have studied here have succeeded most when they worked across Othered differences and generated alternative material and ideological resources to achieve one or more of the three Rs.

Yet, theoretically, the three Rs do not by themselves resolve the paradox of *antagonisms* between recognition, redistribution, and representation, nor the antagonisms between various axes of oppression (race, class, gender, sexuality, et cetera) and the differing, sometimes contradictory, contexts and scales in which they exist. What are we to make of situations in which progress along one axis – say, citizenship rights – undermines progress for wealth redistribution? How do we contend with gains for workers that leave patriarchy, or white supremacy, untouched? Such challenges make defining emancipation objectively along one dimension, axis or scale (temporal or spatial) difficult, if not presumptive and paternalistic.

#### *Towards defining and redefining emancipation*

These challenges thus lead us to place emphasis on the social learning that generates an understanding of these tensions, and strategies towards linking the three Rs – for separate groups of non-elites, but most importantly, across them. Hence, rather than declaring the three Rs a static definition by which to measure movements, we propose to consider emancipation as a process of *social learning and praxis* that takes place as the three Rs are sought. By gauging the direction of that process – do non-elite people through individual and collective learning move away from Othering, and towards a greater sense of solidarity? – we thus define as 'emancipatory' efforts that work across intersectional differences and that see solidarity as a precondition and tool of liberation. Our histories here gesture towards a theoretical understanding of emancipation that builds on Fraser and Honneth's conception with the importance of social learning and application through praxis.

### **5 Conclusion: In crises, uncertainty; in uncertainty, hope**

All evidence points to the post-2008 global financial crisis period as a period of diverse yet interlocked and deepening crises – from climate change, extreme weather events, and oceanic pollution; to skyrocketing healthcare costs, foreclosures and evictions, and rampant police brutality; to opioid addiction, precarious un(der)employment, increased forced migration, and widespread working class debt and disillusion. The rural US has not escaped these cataclysms; indeed, rural areas are where many of these crises are most acutely felt.

The 1980s farm crisis had far-reaching negative consequences, not only for the farms and communities it directly impacted, but in the seeds of discontent it sowed across the rural heartland that continue to affect the political landscape today. And there is little sign of improvement; on the contrary, agricultural economists and farm groups have been warning of another farm crisis, again predicated on formerly low-debt or debt-free farmers assuming huge debt loads. In a January 3, 2018, interview, John K. Hansen, president of Nebraska Farmers Union, noted, “It’s like the house is on fire and no firemen showing up. We are really struggling. ... I’ve talked to a bunch of farmers who told me they went from being debt free to being in a situation where they owe way more money than they ever thought they would owe again” (Haughney 2018).

According to the USDA, Midwestern farmers’ overall income from crop sales in 2017 are expected to be down another two percent from the prior year, representing the fifth consecutive year of lower corn receipts, and the lowest recorded since 2009 (Daniels 2017). For people like Don Batie, a fourth-generation farmer, such below-break-even years are familiar. “The farm crisis in the 1980s was much worse than what we currently have”, Batie recently told reporters. “But we’re headed in the same direction” (Daniels 2017). Just as in the Depression-era conditions of the 1930s, and the 1980s farm crisis, all but the largest-scale Midwest farmers today see themselves at risk of foundering.

Such are the conditions in which authoritarian populism flourishes and festers. A swell of both Right and Left populism was evident in the 2016 election, exhibiting shared elements of nationalism, protectionist trade policies, and focuses on the ‘local’. On the Left, this swell brought the unexpectedly popular primary run of ‘Democratic Socialist’ Bernie Sanders. On the Right, of course, it led to Trump. For some, the populism (if simply defined as ‘anti-elite’, regardless of party), or disruption, seemed to be the point: analysts have found that 12 percent of Sanders primary voters cast their vote for Trump in November. (Kurtzleben, 2017) The xenophobic and racist politics represented in votes for Trump to a large degree constitute a backlash to the current neoliberal order and the immiseration it entails. Unlike Left-wing movements that also reject this order but have sought solutions via reducing capitalist power and ‘glocal’ solidarity, this Trump-supporting reaction has instead manifested as ugly assertions of a new round of Othering and exclusion. Put simply, the current round of capitalist crisis – manifested in and exacerbated by decades of neoliberal policy ‘solutions’ – has led to the conditions necessary to elevate a new round of ‘from below’ ARP politics.

As in previous eras, few farmers believe that their concerns are being heard. “It’s this eerie silence”, said Hansen. “But the silence should not be taken to mean things are OK. It means a lot of folks have given up on waiting for remedy. Our guys no longer have any faith that Congress is going to do anything ... They’re just trying to figure out the best way to get out” (Haughney 2018). Needless to say, despite grand promises, the Trump administration is patently failing to do anything to benefit such farmers and their rural communities, instead pursuing an accelerated version of same neoliberal strategies that have created these cycles of crisis. Trump has called for cutting the USDA budget by 21 percent, while expanding defense spending by \$80 billion (Emmons 2017).<sup>15</sup> His Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue, lost no time in revealing the administration’s true, neoliberal priorities. Among his first actions as secretary was to eliminate ‘rural development’ as a USDA ‘mission area’, eliminating three rural-focused sub-agencies of the Office of Rural Development and demoting its Undersecretary, who had previously reported directly to the secretary, effectively marginalizing the office in USDA decision-making and severing its accountability to Congress (USDA 2017b). The Office of Rural Development provides critical rural loans, grants, and general assistance for water, electricity and other infrastructure; social services like housing and healthcare; and loan help through co-ops, banks, and credit unions – and so, is sometimes called “the only department in the entire government specifically created to help those in rural America” (Nosowitz 2017). It is little wonder

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<sup>15</sup> Technically, Trump only ‘called for’ \$54 billion and Congress gave him much more – a whopping \$80 billion. This brings the total annual US military budget to about \$700 billion, as compared to the USDA’s annual budget of \$151 billion (in 2017).

that rural advocates from coast to coast have expressed outrage that the Department of *Agriculture* is trying to starve rural development (CRDD 2017).

It is doubtful, to say the very least, that a solution to any long-term and worsening rural ills will materialize from the authoritarian ‘populist’ swept in on rhetoric of emancipation for the country’s majority-white, male, older landowner-farmers. The majority of these landowner-farmers are likely to continue suffering economically under continued neoliberal policies, losing land, forced to sell under financial duress of rapidly growing debt, and many also retiring without descendants to take over. It can further be expected that financial actors will show up with accelerated zeal, gobbling up land as investments, speculating on agro-fuels, and commodifying agricultural data in the mode typical of ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2007; Fairbairn 2014; Agri-Food Atlas 2017). If the neoliberal era of recent decades engendered the rise of Trump, the racist and xenophobic sentiments generated by ARP are unlikely to change as long as economic conditions for farm communities continue sliding ever downward.

While white landed farmers are unlikely to see relief under the current ARP regime, even less likely is any government intervention that takes seriously the needs of the wider and more heterogeneous population of rural dispossessed, such as farmworkers, people of color, and immigrants. Introduced in October 2017 by Republican lawmakers, a new ‘Agricultural Guestworker Act’ proposes to replace an existing guestworker program that only covers farmworkers with one that will also cover dairy workers and meat and poultry processors – while also “gutting many of the existing worker protections” (Thompson 2018). If passed, the ‘Ag Act’ will prevent the US government from inspecting worksites without first checking in with employers, transfer all travel and housing costs to employees, and allow employers to pay farm workers at an even lower wage scale than today. It will also enable companies to prevent workers from suing them; instead forcing workers into mandatory arbitration – with guest workers having to shoulder half the arbitration costs. Adrienne DerVartanian of Farmworker Justice, a Washington, DC-based advocacy organization, told journalist Gabriel Thompson that the current US guestworker system is often likened to the 1940s Bracero Program. But, she argues, there are “even fewer protections in [the current] bill than in the original Bracero program” (Thompson 2018).

Compounding the multiple and seemingly intractable crises of the current conjuncture may be the ‘end of cheap natures’, posited by Moore (2014). He argues that we are reaching the limits of capitalism’s ability to reproduce conditions conducive to its own survival, because the four essential things it has had to access cheaply (or to *make* cheap, to cheapen) – labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials – are facing various socio-ecologically co-constructed limits. Considering capitalism’s origins as a fundamentally different world-ecology based on endless expansion and its typical crisis strategy of developing new frontiers and forms of accumulation where none was previously possible, where does this leave the likely outcomes of the contemporary moment? A sobering thought, for sure. Bringing world-ecological ‘Nature’ back into our analysis seems to indicate that today’s convergent crises may not simply repeat capitalism’s long history of crises (in which elites attempt to reassert control against political insurgencies and chaotic, emergent mass reactions), but may develop in a qualitatively different way due to epochal differences, partly, though not only, based in particularly new global environmental challenges like climate change. Elites may abandon ‘control’ strategies to right the ship and maintain societal function in favor of militarized islands of elite power with exploited masses outside them. The lack of frontiers could also render capitalism as a model untenable, with elite hegemony losing its ability to ensure consent as it loses the ability to provide non-elite livelihoods. Natural limits present the possibility of a shift in how crises *can* be managed, though without any certainty about how – or if – they *do* get managed.

For this very reason, however, we believe there is hope – if not for the same reasons identified by numerous commentators. Many have argued that Trumpist malfeasance is engendering an opposite, progressive, reaction from below. With so many Others targeted simultaneously by Trump, and so many groups newly aligned in opposition to the new regime and what it stands for, optimistic analysts are prone to speak to the possibilities of coming together in the current moment. While we accept that

the extremity of Trumpism may generate conditions for greater inter-group solidarity, such organization will be far from spontaneous, and far from inevitable. Non-elites do not automatically come together, as we've seen; such optimistic assumptions cannot truly address the salient questions of emancipation: by whom, for whom, from what, and for what. These questions must be negotiated socially: their answers fought for, re-evaluated, and renegotiated in specific places by specific people, with contextually appropriate tact.

Looking ahead, we cue from Rebecca Solnit's invocation in *Hope in the Dark* (2004). She distinguishes hope from 'optimism', in not assuming, as so many analysts have, that emancipation is inevitable in times of crisis. We cannot assume that in moments like now, when everything seems to be falling apart, that 'falling together' somehow naturally follows. Rather, far from being passive, hope demands agency and *organization*. Unlike optimism, hope also does not rest in the security of having 'figured it all out'; it grows instead from the embers of uncertainty. We therefore suggest that analysts and movements must accept the non-inevitability and uncertainty of social struggles ahead: cycles of authoritarian populism, emancipatory action, reformist impulse, and radical revolution are nonlinear and unpredictable – this in itself is 'normal'. Finally, we also purposefully rescue hope from 'darkness' in the pejorative sense, where it has become too easily hitched to dark skins, to the racial Othering of black and brown peoples. Solnit explains that darkness is part of a hopeful future; "that the present and past are daylight, and the future is night" (Solnit 2016). To recognize unknowability as fertile – as, she suggests, "rich as the womb, rather than the tomb" – inspires our accompanying paper on contemporary emancipatory rural politics. Looking to places where communities contend with the darkest of circumstances, we find astounding intellectual, ethical, cultural, and political work underway. Instances of this work – much of it manifested as plain-old grassroots organizing – will form the empirical basis of our emancipatory study, where we explore the upside of uncertainty.

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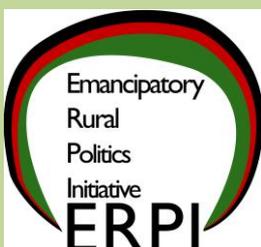
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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