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Essential Agrarian Histories for Essential Agrarian Futures

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The smell of rot fills the country. Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, it makes a hot fire. Dump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them, and let the putrescence drip down into the earth. There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange.

–John Steinbeck

Following the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our food system this spring, I've been thinking about this passage from *The Grapes of Wrath*. In Steinbeck's Depression-era novel, the Joad family loses their family farm to the bank in a case of accumulation by dispossession. Deprived of a smallholder livelihood, the family joins other migrants to harvest food for corporate landlords in California. In a scene three-quarters of the way through the book that has haunted me since tenth-grade English class, Steinbeck turns away from the Joad family to ask readers to consider the injustice of a food supply system that declares that what is essential about agriculture is the production of profitable commodities, rather than a livelihood in which people can live and work well by producing food. As the lines between essential and expendable work thus blur, the resulting contradictions raise a fundamental comment on the value of land and labor.

While Americans wondered about the fate of food and work during the pandemic, President Trump declared meat processing plants "critical infrastructure," and on April 28, 2020 workers in the industrial meat supply chain [became essential](#). In the preceding weeks, public and private eateries had closed their doors, eliminating markets for crops, eggs, milk, and meat. Rather than spend money preparing food for which there was no market, farmers across the United States [destroyed it](#), plowing over crops, spilling milk, and euthanizing animals. How, then, could food be essential when it was being destroyed?

Farmworkers who travel on crowded buses, work close together in fields, live in overcrowded housing, and experience uncertain access to health care worried about spreading and contracting the virus—not through the food supply chain, but by [sheltering in place in seasonal housing](#). Tyson Foods warned that the food supply chain would collapse if plants closed to prevent workers from spreading COVID-19, while

also [insisting that its top priority](#) was the health and safety of workers. Meanwhile, working conditions at pork processing plants owned by [Tyson Foods](#) and its competitor, [Smithfield Foods](#), led cases to spike. Soon, the counties where plant workers lived and worked reported the highest rates of infection in their respective states. How can workers who are worried about getting ill and are being asked to risk their lives for \$12 an hour [in inhumane conditions](#) be deemed essential?

Environmental protections and long-term public health have been deemed nonessential, as outlined in [an Environmental Protection Agency memorandum](#) granting a stay on regulatory enforcement for polluting industries including confined animal feeding operations. Instead, what is essential—in Steinbeck’s novel and in contemporary agri-capitalism—is that low-wage workers keep working, and that plants and animals keep reproducing to sustain capital investments. Worker safety, food security, environmental protection, and employment can wait. Shares of agribusiness conglomerates have all gained value on the U.S. stock market following a crash in mid-March. By contrast, unemployment claims filed in the United States topped 30 million by the end of April. This economic disconnect reveals that what appears as a crisis of food production and health safety has its roots in a centuries-long transformation of land and labor.

Historically, agrarian capitalist crises across Europe stemmed from enclosure (Kautsky 1988; Araghi 2000), where common land and labor relationships were severed through a slow process of privatization. Farmers dispossessed of land were transformed into surplus labor as farms consolidated and agricultural production specialized to fit new economic incentives for distant markets. During the twentieth century, this process accelerated as larger farms became more capital- and input-intensive to produce more with less labor (Fitzgerald 2003; Kloppenburg 2004). Pandemic-induced food anxieties thus stem from a century of agrarian change that has embraced productivism: the ideology that production yields and profit growth are and should be the key drivers of agriculture (Buttel 1993). In the decades following the Dust Bowl of Steinbeck’s novel, U.S. farm sizes have steadily increased while the number of individual farms has plummeted (Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000). Writing just before the farm crisis of the 1980s, Walter Goldschmidt (1978) showed how this consolidation undermined labor organization and land tenure as larger California farms removed capital, workers, and small farms from the rural towns and the economies they had anchored.

Removing capital and workers from the rural economy by consolidating farms, increasing the costs of agriculture, and swelling production are, of course, not unique

to the United States. In India, where I've studied the impacts of genetically modified and certified organic cotton technologies on rural life, persistent rates of farmer suicide and environmental degradation are seen as necessary costs of steady increases in cotton production (Flachs 2019). It does not matter that the world has had a longstanding cotton glut: the state and agribusiness define essential work as the production of profitable agricultural commodities, not agrarian livelihoods. Since India's Green Revolution expanded rural infrastructure, farm inputs, and the role of the state in everyday life in the 1960s, consecutive five-year plans from India's government in fact stressed the need to remove people from agricultural work. Over the past months, millions of migrant workers displaced from agricultural work through consolidation and labor-saving agricultural reforms [have lost their urban work](#). Now, many are defying COVID-19 lockdown orders and slowly marching home because they cannot safely shelter elsewhere—a march of land and labor reform not so different from the Joad family's journey to California.

Cotton sits in a village warehouse as farmers wait for better prices, Telangana, India. Photo by Andrew Flachs.

Plant scientists whom I met with during previous fieldwork argued that it was essential to remove rural labor and consolidate farms, not to make agricultural work more stable and remunerative. “There are too many people with small farms here,”

complained one extension agent. “We need to reduce people's dependence on agriculture. We should become more like the United States, because the output is more efficient there.” Efficiency was essential, defined here in terms of greater yields produced through labor-saving technologies. “The correct population doing agriculture should be 5-10 percent,” the scientist continued. By some estimates, [more than 50 percent](#) of Indians farm as their primary occupation. I remembered that exchange during a 2019 conversation with an Illinois extension agent as we discussed trends in farm automation like self-driving tractors and drone pesticide-sprayers. “We’re not really interested in farms under a thousand acres,” he told me with a sigh. “The future is automated.” This failure of imagination is an international phenomenon, born from an ideology that values farm consolidation and labor reduction as a path to profitable commodities trading. But the current pandemic asks us to recall Steinbeck’s question: could our agricultural system be designed to create jobs, land, or food above profits?

The U.S. government is willing to shut down large sectors of the economy, redistribute trillions of dollars, and force workers into unsafe essential action. Yet this instability is a vicious cycle: workers removed from land through farm consolidation find precarious work as farms turn to labor-saving, capital-intensive technologies to produce ever-more agricultural commodities. Amid this push to maintain essential productivity at all costs, farmers and farmworkers enmeshed in local distribution systems are safely distributing food, capital, and work in ways that could strengthen rural communities—work that is truly essential over the next century. Systematic data is difficult to find, but small farms worried about losing farm-to-table connections are doubling down on [community-supported agriculture \(CSA\) schemes](#) and deliveries organized using online platforms. More nimble than major retailers or agribusiness conglomerates, smaller producers are using a decentralized infrastructure of direct marketing to capitalize on dissatisfaction with the industrial food system as well as viable small farming opportunities in periurban spaces (Flachs and Abel 2019; Janssen 2017). That viability depends, in many cases, on farmer’s markets and food co-ops that circumvent the centralized food system. Yet these alternative institutions also have a responsibility not to push extra risks onto farmworkers, retailers, and distributors during the crisis.

Wildflowers bloom in front of a small Illinois farm. Photo by Andrew Flachs.

There is reason for both hope and caution. Alternative food systems have historically made headway during such crises and provided new ways to organize labor and food production, as with Germany's Solawi socialist farm collectives or the ebbs and flows of home gardens that accompany economic recessions and wars (Lawson 2005). Yet innovations like the Black civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer's pioneering farm cooperative were ignored by mainstream institutions (White 2018), highlighting the fact that viable alternatives can also founder when they hit up against durable inequities. The pandemic also presents opportunities for a deepening of racialized disaster capitalism as well as for new, more just forms of social organization.

Questions of essential reorganizing ask us to consider land and labor relationships for which the goal is not unlimited growth but safe, equitable, decentralized access. COVID-19 represents a disruption to a system that successfully centralized food production and consumption by separating workers from land. This crisis has, in one sense, been centuries in the making, beginning with the privatization of commons, redistribution of labor, and efforts to intensify the capitalization and technification of

agricultural work. What is essential now is the emergence of alternatives. The radical roots of this essential work are critical if we are to emerge from this crisis with a more just and vibrant food system. It is thus important to know that Black farmers pioneered CSAs, that farm consolidation spurred the Dust Bowl, that land-grant universities pushing productivism exist on soil stolen by a colonial state, and that [the seeds we are all rushing to plant](#) were bred and domesticated by laborers enmeshed in local political and ecological relationships. This history keeps the needs of labor and land at the forefront of a struggle for valuing the essential, especially during a crisis that shocks hegemonic assumptions about value itself.

Author Bio

Andrew Flachs (@DrFlachsophone) researches food and agriculture systems, including genetically modified crops, heirloom seeds, and the microbiome. As Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Purdue University, he uses ethnography to study rural well-being and ecological management among farmers experiencing agrarian change in North America, the Balkans, and South India. His book, *Cultivating Knowledge: Biotechnology, Sustainability, and the Human Cost of Cotton Capitalism in India*, was published by the University of Arizona Press in 2019.

Preview Image

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