

STUDI CONTRIBUTIONS

Introduction

Andrea Wulff, in her book *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (2012), argues that the Founding Fathers of the United States of America –George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison– on a sociopolitical level held that the new nation “should be an agrarian republic of virtuous citizens who were connected to the country because they worked the soil” (Wayman 2011). The logic behind their thought was that agriculture was essential to the economy of the emerging nation as well as to America’s self-sufficiency. For Benjamin Franklin “there seem to be but three Ways for a Nation to acquire Wealth. The first is by War as the Romans did in plundering their conquered Neighbours. This is Robbery. The second by Commerce which is generally Cheating. The third by Agriculture the only honest Way; wherein Man receives a real Increase of the Seed thrown into the Ground, in a kind of continual Miracle wrought by the Hand of God in his favour, as a Reward for his innocent Life, and virtuous Industry” (Franklin 2019).

The socio-political and economic vision of the Founding Fathers of the new republic lasted until the early 1900s when more than half of America was composed of small and medium-sized family farmers or people who lived in rural communities (Ikerd 1996). These family farms were quite dynamic in that they incorporated a wide variety of crops that at the same time were complemented by a varied assortment of farm animals (MacDonald 2013: 31). These early American farmers were quite independent and self-sufficient, knowledgeable of the different aspects of administering and the day-to-day running of a profitable farm using mostly family and animal labor (Center for a Livable Future 2020).

Beginning in the early 20th century, agriculture in the U.S. underwent a radical transformation, due to its industrialization, which was unprecedented in its worldwide 13,000-year history. Today’s American agriculture is categorized as “the most efficient in the world, at least in terms of the dollar and cent costs of production” (Ikerd 1996; Dimitri, Effland

and Conklin 2005: 2). However, many critical voices have raised red flags regarding the “public health and ecological costs of [the] industrialization” of American farming (Center for a Livable Future 2020).

American Family Farming at the Threshold of the Third Millennium

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) has no standard definition of a family farm. The current definition of a family farm is, according to the 2005 Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS), “any farm organized as a sole proprietorship, partnership, or family corporation.” Family farms exclude farms “where the operator and relatives do not own the majority of the business”, e.g., corporate farms, “farms owned by three unrelated business partners, as well as farms operated by a hired manager for a family of absentee owners” (USDA-ARMS 2005). This classification is mostly based on farm sales, organizational structure, and the operator’s main occupation.

According to this definition there are approximately 2,113,615 family farms in the United States. This accounts for almost 96% of all farms in the nation (USDA-ERS-ARMS 2005). The USDA-ERS 2000 makes the following gross annual sales distinctions among family farms:

\$500,000 +: “very large family farms”
(101,265 family farms)

\$250,000–\$500,000: “large family farm”
(86,551 family farms)

– \$250,000: “small family farm”
(1,925,799 family farms)

The USDA explains that the classification is based on gross annual sales rather than on acreage because acreage can have different meanings in different parts of the country: “An acre of non-irrigated land in a low rainfall area, such as southern Utah, is hard to compare to an acre of very fertile, high rainfall land in the Pelouse region of eastern Washington”

(USDA-NIFA 2019).

Based on the above classification, 63% of American food and fiber production is produced by “very large” and “large” family farms (USDA-NIFA 2019), 21% by “non-family farms”, and 15% by “small” family farms (USDA-NIFA 2019).

On a negative note, according to the USDA, many family farms, be they “very large”, “large” or “small”, will continue to disappear across the American landscape. Despite the fact that during the next 20 years, approximately 70% of American family farms will be inherited by the next generation, nevertheless, many in the next generation do not have the appropriate skills to continue the family business or are not interested in continuing in farming (USDA-NIFA 2019). This will mean that many family farms will be either foreclosed, taken over by ever growing “very large” family farms or corporations, or will become land destined for non-farming uses (USDA-NIFA 2019).

On a positive note, the USDA sees the increasing popularity of consumers buying organically produced and locally sold produce as a hopeful sign that family farms will continue to dot the American scene in the near future: “after decades of decline the number of family farms has grown by about 4 percent” (USDA-NIFA 2019).

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) are “partnerships of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of supporters that provide a direct link between the production and consumption of food” (IFOAM). In this arrangement, a local community buys a season’s harvest, and may even help with the farm work, from a local family owned farm. The family farm tries to provide the local community with organically grown fresh produce –94% of CSA farms use organic methods (Strochlic and Shelley 2004: iv).

The CSA system “from farm to table” is based on four fundamental ideas (Bashford et al. 2013:6-7):



1. Partnership: Between the local community to buy a season's harvest, and even help with the farm work, and a local family farm to sell to the local community organically grown fresh produce.
2. Local: this means promoting local exchange between a community and family farms in a vicinity.
3. Solidarity: Both the community and family farm share the risks and benefits of organically grown produce "adapted to the natural rhythm of the seasons" and "respectful of the environment, natural and cultural heritage and health." The fundamental idea of solidarity also means that the community will pay a just price for the produce that allows the farmers to live with dignity.
4. The Producer/Consumer Tandem: there is a direct person-to-person relationship between the community and the farmers.

The idea of CSA was brought to the U.S. by Jan Vander Tuin from Switzerland and Trauger Groh from Germany in the mid-1980s (McFadden 2005). As of 2007, there are 12,549 CSA farms in the United States mostly in the regions of the West Coast, New England, and Upper-Midwest (USDA 2007). CSA farms are known to cultivate during the growing season between 50 to 70 different types of crops (Strochlic and Shelley 2004: iv).

The Most Efficient/The Most Dysfunctional

As stated in the Introduction, today's American agriculture is categorized as "the most efficient in the world, at least in terms of the dollar and cent costs of production" (Ikerd 1996; Dimitri, Efland and Conklin 2005: 2). However, many have categorized American agriculture as the most dysfunctional. One such critical voice is that of Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Watch, a Washington, D.C.-based whistle-blower organization concerned with corporate and state accountability regarding food, water and fishing (Food & Water Watch: About). Additionally, Hauter owns a family working farm in The Plains, Virginia.

In her book *Foodopoly: The Battle Over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, Hauter argues that, despite renewed interest in locally sold and organically grown produce through farmer's



markets and CSAs (USDA-NIFA 2019), they "are only a small part of the fix for our dysfunctional food system. Food hubs, which aggregate and distribute local food, are beneficial for participating farmers and the purchasing food establishment. But, so far, they must be subsidized by nonprofits or local governments because they are not self-sustaining" (Hauter 2012: 2).

According to Hauter, the dysfunctionality of American food production and distribution is structural: "Solving it means we must move beyond the focus on consumer choice to examine the corporate, scientific, industrial, and political structures that support an unhealthy system" (Hauter 2012: 2). Hauter calls for political activism against the "foodopoly"—"the handful of corporations that control our food system from seeds to dinner plates" (Hauter 2012:2). In her book *Foodopoly*, Hauter names the twenty food corporations that control every aspect of food production as well as the four conglomerates that control food distribution and sales in the United States. Hauter is likewise very critical of the biotechnology industry that is without adequate regulation and "has enable corporations to gain control of the basic building blocks of life, threatening the integrity of our global genetic commons and our collective food security" (Hauter 2012:3).

Hauter laments that these structural dysfunctions (deregulation, consolidation, and control of production and dis-

tribution by twenty-four large corporations with heavy political clout) are usually overlooked by groups like The Good-Food Movement—which provides "support for local, organic, humanely-raised, family farm identified food" (Farm Aid 2019). Hauter bemoans that they put all their energy into creating alternatives to the American agribusiness instead of fighting to change the dysfunctional system itself (Hauter 2012: 3). The 2008 USDA Report confirms Hauter's assessment of the minimal impact of the The Good-Food Movement by presenting the fact that The Good-Food Movement only generates \$4.8 billion in sales whereas the "foodopoly" generates \$1,229 trillion in overall sales (Low 2011: iii). This is mostly due to the fact that over half of The Good-Food Movement farms are located near metropolitan areas, thus with good access to the local market, but they compose only a third of U.S. farms (Hauter 2012: 4-5). So, most of these farms do not have access to large markets and usually are forced to produce only components for the large corporate agricultural industry like sweeteners, oils, starches, or feed for animals (Hauter 2012:4).

Hauter also criticizes the USDA's Census of Agriculture that overcounts the number of "small" family farms because it includes farms that are not full-time farms but are more like "hobby farms" that go from "having a vineyard to growing flowers or mushrooms" (Hauter 2012: 5). This creates the problem that it

“makes it appear that only a small percentage receive government payments. In reality, we have under a million full-time farms left, and almost all of them, small and large, receive government subsidies” (Hauter 2012:5).

Hauter believes the solutions to America’s agricultural dysfunction lies, among other things mentioned above, in enforcing “antitrust laws and regulate genetically modified food” as well as fight against “the manipulation of nutrition standards and the marketing of junk food to children” (Hauter 2012: 6). Therefore, the solution is in the changing of agricultural policies through a massive grassroots mobilization that includes “restructuring how food is grown, sold, and distributed. It means organizing a movement to hold policy makers accountable, so that food and farm policy is transformed and environmental, health, and safety laws are obeyed” (Hauter 2012: 7).

Conclusion

Can family farms, as the U.S. Founding Fathers’ ideals envision, once again be engines of economic growth consistent with contemporary America? According to the USDA and The Good Food Movement, yes, in the continual growth and support of organic and local food production and distribution and other alternative forms of food growth and marketing. The USDA, The Good Food Movement, and other like-minded movements do not want to romanticize small-scale “civic farming”, nor the U.S. founders’ original plans to build a farming nation—they are very much aware of the economic, volatile, and physical hardships of farming—; rather, they want “to demonstrate that the broader goals of equality and freedom through the land is not at odds with who we are as a nation. Quite the opposite; it is central to our story” (Sova 2015). These movements are the product of “economic necessity, moral awakening, environmental consciousness and the simple desire to eat good food” (Sova 2015). As Senior Director of Public Policy and Research at World Food Program USA (WFP USA) Chase Sova claims, “they are the seed of a new revolution... Farming at the time of independence was a political act [—self-reliant and self-sufficient farming was at first a rallying cry against British Colonialism;] and it needs to be again today” against agrobusiness imperialism (Sova 2015).

Wenonah Hauter would agree that we

need a new revolution in the agricultural world, but that revolution should not be fought through alternatives to the American agribusiness, but by fighting to change the dysfunctional system of industrial production and consolidated food distribution itself in the hands of a few corporations with heavy political clout in Washington. Hauter concludes: “The local-food movement is uplifting and inspiring and represents positive steps in the right direction. But now it’s time for us to marshal our forces and do more than vote with our forks. Changing our food system is a political act. We must build the political power to do so. It’s a matter of survival” (Hauter 2012: 8).

End Notes

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