

Contemporary Agrarianism: A Reality Check

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Agrarian ideology—the celebration of farming and rural life for the benefit it brings to individuals and the nation—has become part of a widespread national discourse about what we eat and how we live. This essay examines major tenets of new agrarian thinking and offers a critique of many of the assumptions that underlie the new agrarian movement. The author argues that incremental changes in consumer behavior can only achieve incremental improvements in the food system and that true systemic change depends on a fundamental alteration of in federal agricultural policy.

LAST SUMMER A YOUNG WOMAN IN MY YOGA CLASS, an Americorps/VISTA volunteer from suburban Charlotte, lectured me on the importance of supporting local by buying food at my farmers' market. At that moment, I became convinced of something I had suspected for a long time: agrarian ideology had gone mainstream. Browse your local bookstore, open the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*, or turn on a television news show on any given day, and you are likely to find books and articles and stories about sustainable farming or local foods or Michelle Obama's White House vegetable garden. In these unsettled times, agrarian ideas are infiltrating our national dialogue; a surprising variety of people—nutritionists, novelists, journalists, foodies, chefs, environmentalists, new urbanists, average suburbanites, and college students—are calling for changes in how we live and how we eat and produce food.¹

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I first tuned in to the contemporary discourse about agrarianism a few years ago when I purchased Norman Wirzba's 2003 collection of essays, *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*. Wirzba's book, the first in a University Press of Kentucky series called "Culture of the Land: A Series in the New Agrarianism," explores "a new agrarianism that considers the health of habitats and human communities together." Legal scholar Eric T. Freyfogle called this resurgence in agrarian thought the "new agrarianism" in his 2001 book by that title. In 2006 agrarian ideology went mainstream with the publication of Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Lamenting "our national eating disorder," Pollan revealed many of the dirty secrets of the corn-based industrial food chain and praised small farms committed to producing healthy food using sustainable practices. Pollan's book made a huge impact on the national consciousness. The *New York Times* named it one of the ten best books of the year. Excerpts and interviews with Pollan appeared in dozens of publications around the country. The next year, in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, novelist Barbara Kingsolver, her biologist husband, and her daughter recounted their family's adventure in local eating. Since the publication of these books, it seems that every time I open a magazine or visit a bookstore, I see a new work that urges consumers to embrace locally and sustainably produced foods in order to aid neighboring farmers, improve individual health, and/or save the planet. Lest you think I am engaging in hyperbole, consider the title of organic farming advocate Maria Rodale's most recent book: *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep Us Safe*.²

You might take issue with my characterization of some of this critique of the industrial food system as agrarianism. I am defining agrarianism as David Danbom did in his 1991 Agricultural History Society presidential address: "the celebration of agriculture and rural life for the positive impact thereof on the individual and society." Some of the proponents of local or organic food are not agrarian in their approach; they are simply advocating better food with little concern for farmers or the quality of rural life. But like agrarian thinkers of the past, many of the new voices emphasize the centrality of farmers and rural life in a healthy American society. They link the ways that agriculture is practiced and the success

of small-scale farmers with the health of local communities and the non-farm populace. Many of these people have been profoundly influenced by farmer/agrarians. For example, both Pollan and Kingsolver profess to have been influenced by the latter-day prophet of the new agrarians, Kentucky writer and farmer Wendell Berry.³

In the interests of full disclosure, I must tell you that I am a farmer's daughter; my childhood on a small East Tennessee dairy farm has shaped most of my thinking about agricultural history. I was raised by a man who believed farming was the highest human calling. I would love to see family farms flourish in this nation, if only so that those who feel called to farm can do that work. Growing up, I was taught that life on the land made better people than life off it. Part of me still embraces the potential of rural life to mold people of good character. I am also a self-professed foodie. I love good food, and I prefer to buy local and organic when it is possible and practical. I believe that industrial agriculture has harmed our environment; industrial farming practices have contaminated soil and water and created monocultures that have increased, not reduced, the incidence of insect infestations and disease among plants and livestock. Agriculture has also become such a capital-intensive venture that it is increasingly difficult for individuals to enter or persist at farming. I share the new agrarians' grave concerns about the future of our nation and indeed our planet: our dependence on fossil fuels, the problem of climate change, weakening ties to communities, and a resulting decline in civic engagement. I fear for my country, and the language of the new agrarians seems to address some of my fears. Part of me yearns to join the agrarian choir and become a true believer in the power of agrarian values to solve many of our nation's social, political, and environmental ills. Yet when I look closely at the rhetoric of the most influential contemporary agrarian thinkers, I believe we need a reality check. I see a range of problems with the overblown promises of salvation issued by advocates of a new agrarianism.

The new agrarians are a large and motley bunch, but as historian James E. McWilliams points out, they share a conceptualization of "agriculture as a countercultural ideal to industrial modes of production." The leading spokesman of the movement is Berry, who launched many of the debates about the broad implications of industrial agriculture with his 1977 book *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

The local food movement began with California restaurateur Alice Waters; she has since become an advocate for sustainable food production methods, and she is the founder of the Edible Schoolyard program that aims to teach children about healthy food production. In addition to Berry and the food writers, restaurateurs, and organic farming advocates I have already mentioned, other leaders in the resurgence of agrarian thought include Ohio writer and farmer Gene Logsdon, formerly a journalist with *Farm Journal*, biologist and Land Institute founder Wes Jackson of Kansas, and California classics scholar and farmer Victor Davis Hanson. They are joined by historian Brian Donahue of Massachusetts, legal scholar Freyfogle of Illinois, and philosophers Paul Thompson of Michigan, Wirzba of Kentucky, and Ronald Jager of Vermont, and many others.⁴

Among the common threads in the thinking of these new agrarians is the idea that, as Pollan says, “The way that we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world.” Or as Berry put it more succinctly, “Eating is an agricultural act.” In this way of thinking, humans have a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth that provides them sustenance. In his introduction to one of Berry’s books, Wirzba writes, “We must learn to reorganize our economic and social lives around the principle that health is an all-inclusive concept, a concept that involves soil, water, plants, ecosystems, individuals, families, cities, and nations.” To achieve this kind of health, new agrarians share a commitment to sustainability—that is the principle that our interactions with nature and the land should be calculated to meet our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. New agrarians share a conviction that modern industrial agriculture—the agriculture that now dominates world food and fiber production—is destructive rather than sustainable. Rodale says, “the chemical system of agriculture is killing us,” poisoning our soil, water, and air, our children, and ourselves with our use of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).⁵

A corollary to new agrarians’ commitment to sustainable agriculture is their advocacy of wise land use and environmental protection. Berry intones, “I am a conservationist and a farmer.” He and his compatriots believe that urban and suburban sprawl has eaten up thousands of acres of open land, displacing wildlife and destroying arable acres. Unlike many

traditional environmentalists, the new agrarians focus not on wilderness preservation but on wise land use that safeguards soil for the future use of human beings. They call for an overhaul of the nation's land use policies suggesting a variety of strategies including conservation easements, better models of residential development than the sprawling subdivision, and even, in the case of Freyfogle, a wholesale rethinking of private property rights. Because "property law creates a framework for managing and using nature," Freyfogle calls on policymakers to find ways to protect the public's interest "without undercutting the vital benefits we all get from a scheme of widespread private ownership."⁶

As agrarian approaches to land use laws suggest, the new agrarians do not see agrarian values and practices as the exclusive domain of farmers or even of rural dwellers. Their conception of agrarianism is broad and far-reaching, cultural as well as economic. Wirzba says, "Agrarianism is not simply the concern or prerogative of a few remaining farmers, but it is rather a comprehensive worldview that holds together in a synoptic vision the health of land *and* culture." Agrarians believe that shrinking the size of the loop between production and consumption will help maintain a safe and healthy food supply, something they do not believe is possible in the long run through the use of industrial agriculture. The new agrarians maintain that consumers bear much of the responsibility for restoring agrarian values to the center of American life. Freyfogle says, "The product cycle, from earth to consumer good to waste, traces not just lines of dependence and causation, but also lines of responsibility . . . Agrarians believe that those who buy products are morally implicated in their production, much as those who discard waste items are morally involved in their final end."⁷

Adopting a comprehensive agrarian worldview will do more than improve the physical health of Americans, say the new agrarians. It will be a source of cultural renewal. Agrarians believe that farming is a way of life that limits the alienating effects of modern post-industrial society. The new agrarians insist that culture, agriculture, and environmental health are intrinsically linked. Wirzba concludes, "What makes agrarianism the ideal candidate for cultural renewal is that it . . . [is] a deliberate way of life in which the integrity and wholeness of peoples and neighborhoods, and the natural sources they depend upon, are maintained and celebrated."⁸

As Wirzba suggests, the new agrarians focus on the revitalization of local communities. Berry calls modern industrial agriculture “community-killing agriculture.” He argues, “In the last half-century, we have added to our desecrations of nature a deliberate destruction of our rural communities The great, centralized economic entities of our time do not come into rural places in order to improve them by ‘creating jobs.’ They come to take as much of value as they can take, as cheaply and quickly as they can take it.” To Berry, corporate interests have destroyed small towns whose economies depended on agriculture and local businesses and in the process dismantled ties between people and their communities. Philosopher Thompson argues that food practices—including the ways that non-farm people obtain food—can be a “potent source of community” because community is built by shared experiences.⁹

Like earlier generations of thinkers, new agrarians argue that agrarian values are vital to the health of our democracy. Echoing Thomas Jefferson, the new agrarians argue that the concept of the free citizen is rooted in yeoman farming. Jager calls agriculture “*the* sustaining activity for life and for democratic society.” Hanson says, “The farmer’s understanding of man and society in our present age is absolutely critical to the survival of democracy as we once knew it. Democracy at its inceptions, ancient and American, has always been the outgrowth of an agrarian society.” Yeoman farming, in Hanson’s view, protects democracy from the corrosive and irresponsible sensibilities of the mob.¹⁰

The new agrarians promise that a national embrace of their ideals will mend our ailing society. They promise an economy more cooperative than competitive, a society marked by tight-knit communities and mutual care for the environment, a safe food supply that nurtures a healthy population, and a nation that values its farmers. All of these things appeal to me. I want to believe they are possible. But can an embrace of agrarian values and practices by American citizens really bring about such sweeping change? Can it really, in the words of Rodale, heal our planet, feed the world, and keep us safe? Can agrarian values restore a lost sense of community and heal our fractured polity?

As I see it, there are several problems with the new agrarian rhetoric. The first problem is cost. Lots of us are voting with our pocketbooks, buying more locally produced food. Some of us are trying to be more mindful, less materialistic consumers. Many of us are trying to reduce our

carbon footprints in ways large and small. But recyclers and foodies and locavores also tend to be pretty affluent. For example, several studies indicate that recycling is linked with income; the wealthier we are, the more likely we are to recycle. In other words, the people inclined to share the values of the new agrarians are often those who can afford to pay more for locally produced, fresh food purchased directly from the farmer at a farmers' market or through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangement. But what about the family of four scraping by on minimum wage jobs, the family whose children receive much of their nourishment from free or reduced price school breakfasts and lunches? Can they afford the up-front investment in a CSA share or the premium prices of a farmers' market or that six-dollar gallon of organic milk? In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last summer, Pollan set off a minor furor on the paper's blog pages when he suggested that all consumers should buy organically produced eggs at eight dollars a dozen. Even the affluent readers of the *Wall Street Journal* recognized that most people could not afford to buy eight-dollar eggs.¹¹

Pollan and others respond to such arguments by pointing out that local food may be more expensive in the short run, but cheaper when hidden costs such as tax dollars designated for farm subsidies and the cost of dealing with outbreaks of food-borne illnesses, are figured in. In the wake of the summer 2010 egg recall after a salmonella outbreak, Pollan told CNN, "We all like cheap food. But when we are spending billions to deal with a salmonella outbreak, it really isn't as cheap as it seems." Biologist Steven L. Hopp estimates that these hidden costs add up to about \$725 per household per year. On one level, Pollan and Hopp are correct. We all pay many hidden costs for our food supply. But we are largely unconscious or unaware of those costs. Our tax dollars disappear from our paychecks whether there is a salmonella outbreak or not; we do not see where that money goes. On the other hand, at the grocery store, we are very conscious of what things cost, and many people would object to paying substantially more for food, no matter how much safer it was. Nor is it clear that locally produced food is substantially healthier than food produced far away.¹²

And what about accessibility? Can the average American really have access to locally produced fresh food? Many disadvantaged urbanites live in "food deserts"—communities where the only food outlet is the

local convenience store. They must travel miles outside their neighborhoods to shop in a supermarket, and their ability to do so—or to make weekly pick-ups of produce from a CSA—depends on their access to mass transit or to a private automobile. I see some hopeful progress on the accessibility front. I'll give you just a few examples. Many local social service organizations are trying to promote the consumption of healthier foods. In my hometown, our non-profit farmers' market organization accepts WIC vouchers and food stamps so that even the town's poorest residents can purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables. This is part of a national WIC program that provides farmers' market vouchers to 2.5 million people. Last summer the agency received a grant to outfit a Mobile Market, a truck that allows them to take locally produced food into the city's disadvantaged neighborhoods. The *New York Times* reported in early 2011 that CVS and Walgreens stores in inner-city neighborhoods are beginning to stock fresh produce, meats, milk, bakery items, and frozen food in an effort to capitalize on an underserved market. In Cleveland, Ohio, the Fresh Stops garden program provides fresh food for low to moderate-income neighborhoods. In a working-class neighborhood in Milwaukee, farmer Will Allen's Growing Power farm produces low-cost food for urbanites in fourteen greenhouses. He also delivers low-cost market baskets to neighborhood pickup points around the city. In Washington, DC, a program called "Through the Kitchen Door" teaches low-income families how to cook healthy inexpensive food. Detroit's Urban Farming organization grows food for inner-city residents on the city's vacant lots. At the University of South Carolina, public health physicians are using grant money to establish farmers' markets adjacent to community health clinics. But these efforts are piecemeal, and it remains to be seen whether most low-income people will gain access to reasonably priced local and fresh food.¹³

Then there is the question of whether people really want to restrict themselves to a diet that is locally produced. Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* brings home the challenges of eating locally; it means you must eat seasonally. And in January, the local pickings are pretty slim in most parts of the country. I am not interested in going back to the limited and bland diet my ancestors were forced to eat during the winter. Moreover, the biggest advocates of local and sustainable food are the

foodies among us. Those folks have developed sophisticated tastes. I am happy to buy tomatoes and beef and eggs at my local farmers' market, but I am not going to give up my Haas avocados, extra virgin olive oil, Colombian coffee, or Argentinean Malbec, none of which is produced within a thousand miles of my South Carolina home. Journalist and commentator Virginia Postrel writes in the *Wall Street Journal*, "The locavore ideal is a world without trade, not only beyond national borders, but even from the next state: no Florida oranges in Colorado, no Vidalia onions in New York." She points out that the variety of foods available to all Americans and the recent resurgence of interest in all things culinary are the products of "logistical ingenuity and gains from trade" that have taken place in the past century and argues that the local food movement could be as much a backward step as a forward one.¹⁴

Much of the new agrarian rhetoric romanticizes some "golden age" of our food past, but I remain skeptical that the good old days were so good. Food historian Rachel Laudan says, "If we romanticize the past, we may miss the fact that it is the modern, global, industrial economy . . . that allows us to savor traditional, peasant, fresh, and natural foods." Laudan asserts that "for our ancestors, natural was something quite nasty. Natural often tasted bad." Moreover, the amount of variety in one's diet has often depended to a large extent on one's socioeconomic status. As Laudan points out, "By the standard measures of health and nutrition—life expectancy and height—our ancestors were far worse off than we are. Much of the blame was due to diet." She goes on to argue, "Where modern food became available, populations grew taller, stronger, had fewer diseases, and lived longer."¹⁵

Put another way, I wonder what are the limits—psychological as well as economic—to consumers' commitment to the local and the sustainable? Again, I am skeptical. It is a "feel good" message: buy food from local farmers, reject the products of industrial agriculture, and you will be healthier and save the world in the process. Still, the problems are far more complex than agrarians like to admit, and consumers are a fickle lot. Historian David Shi has argued that Americans have always been "ambivalent about the meaning of the good life From colonial days, the images of America as a spiritual commonwealth and a republic of virtue have survived alongside the more tantalizing vision of America as a cornucopia of economic opportunities and consumer delights." Which

impulse will prove most powerful: the impulse to be virtuous citizens or the impulse to enjoy a “cornucopia of . . . consumer delights”?¹⁶

I also wonder whether the local food movement advocated by agrarians and locavores is just another manifestation of our tendency to embrace the trend of the decade. McWilliams writes, “Whereas the push to develop alternative local food systems began as a way of democratizing fresh food, the quest to keep matters local has thus far ended up empowering the self-styled tastemakers while excluding the masses.” Is the push to embrace locally or sustainably grown food—like so many movements advocated by affluent middle-class folks—just another example of the privileged few telling the rest of the nation’s citizens how they ought to live? A *New York Times* story entitled “A Sniff of Home Cooking for Dogs and Cats,” featuring Barbara Laino, a New Yorker who makes her own pet food from organically raised meats and vegetables, suggests to me that the trendiness of the food movement may have reached preposterous proportions.¹⁷

Like every new trend that comes down the pike, the commitment to sustainably produced food is one that mega agri-processing and food corporations have begun to capitalize on. For example, the French-based company Dannon Yogurt now owns 85 percent of organic brand Stonyfield Farms. In fall 2010 Wal-Mart announced a commitment to purchasing four-hundred-million-dollars worth of local produce each year. Changes like this, particularly the Wal-Mart announcement, have the potential to transform the landscape of food production and distribution and even to make local and/or organic food more widely available in disadvantaged neighborhoods, particularly if more of the major food retailers jump on the local food bandwagon. Yet even the flagship supermarket of the food movement, Whole Foods, fails to deliver on its implied promises to offer mostly local or sustainably produced food. A *Slate* magazine exposé points out that the stores are festooned with banners proclaiming “Our Commitment to the Local Farmer” and “Help the Small Farmer,” but that most of the produce sold in those stores is grown by mega-producers in California. Call me cynical, but I tend to be suspicious when big corporations capitalize on a trend. With their size and their access to high-priced lobbyists, big corporations can often hijack the process of policymaking, as they have with some of the USDA’s changes in organic food requirements over the last couple of years.¹⁸

Then there is the question of whether farmers can make an adequate living on the land. As Berry has said, “It ought to be obvious that in order to have sustainable agriculture, you have got to make sustainable the lives and livelihoods of the people who do the work.” Nor do I mean that farmers should be satisfied with the subsistence living provided by small farming today. Unless small-scale farmers can achieve a twenty-first-century middle-class standard of living, very few people are going to want to farm. And if few people want to farm, then locally produced food will not be available in quantities sufficient to meet local demand. While some of the new agrarian spokesmen identify themselves first and foremost as farmers, most of the ones I cite here have other sources of income—often sources of steady income with affordable health insurance benefits that are not available to full-time self-employed farmers. Berry himself admits that it is difficult for small-scale farmers to earn an adequate living without off-farm jobs. And for young farmers without the equity head start that comes with inherited land, the start-up costs of obtaining land and equipment for even small-scale farming can be prohibitive. Organic farming can be even more expensive if the farmer wants to become a USDA-certified organic producer. Estimates are that it costs about seven hundred fifty dollars to gain certification.¹⁹

The USDA has made some strides toward helping farmers who want to adopt sustainable methods. The USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service administers a grant program to help eligible farmers cover the cost of certification, but many still find organic certification to be cost prohibitive. Another example is the agency’s Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program founded in 1988, which funds research and education and makes grants to farmers ranging from five hundred to fifteen thousand dollars. A SARE grant funded start-up of Milwaukee’s Growing Power urban farm that I mentioned earlier. Dan Forgey, a South Dakota farmer, received a SARE grant to introduce cover crops into his diverse crop rotation system. Pelzer, South Carolina, dairy farmer Tom Trantham used a SARE grant to shift from large-scale dairy farming to smaller-scale organic dairying. He also developed his own bottling operation, Happy Cow Creamery. Today he earns more money from the organic operation than he ever did in his industrial-style farming days. Such stories are inspirational, but they are also exceptional.

Federal help is limited, and for many people, the obstacles to making a good living on the land are enormous.²⁰

Even if farmers could make a good living, how many people want to farm? Farming is hard physical labor; it is also among the most dangerous occupations. As we all know, it requires extraordinary commitment and stamina to work outdoors in all kinds of weather and deal with the uncertainties of weather and markets. Livestock farmers must work 24/7. A report from the Economic Research Service of the USDA notes that the number of farm children who sought farm careers has been steadily declining for decades. This suggests that few people raised on farms—in other words, those who possess firsthand acquaintance with the realities of farming—find farming an attractive career alternative. The number of farms has increased slightly: the USDA reported that the total number of farms grew from 2,129,000 in 2002 to 2,205,000 in 2007. However, almost all of the gain came from tiny farms—farms with gross sales of less than twenty-five hundred dollars—not farms that could provide an adequate living for a farm family. As a friend pointed out, that is smaller than a lemonade stand. These small farms typically feed their owners and produce some commodities for local markets. They hardly meet the new agrarian goal of making farming a viable way to earn a living.²¹

And then there is the problem of private property. Whatever the evolution of land use law, Americans have long held sacred the notion of private property. They bristle at any attempt to restrict land use as every fight to implement or tighten local zoning laws reminds us. Farmers have often been the most vocal opponents of land use restrictions, insisting that “no one can tell me what to do with my land” and that conservation easements or land use restrictions will reduce the value of their property. They have a valid point. Farmers rarely have the spare capital to sock away in an IRA in anticipation of retirement. They see the land as a retirement fund, the only asset they have with which to sustain themselves in old age. It is understandable that they want to be free to sell their land to the highest bidder, regardless of use the buyer intends to make of it and how that use might affect the local community.²²

Another source of my skepticism arises from the tricky business of definitions. Who gets to define local anyway? Are the Thai immigrants selling bitter squash at my local farmers’ market “local”? Are certified organic foods necessarily healthier? How about locally produced foods?

Are all local farmers using sustainable methods? Are any of them using exploited migrant laborers to harvest their food crops? Not all things labeled local are produced in ways that steward the earth or its people. Advocates for local food and consumers alike sometimes take it for granted that food produced by local farmers is somehow produced in a more healthy and sustainable manner than food shipped from distant farms. Yet there is no guarantee that the strawberry farmer whose products I buy at my farmers' market is growing those berries in a sustainable way. He may be using plenty of herbicides and pesticides on those red beauties I put in my cereal bowl. Just because something is locally produced does not guarantee that it is produced in accord with agrarian values. Local is not necessarily good, though the new agrarians rarely admit that. Nor is organic a magic bullet. Organic food can be, and sometimes is, produced using methods that are destructive to the land. Some California growers are producing USDA-certified organic foods by using unsustainable methods. Earthbound Farms, the nation's largest producer of bagged, pre-washed salad greens, uses massive amounts of fossil fuel to plant, harvest, and process its popular baby greens. There is little evidence that products labeled local or organic are somehow inherently healthier or more sustainable than products that do not carry these labels.²³

These examples are the source of some of my skepticism; many of the new agrarian promises are at best overblown and, at worst, just plain wrong. Last summer, Virginia writer Stephen Budiansky warned in the *New York Times* that local food advocates often advance misleading claims about the environmental advantages of consuming local foods. He says, "One popular and oft-repeated statistic is that it takes 36 calories of fossil fuel energy to bring one calorie of iceberg lettuce from California to the East Coast." That figure is misleading, however. He argues that this figure includes ALL the fossil fuel energy necessary to produce food, including farming, transportation, food processing, marketing and distribution, and home storage and preparation. Farming itself probably accounts for about one-fifth of the energy consumption to get food to our plates, and herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers consume most of that figure. Transportation constitutes another 6–12 percent of the cost of food. Budiansky says, "The real energy hog . . . is not industrial agriculture Home preparation and storage accounts for 32% of all energy use in our

food system.” Several other studies have offered similar figures for the amount of energy used by home storage and consumption.²⁴

No matter how you interpret the statistical evidence, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that eating locally will not eliminate all the fossil fuels used in food production. Many locavores insist that we should not buy winter lettuce or tomatoes from California. And indeed, I can buy hydroponic lettuce and greenhouse-grown tomatoes produced in North Carolina, only fifty miles from my door. That might reduce the transportation costs, but how about the fossil fuel that is consumed in heating the greenhouses where that lettuce and those tomatoes are grown? McWilliams points out that the focus on transportation costs obscures the complexities of energy use in food production. He notes that different foods consume different amounts of energy at different stages. Canned foods, for example, require more fossil fuels in the processing and disposal of the cans. The amount of fossil fuels consumed in fishing depends on the methods used to fish. Critics often assert that many of the problems of modern American family farmers are rooted in the cheap food policies of the last fifty years. As Hanson says, many Americans “no longer care where or how they get their food, as long as it is firm, fresh, and cheap.” But even here, new agrarian claims tell only part of the story. They point out, correctly, that Americans spend a much smaller proportion of their income on food now than they did fifty years ago. In 1950 the average American family spent more than 30 percent of its income on food, today less than 10 percent. Still, in this sixty-year period, real household incomes have risen; some studies indicate that they have risen 30 percent or more. As a result, the declining proportion of income spent on food is in part a function of rising household income, not just the cheapness of food. The real prices of many foods have indeed fallen during this period due to federal policies that have subsidized and encouraged overproduction of some commodities while ignoring others. Still, Americans consume more food—more processed food, more fresh produce and meat, more restaurant meals and prepared meals, more food of all kinds than before. They are spending a smaller proportion of income to purchase more food.²⁵

The problem for farmers is that, at the same time that some food became cheaper and more plentiful, the farmer enjoyed a smaller share of the food dollar than ever before. “In 1950, the farmer received over

fifty cents of every food dollar spent”; today he sees less than twenty cents. Yet this decline is not simply a result of cheap food policies, though those policies have had some impact. Other factors have played a role in reducing the farmer’s share of the food dollar including overproduction of many commodities, increased global competition, and the rising popularity of processed foods.²⁶

McWilliams has taken on many locavore claims in his book *Just Food*. He points out that we simply do not have enough information to assess the validity of many locavore assertions. What is more, he argues, federal agricultural policies, policies advocated by incredibly powerful agribusiness conglomerates, are huge obstacles to reform in the food system. Historians James C. Giesen and Mark Hersey agree. They have argued that many advocates for locally and sustainably produced food fail to grapple with the extent to which the early twentieth century “development of government policies that married federal research with industrial agriculture” has shaped our modern industrial food system.²⁷

McWilliams points out the problem of “perverse subsidies”—that is the billions of dollars worth of federal subsidies distributed each year to support environmentally damaging production. In fact, he says, “Subsidies not only allow but practically beg farmers” to use destructive practices. Moreover, we subsidize the wrong things. Half of the subsidized corn produced in this nation feeds animals, many of them kept in the environmental disasters that are CAFOs or confined animal feeding operations. Another 40 percent is used to produce ethanol. Still more corn is used in processed foods that contribute to obesity and other health problems. Most Americans do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, yet few fruits and vegetables receive subsidies.²⁸

Not only do perverse subsidies encourage environmentally damaging production and subsidize the wrong crops, but they also reward inefficiency. For example, in 2005 the market value of corn in Illinois was \$1.95, but it cost between \$2.95 and \$3.21 a bushel to produce. Still farmers were able to break even or even make money on that corn due to subsidies. Many alternative crops are not subsidized and thus are riskier to produce. Likewise, federal policies reward inefficiency in the production of ethanol. One recent study found that it took 29 percent more fossil fuel energy to produce fuel from corn than the amount of biofuel energy produced. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-California) has called ethanol

“the triple crown of government intervention.” Not only is production of the corn used in ethanol subsidized by the federal government, but she points out that the use of it in fuel is mandated by law and protected by tariffs, while companies are paid by the federal government to use it. Given the powerful corporate interests that would resist changes in policies regarding ethanol, I doubt that Congress will discourage production of corn for ethanol any time soon. That means that lawmakers will surely not have the financial flexibility to then expand programs that encourage sustainable food production.²⁹

Like McWilliams, it seems to me that altering the structure of our federal agricultural programs is the biggest obstacle of all to making agrarian dreams a reality. As long as our public policy continues to subsidize cheap corn and cotton instead of cheap broccoli and blueberries, a substantial number of people may be unable to afford fresh, sustainably grown food, much less organic food, and many farmers will be discouraged from producing food in sustainable ways. I doubt that the voices of the citizen advocates of the new agrarianism are powerful enough to overcome the strong hold that entrenched agribusiness interests have on our national agricultural policy. Political will is a particularly sticky question in the current environment in which citizens are intensely suspicious of encroaching federal or state power. Can we achieve the agrarian vision without a lot of government control? What kind? How much? Can we fashion policies in a way that will not have unintended and negative consequences? Will the agrarian vision be sufficiently appealing to enough Americans for us to rethink many of our most entrenched practices and beliefs?³⁰

Another claim that gives me pause is the assertion that we can meet the world’s food needs using sustainable methods. I would say that it depends on how you define sustainability; certainly we can and must improve the sustainability of our farming methods across the board. And we already produce enough food to feed the world. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, we already produce enough food to make every person on the globe fat, in spite of the fact that eight hundred million people on this planet are chronically undernourished. The problem of hunger in the world is complex, but it is not the result of producing too little food. Still, I am unconvinced by Rodale’s claim that we can “feed the world” with organic methods. In an extensive

search of the scholarly literature, McWilliams found vast evidence that per acre productivity goes down substantially when organic methods are introduced. That means that we would need significantly more land in production to feed the world using organic methods. We would also need many more farmers because organic farming is labor intensive. It follows that more labor-intensive farming will lead to more expensive food.³¹

I am most skeptical about the most sweeping new agrarian claim—that a widespread embrace of agrarian values will safeguard democracy and rebuild our communities. As a historian, I know that doomsayers—including that father of agrarianism, Thomas Jefferson—have predicted the end of American democracy since the beginning of our nation. It has not happened yet. Yes, our nation has changed and our democratic systems have evolved. Moreover, I do not share Hanson's conviction that only farmers can guarantee the persistence of a free citizenry. The same farmers who were among our founding fathers—including again the father of American agrarianism—were also men who excluded African Americans, women, and Native Americans from that free citizenry. From the days of slavery to the present, farmers have been as likely as any other occupational group to exploit powerless workers. Our democracy is too complex and multi-faceted for a single factor—such as the declining numbers of farmers—to bring about its downfall.

So the new agrarians overstate their arguments. So some of their proposals will not work, and many of their promises are overblown. In talking about this paper with Mark Hersey, he pointed out that many of the best and most compelling arguments for reform throughout history have been overblown. In the same vein, I tell my students that the women's suffrage amendment would not have passed in 1919 without the actions of Alice Paul and the radicals in the National Women's Party who made the more moderate demands of the National American Women Suffrage Association look like the lesser of the evils. The job of reformers is, in part, to be gadflies—to irritate the powerful and raise the awareness of the less powerful, to advocate for sweeping change in order to achieve more moderate reform.³²

In short I think the new agrarians make valid and important points in their rhetoric. I agree with Danbom who, twenty years ago before this august body, said that agrarianism remains a vital and important point of view “because it forces us, in an uncompromising fashion, to confront

ourselves and what we have become, to take stock of our values, and to consider seriously the nature and purpose of life.” The new agrarians have encouraged many Americans to take stock of our values and to consider the nature and purpose of life. They have also helped millions of Americans connect the food they eat to the people who grow that food, leading to a broader public understanding of the enormous skill required to produce food.³³

I am not arguing that we resign ourselves to accepting the damaging effects of industrial agriculture; many new agrarian proposals would go a long way toward fixing problems in our food system and our environment, but I am wary of overblown, uncritical, and simplistic solutions. Our food system is a complex organism, and ideologies provide only limited solutions. Agrarian values can guide us toward answers, but understating the scope of the problem or overstating the possibilities can ultimately lead to disillusionment and then rejection of the new agrarian agenda.

If we ever hope to change our food system, we have to follow some of the prescriptions of the new agrarians. We must be more responsible and mindful consumers. We must recognize that the health of the land and the food supply is crucial to the health of all of us. We can encourage farmers to adopt more sustainable methods by buying the products of farmers who do so. We must continue advocacy and education around smarter food choices. We must continue grassroots and top-down efforts to make healthy food choices more accessible to all Americans.

Still all these incremental changes in our behavior can make only an incremental difference. The problems we face are huge. Addressing the challenges posed by climate change will not only require addressing many domestic economic development policies but also complex negotiations with foreign nations. Reforming our food system will be impossible without more action on the part of the federal government. I am not proposing *more* regulation; I am talking about replacing bad regulation and bad policy with better regulations and policies. We must focus our citizen advocacy efforts on reforms that will make a difference. We must attempt to fight the powerful interests that have blocked efforts to regulate GMOs, the use of human growth hormone and antibiotics in livestock and milk production, and CAFOs. We must continue to push for better regulation of the use of pesticides and herbicides and synthetic fertilizers. We must encourage Congress to expand support of sustainable

farming activities; we must push lawmakers to end subsidies and regulations that reward inefficiency and environmentally damaging production. Unless we change the nature of federal agricultural regulations, I doubt that we can ever make sustainable farming a source of an adequate living for very many people.

In the end, many of the debates about agrarianism center on a basic question. What is “good” farming? Agricultural historians have grappled with this question as we have evaluated the lives and work of farmers past and present, and we have struggled with the answer. Environmental historian Donald Worster has observed that we do not have an adequate idea of what constitutes “the agricultural good of this nation.” He adds that traditionally policymakers, farmers, and citizens alike have believed that the public good in agriculture lies either in increasing the gross farm product or increasing the wealth of the farm sector “even if it means losing most of our farmers.” More and more Americans are realizing that there is a problem with this view of “good farming.” Twenty years ago, Worster identified three conditions of good farming:

- “Good farming is farming that makes people healthier.”
- “Good farming is farming that promotes a more just society.”
- “Good farming is farming that preserves the earth and its network of life.”

I think that Worster’s prescription holds up today. I would add that good farming provides a good living for the farmer. We must have good farming if we are to continue to sustain future generations of human beings. And the new agrarians offer compelling approaches to many of the most pressing problems we face. For all the limitations of their arguments, they offer a vision worth taking seriously.³⁴

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Rebecca Sharpless, Charles Reback, David Vaught, Mark Hersey, Lu Ann Jones, Anne Effland, Jim Minick, and Jill Bouchillon for their careful reading and helpful comments on previous versions of this essay. I also thank the audience at Mississippi State University’s Nature and Society lecture series for their helpful comments, especially Claire Strom and Jim Giesen.

Recent titles at my local bookstore include: Karl Weber, *Food, Inc.: How Industrial Food Is Making Us Sicker, Fatter and Poorer—and What You Can Do about It* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009); Jill Richardson, *Recipe for America: Why Our Food System Is Broken and What We Can Do to Fix It* (Brooklyn: Ig Pub., 2009); Ben Hewitt, *The Town that Food Saved:*

How One Community Found Vitality in Local Food (Emmaus, Penn.: Rodale, 2009). Media attention can be seen, for example, in Christine Muhlke, "Growing Together," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/magazine/10FOB-WWLN-t.html?ref=urbanagriculture> (accessed Dec. 14, 2010); Michael Pollan on the Oprah Winfrey Show, Apr. 22, 2009, <http://www.oprah.com/world/Michael-Pollan-Omnivores-Dilemma-Environment-and-Food/1> (accessed Sept. 26, 2011); Karen Cullotta, "Making Fresh Food Affordable," *O! The Oprah Magazine*, July 14, 2009, <http://www.oprah.com/world/Will-Allen-Making-Fresh-Food-Affordable> (accessed Dec. 14, 2010); Marian Burros, "Obamas to Plant Vegetable Garden at the White House," *New York Times*, Mar. 19, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/20/dining/20garden.html?sq=Obamas%20Prepare%20to%20Plant%20Vegetable%20Garden%20at%20the%20White%20House&st=cse&adxnnl=1&scp=1&adxnnlx=1311260516-0SpHNcnw0faDxrvUcbqEQ> (accessed June 5, 2011). Agricultural historians have noticed this dialogue, and they have identified some parallels with earlier agricultural reform efforts. In 2010 at the Agricultural History Society conference, in a roundtable discussion on populism in contemporary America, Robert McMath compared the contemporary push for sustainable agriculture and the revival of small farms to the producerist mentality of nineteenth-century Populists. At the same meeting, Mary S. Hoffschwelle placed current debates about sustainability in historical context, comparing today's movement with the early twentieth-century USDA live-at-home programs that "stressed household production, consumption of local products, and sustainable agricultural practices" as tools for improving farm families' living standards. See, McMath, "Twenty-First Century Populism: Relating to the Global Environment: A Roundtable Discussion"; Hoffschwelle, "The First Locavores? Rethinking Live-At-Home Programs in the Era of Sustainability," Agricultural History Society Annual Conference, Rollins College, Winter Park, Fla., June 10, 2010, notes in author's possession.

2. Norman Wirzba, ed., *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Eric T. Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001); Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 1; "The 10 Best Books of 2006," *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/review/20061210tenbestbooks.html> (accessed Dec. 1, 2011); Pollan, "The Modern Hunter-Gatherer," *New York Times Magazine*, Mar. 26, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/26/magazine/carnivore.html?scp=1&sq=the%20modern%20hunter%20gatherer%20pollan&st=cse> (accessed Oct. 23, 2010); "Questions for Michael Pollan," *New York Times Magazine*, Mar. 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/29/magazine/29questions-pollan.html?scp=1&sq=questions%20for%20michael%20pollan&st=cse> (accessed Oct. 23, 2010); Carol Ness, "A Consuming Interest; Pollan puts his Research Where his Mouth is," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 9, 2006, M6; Kim Ode, "Author Urges a Diet that Balances Ethics and Aesthetics; Michael Pollan Talks about how we Omnivores can Solve our Eating Dilemmas by Voting with our Forks," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Apr. 5, 2007, 1T; Barbara Kingsolver et al., *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Maria Rodale, *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep Us Safe* (New York: Rodale, Inc., 2010). Rodale builds on the legacy of her grandfather, J. I. Rodale, who launched *Organic Farming and Gardening* magazine in 1942, thus inaugurating the organic farming movement. Her father developed the Rodale Research Institute in Pennsylvania, an organization that has conducted extensive empirical research on organic and conventional farming.

3. David B. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America," *Agricultural History* 65 (Fall 1991): 1; Michael Pollan, "Introduction," in Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), x–xi; Kingsolver et al., *Animal, Vegetable*, 353. For a fuller discussion of Berry's influence on the proponents of the contemporary food movement, see, Jeffrey Filipiak, "The Work of Local Culture: Wendell Berry and Communities as the Source of Farming Knowledge," *Agricultural History* (Spring 2011): 1–21.

4. James E. McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get it Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 8; Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 3rd ed. (1977; repr., San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996); *The Edible Schoolyard*, <http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/about-us> (accessed May 31, 2011). One Waters biographer's title is indicative of her influence: Thomas McNamee's *Alice Waters and Chez Panisse: The Romantic, Impractical, Often Eccentric, Ultimately Brilliant Making of a Food Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).

Gene Logsdon, *At Nature's Pace: Farming and the American Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); Logsdon, *You Can Go Home Again: Adventures of a Contrary Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture*, foreword by Wendell Berry (1980; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Victor Davis Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Ideal* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Hanson, *The Land Was Everything: Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Wirzba, *Essential Agrarian Reader*; Ronald Jager, *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004).

5. Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 10; Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating," in *Bringing it to the Table*, 227; Norman Wirzba, "Introduction," in Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), xv–xvi. Historian Donahue, for example, defines sustainable agriculture as "growing a wide variety of fresh food and flowers for local consumption while relying on local, renewable resources without degrading them." See, Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons*, 82. Literary scholar M. Thomas Inge noted that agrarian literature of the past was riddled with the idea that technology both corrupts and damages the environment and human beings. See, Inge, ed., *Agrarianism in American Literature* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1969). Rodale, *Organic Manifesto*, 5–33.

6. Berry, "Conservationist and Agrarian," in *Bringing it to the Table*, 67; Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons*, 286; Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society*, 107, 98–99.

7. In the words of Logsdon, new agrarians seek to foster a lifestyle among Americans that maintains "a vital connection between agriculture and human culture, between food getting and food eating." Logsdon, *The Mother of All Arts: Agrarianism and the Creative Impulse* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 3. Freyfogle says, "Agrarianism, broadly conceived, reaches beyond food production and rural living to include a wide constellation of ideas, loyalties, sentiments, and hopes. It is a temperament and a moral orientation as well as a suite of economic practices, all arising out of the insistent truth that people everywhere are part of the land community." See, Freyfogle, *New Agrarianism*, xiii, xx. Wirzba, *Essential Agrarian Reader*, 5; Pollan, "The Food

Movement Rising,” *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/food-movement-rising/?pagination=false> (accessed Dec. 9, 2011). Rodale is scathing in her critique of chemical use in agriculture. She points out that more children than ever suffer from ADHD, food allergies, and autism, while record numbers of adults are diagnosed with diabetes and cancer, and all Americans are experiencing an alarming number of drug-resistant infections. Research has linked all of these ailments to exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals ranging from herbicides and pesticides to anti-bacterial soap. Rodale, *Organic Manifesto*, 18–27. As Logsdon put it, “people are beginning to understand they really *are* what they eat and demanding quality food, which megafarms can’t supply.” Logsdon, *At Nature’s Pace*, 107, emphasis mine.

8. Berry, *Unsettling*, 43. Berry also argues that our modern industrial culture has killed individual souls. He says, “We have to remember that the great destructiveness of the industrial age comes from a division, a sort of divorce, in our economy, and therefore in our consciousness, between production and consumption.” Berry believes that Americans have experienced a profound “split between what we think and what we do.” Berry, *Unsettling*, 19, 77. Wirzba, *Essential Agrarian Reader*, 5.

9. Berry, *Unsettling*, 41; Wendell Berry, “Conserving Communities,” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. William Vitek and Wes Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 77, 81–82; Paul B. Thompson, *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 145.

10. Jager, *Fate of Family Farming*, 83; Hanson, *Land Was Everything*, 2; Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams*, 182.

11. Rebecca Gardyn, “Being Green,” *American Demographics*, Sept. 1, 2002, CBS Interactive Business Network, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_2002_Sept_1/ai_90957499/ (accessed Jan. 5, 2010); I. E. Berger, “The Demographics of Recycling and the Structure of Environmental Behavior,” *Environment and Behavior* 29 (July 1997): 515–31; Ben Worthen, “A Dozen Eggs for \$8? Michael Pollan Explains the Math of Buying Local,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 8, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704271804575405521469248574.html> (accessed Oct. 22, 2010).

12. Kingsolver et al., *Animal, Vegetable*, 117. Another study says that consumers pay about two thousand dollars a year in subsidies and another two thousand dollars a year in higher prices on consumer goods due to environmental degradation. See, McWilliams, *Just Food*, 189–92.

13. Kingsolver et al., *Animal, Vegetable*, 325; Lynne Shackelford, “Mobile Market a Fresh Idea,” *Spartanburg (SC) Herald-Journal*, Sept. 8, 2010, C1; Stephanie Clifford, “Big Retailers Fill More Aisles With Groceries,” *New York Times*, Jan. 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/17/business/17grocery.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed July 21, 2011); Mark Winne, *Food Rebels, Guerilla Gardeners, and Smart Cookin’ Mamas: Fighting Back in an Age of Industrial Agriculture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 64; Elizabeth Royte, “Street Farmer,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/magazine/05allen-t.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed July 6, 2009); Jessie Price and the Eating Well Test Kitchen, “Eat Well and Spend Less,” *Eating Well* (Sept.–Oct. 2010): 76; Christine Muhlke, “Growing Together,” *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/magazine/10FOB-WWLN-t.html> (accessed Dec. 14, 2010); “Farmers’ Market Grant,” *Carolina Minute*, SC Educational Radio, Jan. 3, 2011, <http://www.sc.edu/media/carolinaminutes.php?m=1&y=2011> (accessed Jan. 12, 2011).

14. Virginia Postrel, "No Free Locavore Lunch," *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 25–26, 2010, C10.
15. Rachel Laudan, "A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food," *Gastronomica* 1 (Winter 2001): 36–44.
16. David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 277.
17. McWilliams, *Just Food*, 36; Samantha Story, "A Sniff of Home Cooking for Dogs and Cats," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/19/dining/19pets.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed July 21, 2011).
18. For more on the rise of organic farming as a multi-billion dollar industry, see, Robin O'Sullivan, "Organic Farming and the Routinization of Subversion," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, Philadelphia, Penn., Oct. 11, 2007, http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p185540_index.html (accessed May 23, 2011); Stonyfield Farms corporate website, http://web.archive.org/web/20070110034106/http://www.stonyfield.com/AboutUs/MoosReleases_Display.cfm?pr_id=36 (accessed Jan. 3, 2010); Mark Gunther, "Stonyfield Stirs Up the Yogurt Market," *CNN Money*, Jan. 4, 2008, <http://money.cnn.com/2008/01/03/news/companies/gunther.yogurt.fortune/index.htm> (accessed Jan. 3, 2010); Stephanie Clifford, "Wal-Mart to Buy Local Produce," *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/business/15walmart.html?_r=1 (accessed Jan. 3, 2011); Field Maloney, "Is Whole Foods Wholesome?: The Dark Secrets of the Organic-Food Movement," Mar. 17, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2138176/> (accessed June 5, 2011); See, Gabriel Nelson, "USDA's Organic Enforcers Let Offenders Slide, Audit Says," *New York Times*, Mar. 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/gwire/2010/03/19/19greenwire-usdas-organic-enforcers-let-offenders-slide-au-12233.html> (accessed May 23, 2011); Melanie Warner, "What is Organic? Powerful Players Want a Say," *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/01/business/01organic.html> (accessed May 23, 2011).
19. Berry, *Bringing it to the Table*, 16; George Kuepper, "Organic Farm Certification and the National Organic Program," *Marketing Technical Note*, ATTRA, National Center for Appropriate Technology (Oct. 2002).
20. USDA, "Grant Marketing Programs/Agricultural Marketing Service," <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/> (accessed Jan. 12, 2011); USDA, "Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education," <http://www.sare.org/> (accessed Jan. 12, 2011); USDA, "2009-2010 Report from the Field," <http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/SARE-Biennial-Reports/2009-2010-Biennial-Report> (accessed July 21, 2011); Jeffrey Collins, "Doing Less Helps One Pelzer Farmer Make More Profit," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, Oct. 28, 2002, C4.
21. National Safety Council, "President Bush Proclaims Sept. 16–23, 2007 National Farm Safety and Health Week," Aug. 29, 2007, <http://www.nsc.org/Pages/PresidentBushProclaimsSeptember16-22,2007NationalFarmSafetyandHealthWeek.aspx> (accessed Jan. 12, 2011); Fred Gale, "The Graying Farm Sector: Legacy of Off-Farm Migration," *Rural America* 17 (Fall 2002): 30; USDA, *2007 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1: United States Summary and State Data, Pt. 51, http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/index.asp (accessed July 21, 2011).
22. Maybe the tide on private property is turning in a new direction. In 2005, in the case of *Kelo v. City of New London*, a divided US Supreme Court ruled that the city could use its power of eminent domain to purchase private residences for use by developers of a mixed use shopping and residential community. The city insisted that the development, which would be a significant boost to the local economy and tax base, was a legitimate public use

of the land, and the Supreme Court agreed. The majority of justices concluded that today, “public purpose” is a more legitimate reading of eminent domain than a stricter “public use” standard. Still, I doubt this case signals an increasing willingness on the part of governments to restrict private property. In the current climate, it seems unlikely that American courts would view eminent domain cases for the purpose of conservation or agriculture in the same category of “public purpose” as cases that benefit private developers. But there is no doubt that a major obstacle to much of the new agrarian agenda is the lack of restrictions on land use in most rural areas. Linda Greenhouse, “Justices Rule Cities Can Take Property for Private Development,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/23/politics/23wire-scotus.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=kelo%20v%20city%20of%20new%20london&st=cse (accessed July 31, 2010). For commentary on the case, see, “A Turning Point for Eminent Domain,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2009, <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/a-turning-point-for-eminent-domain/?scp=2&sq=kelo%20v%20city%20of%20new%20london&st=cse> (accessed July 31, 2010).

23. Organic blueberry farmer Jim Minick cites just such an example in his book *Blueberry Years: The Story of a Farm and a Family* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 47. Gary Holthaus, *From the Farm to the Table: What All Americans Need to Know About Agriculture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 249; Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 162–69.

24. Stephen Budiansky, “Math Lessons for Locavores,” *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/opinion/20budiansky.html> (accessed Aug. 23, 2010). Other studies confirm Budiansky’s figures. Agricultural economist John Hendrickson surveyed a wide variety of studies that showed a range of figures for each category of food-related energy consumption. He found that home storage and preparation ranges from 25–30 percent of fossil fuel energy. See, John Hendrickson, “Energy Use in the US Food System: A Summary of Existing Research and Analysis,” Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1996, <http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/energyuse.pdf> (accessed Dec. 14, 2010); Rich Pirog, “Food, Fuel, and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University, http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/food_mil.pdf (accessed Jan. 3, 2010); Berry, *Bringing it to the Table*, 60. Pollan says that, “after cars, the food system uses more fossil fuel than any other sector of the economy—19 percent. And while the experts disagree about the exact amount, the way we feed ourselves contributes more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than anything else we do—as much as 37 percent, according to one study.” Pollan, “Farmer-in-Chief,” *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/magazine/12policy-t.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed Oct. 23, 2010). Maybe, maybe not. Kentucky State University researcher Michael Bomford argues that Pollan overstates his figures, by a factor of perhaps as much as two. Bomford says, “My rough approaches to estimating US food system energy and greenhouse gas emissions suggest that the food system accounts for about 9 percent of US energy use and 15 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.” Bomford, “How Much Greenhouse Gas Comes from Food?” *Energy Farms*, Apr. 16, 2009, <http://energyfarms.wordpress.com/2009/04/16/how-much-energy-goes-into-our-food-system/> (accessed Dec. 14, 2010).

25. McWilliams, *Just Food*, 23–25; Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams*, 270; Jager, *Fate of Family Farming*, 195; Pollan, “The Food Movement, Rising”; Carmen DeNavas-Walt et al., *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003* (Washington,

DC: GPO, 2004), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf>, p. 3 (accessed July 21, 2011). Much of this increase is due to the number of households that have two people employed full time.

26. Jager, *Fate of Family Farming*, 195.

27. James C. Giesen and Mark Hersey, "The New Environmental Politics and its Antecedents: Lessons from the Early Twentieth Century South," *Historian* (Summer 2010): 271–98.

28. McWilliams, *Just Food*, 189–92; Mark Bittman, "Sustainable Farming Can Feed the World?" Mar. 8, 2011, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/08/sustainable-farming/> (accessed May 31, 2011). McWilliams quotes a study saying that the United States spends \$315 billion dollars annually on federal agricultural subsidies, p. 242n3. United States' spending on agricultural supports varies from year to year, depending on weather disasters, commodity prices, and other factors, but USDA figures show that spending has been around ten billion dollars each year for the past five years, down from a high of more than twenty billion dollars in 2006. See, Farm Service Agency, USDA, "2012 President's Budget Table 35," http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/pb12_tbl35.pdf (accessed Aug. 5, 2011). I am grateful to Anne Effland for steering me to the USDA subsidy data.

29. "Ethanol and Biodiesel from Crops not Worth the Energy," *Science Daily*, July 6, 2005, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/07/050705231841.htm> (accessed May 31, 2011); "Cut Ethanol Subsidy: If It Ever Made Sense, It Sure Doesn't Now, Given Rising Food Prices and Soaring Deficits," *Houston Chronicle*, May 11, 2011, <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story/mpl/editorial/7561119.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

30. Jager puts it this way, "If we don't like some part of this picture . . . there are points in this system of processes that could be brought under restraining legislative control. And of course there are points where tax policy could reward socially responsible behavior and penalize the other kind. But is there sufficient political wit or will to do so? Doubtful. Easier for the legislator to turn up at a local parade and make a warm speech about the importance of the family farm. Easier for the Farm Bureau official to tell about the glories of free enterprise." See, Jager, *Fate of Family Farming*, 199–200.

31. Kingsolver et al., *Animal, Vegetable*, 18–19; McWilliams, *Just Food*, 55–59.

32. Mark Hersey says, "A caveat worth noting here is that the best (or at least the most compelling) arguments are often overblown. Think back over American historiography and pick out the big books, for example. It's possible that they oversell it as a way of shifting the discussion—à la Rush Limbaugh making the moderate conservative agenda more palatable and thus shifting the entire dialogue to the Right. To the extent that major corporations are signing on, they have been successful, no? Maybe you should view the co-optation of the movement by groups like Wal-Mart as a success. . . . Would Wal-Mart have posted a formal statement on sustainability without Pollan?" Personal communication with the author, ca. May 2011, copy in author's possession.

33. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism," 11. I am indebted to Lu Ann Jones for this last point.

34. Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 88.