

In Defense of Farming

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I believe in the future of farming with a faith born not of words but of deeds—achievements won by the present and past generations of farmers; in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come to us from the struggles of former years. When I was a member of the Future Farmers of America in the late 1950s, the FFA Creed began with these words. I believed those words then and believe them now. However, I do not believe there is any future in the kind of farming we have created over past 50-60 years. In fact the FFA organization apparently doesn't even believe in the future of "real farming." They have dropped the word "farming" from the name of the organization, simply going by FFA, and have replaced "farming" with "agriculture" throughout the FFA creed.

I believe the future of farming in America will be in a kind of farming very different from the large farms that dominate American agriculture today. However, in many respects, farming the future will be very much like farming had been throughout much of human history. Returning to the core principles and ideas of farming in the past does not mean farms of the future will rely on the farming methods, practices, or technologies of earlier agrarian times. Instead, for any approach to farming to have a future, it must respect the basic principles of nature, including human nature, as the farms that have sustained flourished human societies in the past.

Traditional family farms in America reflected many of those core principles. The primary motivation or purpose for farming is perhaps the most important difference between today's so-called modern agriculture and traditional family farms. Family farms, traditionally, were not just family businesses but also were an integral part of the farm family's social and ethical way of life. The farm and the family are inseparable. The same farm with a different family would have been a different farm, and the same family with a different farm would have been a different family. Family farmers understood that the positive or negative impacts of their farms on the biological health of the land, economic their communities, and the quality of life of their neighbors were reflections of the ethical and social values of the farm family.

Using contemporary agricultural terminology, traditional family farms were *multifunctional* farms. They provided multiple economic, social, ecological benefits for farm families, farm workers, communities, consumers, and society in general—not just profits for farm businesses. This multifunctionality is reflected in the etymology of root words used for farm and farmer. The English word farmer has varied origins: from Middle English, *fermer*, *fermour* ("steward"), from Old French *fermier* ("husbandman"), and from Medieval Latin *firmarius* ("one who rents land") (Wiktionary, nd). The English word *farm* comes from Middle English, *ferme*, *farme* ("rent, revenue, produce, stewardship, meal, feast"), from Old English, *feorm*, *fearm*, *farm* ("meaning provisions, food, supplies, possessions, stores, feast, entertainment, haven"), from Proto-Germanic *fermō* ("means of living, subsistence"), and from Proto-Indo-European *perk-* ("life, strength, force"). It is related also to Old English words such as *feormian* ("to provision, sustain"), and *feorh* ("life, spirit") (Wiktionary, nd).

These historic meanings of the words farmer and farm suggest that economics has always been an important motivation for farming. Farming has always been a way to make a living. Farming also was a means of providing more food for communities and societies than could be provided by hunting and gathering. The root words also suggest that farms historically have met the *non-economic* as well as *economic* needs. Farming philosophies, methods, and practices were linked to the social and spiritual values of farmers and people in farming communities. The etymology of farming also suggests that sustainable farming is a timeless phenomenon; it is of the past as well as the present and future. Historical meanings such as “stewardship, security, and sustain” clearly confirm an historical ethical commitment to the ideal of *sustainability*.

Historically, farmers have been held in high esteem in the U.S. and in much of the rest of the world. Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed strongly that the “yeoman farmer” best exemplified the kind of “independence and virtue” that should be respected and supported by government. Adam Smith, an icon of capitalism and author of the classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, observed that farmers ranked among the highest social classes in China and India and suggested it would be the same everywhere if the “corporate spirit” did not prevent it. Smith never trusted businessmen in general and corporate managers in particular, and he suggested the legitimate role of corporations was very limited.

Smith’s reference to China was to the philosopher Confucius who ranked Chinese farmers second only to Chinese scholars. Workers ranked below, and businessmen ranked last. Jefferson didn’t trust financiers, bankers, or industrialists to be responsible citizens and suggested they should not be encouraged by government. These and other respected historical figures have placed farmers at or near the top of society and those involved with business and economics at the bottom. The farmers extolled by Jefferson, Smith, and Confucius were *multifunctional* family farmers. They were respected not just as businessmen but as honorable people making positive contributions to society and humanity.

I knew this kind of farming firsthand while I was growing up on a small family farm during the 1940s and 1950s. Again, from the FFA Creed: “*I believe that to live and work on a good farm is pleasant as well as challenging; for I know the joys and discomforts of farm life and hold an inborn fondness for those associations, which even in the hours of discouragement, I cannot deny.*” I grew up on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri. After high school, I attended the University of Missouri. I earned my BS, and eventually my MS and PhD degrees in agricultural economics from MU. Between my BS and MS degrees, I worked for three years for Wilson Packing Company, the fourth largest meat packer in the country at that time. My academic career spanned 30 years, including faculty positions at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Georgia, before returning to the University of Missouri, where I eventually retired in early 2000.

I spent the first half of my academic career as an extension livestock marketing specialist. I helped start the hog industry in North Carolina and worked with the big feedlots in western Oklahoma. During those times, I was a very traditional agricultural economist. I told farmers they had to treat farming as a *business*, rather than a *way of life*—if they expected to survive. If theirs was a family farm, I warned that “family business” should not be allowed to interfere with “farm business.” I advised farmers to either “get big or get out.” Farms of the future would need

the economic efficiency that comes with large-scale production. I taught the things I had been taught—things I believed.

This was not a popular message in rural America at the time, but I believed the potential benefits for greater economic efficiency outweighed the inevitable *inconveniences* of losing traditional family farms. Most important, I believed that the industrialization of agriculture could provide domestic food security or *eliminate hunger*. We were going to help farmers make agriculture more economically efficient by reducing production costs. This ultimately would reduce food costs for consumers, making good food affordable and accessible for everyone. The profits made by progressive farmers who reduced production costs would support viable rural economies and communities. It was a well-intended experiment—but *it failed*.

It was a bold, aggressive economic experiment, but it failed. In 2015, the USDA classified nearly 13% of U.S. households as “food insecure,” and nearly 17% or one-in-six of American children lived in food insecure households. Food insecurity means uncertainty regarding whether enough food will be available to meet the nutritional needs of the household at all times. In 1968, when CBS-TV aired its classic documentary, “Hunger in America,” only 5% of the people in the U.S. were estimated to be hungry. Back then, 5% of Americans going hungry was considered a national emergency; today 13% food insecurity is not even a political priority. Sixty years of industrial agriculture has done nothing to alleviate hunger in the U.S.

Furthermore, the industrial food system is linked to a new kind of food insecurity, meaning foods that lack the *nutritional value* essential to support healthy lifestyles. The U.S. is confronted with a growing epidemic of obesity and related diseases, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and a variety of diet related cancers. While the percentage of income spent for food dropped by nearly half, the percentage of GDP spent for health care in the U.S. more than tripled, from 5% in 1960 to nearly 18% in 2015. A large portion of these increases was linked to diet-related illnesses.

My first realization that something was fundamentally wrong came during the mid-1980s. I had just moved from Oklahoma to Georgia to take a position as Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics Extension at the University of Georgia. This was during the time many of us remember as “the farm financial crisis.” Many farmers had borrowed heavily at record high interest rates during the 1970s, which was an inflationary, but still profitable, time for farmers. American farmers were going to “feed the world” back then as well, and farming would remain profitable until everyone in the world was “well fed.” Farmers planted “fencerow to fencerow,” then ripped out and farmed the fencerows. Farms got bigger as big farmers bought out their neighbors at record high land prices—many using money borrowed at record high interest rates.

But then came the Reagan-era domestic economic recession, which triggered a global economic recession. U.S. export markets dried up, farm commodity prices fell dramatically, and many farmers couldn’t even make interest payments on their loans, let alone keep up with payments on principals. Farm foreclosures and bankruptcies were regular fare on the evening TV network news programs, and reports of farm suicides were not uncommon. Suicides were particularly high in Georgia, where the FMHA had been pushing big farm loans to impress the Carter administration. My department at UGA had the responsibility of trying to help Georgia

farmers find some way to survive—pay off their loans, sell out while they still had equity, or at least not kill themselves.

We traveled around the state holding face-to-face meetings with farmers and going over their financial records. During these meetings, it dawned on me that the farmers who were in the biggest financial trouble were those who had been doing what we so-called experts had been telling them they should do—they “got big rather than getting out.” There was, and still is, only so much farmland and a limited market for food that farmers must share. I knew farm failures were an inevitable result of the industrialization of agriculture. As a “good economist,” I had rationalized that displaced farmers would find better opportunities elsewhere. However, many farmers who lost their farms had no other opportunities. In depression and despair, some killed themselves. I simply didn’t understand that the farm and the farmer are inseparable on a true family farm. Losing the farm didn’t mean just losing a job; it meant losing an important part to themselves.

Something was fundamentally wrong with the economics I had been taught. I then began to see that forcing families off their farms was also destroying farming communities. It takes people to sustain rural communities, not just production. It takes people to support farm supply dealers and to shop for clothes and cars on Main Street. Equally important, it takes people to fill desks in local schools, pews in local churches, and seats on county boards. I also began to understand what industrial agriculture was doing to the land—the erosion of soil and pollution of air and water with agricultural chemical and biological wastes from factory farms. Industrial agriculture was destroying the ultimate sources of its own productivity; it was not sustainable.

Wendell Berry—farmer, philosopher, and gifted author—summarized the consequences for rural America of replacing family farms with agribusinesses in a recent letter to the book editor of the New York Times by: *“The business of America has been largely and without apology the plundering of rural America, from which everything of value—minerals, timber, farm animals, farm crops, and “labor”—has been taken at the lowest possible price. As apparently none of the enlightened ones has seen in flying over or bypassing on the interstate highways, its too-large fields are toxic and eroding, its streams and rivers poisoned, its forests mangled, its towns dying or dead along with their locally owned small businesses, its children leaving after high school and not coming back. Too many of the children are not working at anything, too many are transfixed by the various screens, too many are on drugs, too many are dying.”*ⁱ

Luckily, “sustainable agriculture” was emerging as an area of research and education in the late 1980s, and I was able to spend the rest of my academic career working on something I could believe in—farming that actually has a future. Extensive research has confirmed early concerns about the sustainability of American agriculture. A 2016 United Nations study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability (IPES) described the scientific evidence against so-called modern agriculture as “overwhelming”. They cited more than 350 studies in concluded, *“Today’s food and farming systems have succeeded in supplying large volumes of foods to global markets, but are generating negative outcomes on multiple fronts: widespread degradation of land, water and ecosystems; high GHG emissions; biodiversity losses; persistent hunger and micro-nutrient deficiencies alongside the rapid rise of obesity and diet-related diseases; and livelihood stresses for farmers around the world”*

The IPES report states: “*What is required is a fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods. Data shows that these systems can compete with industrial agriculture in terms of total outputs, performing particularly strongly under environmental stress, and delivering production increases in the places where additional food is desperately needed. Diversified agroecological systems can also pave the way for diverse diets and improved health.*”

Perhaps, today’s industrial agriculture can be made “less bad” with new technologies, practices, and methods that allow it to use resources more efficiently and mitigate its negative impacts on nature and society. However, many of its negative impacts are inherent consequences of the principles, and ways of thinking that characterize the “industrialization”—specialization, standardization, and consolidation into larger and larger farming operations. The problems of today’s agriculture cannot be prevented or solved without replacing industrial agriculture with a fundamentally different agricultural *system*. Industrial agri-food systems are simply not sustainable. New production technologies, practices, and methods will naturally evolve from the new principles and ideas that characterize the new systemic whole of sustainable agriculture.

The problems associated with industrial agriculture are what social scientists call “wicked problems.” They are called wicked not because they are evil, but because they are difficult to clearly identify, isolate, and solve. The negative impacts of industrial agriculture are of the same kind or nature as those of other industrial production processes – steel mills, oil refineries, power plants, and chemical factories. The problems of industry are wicked because of the complexity, interconnectivity, and dynamic nature of the ecological and social systems within which the problems arise. They are impossible to solve partially or sequentially because of the inability to collect and analyze enough data to include all of the interconnected variables needed to draw irrefutable conclusions. It is virtually impossible to isolate specific cause-and-effect relationships, and *causes* often are the *effects* of other causes somewhere in the system. Efforts to solve one aspect of wicked problems may reveal or create other problems, as we have seen with the diet/health problems that arose from trying to make farming more efficient and food more affordable.

Wicked problems can be solved only by choosing different systems. Wendell Berry—philosopher, author, farmer—refers to systems solutions as *Solving for Pattern*. He writes, “A good solution is good because it is in harmony with those larger patterns – and this harmony will, I think, be found to have a nature of analogy. A good solution acts within the larger pattern the way a healthy organ acts within the body.” The pattern of industrial agriculture is that of a large, complex machine or mechanism. The natural ecosystems and social cultures within which farms function are living systems, not machines – organisms, not mechanisms. The mechanistic pattern of industrial agriculture conflicts with the organismic pattern of nature and society.

The failures of industrial agriculture in general are an inevitable consequence of the inherent disharmony between industrial agricultural systems and the social and ecological environment within which agriculture must function. The *internal* mechanistic industrial agricultural

paradigm conflicts with its *external* organismic social and ecological context. The only way to solve the wicked ecological, social, and economic problems of industrial agriculture is to abandon the mechanistic paradigm of industrial agriculture in favor of a paradigm that treats agriculture as a resourceful, resilient, regenerative living system.

Thousands of new farmers all across America and around the world are rising to the challenge of creating a replacement for the failed industrial system of farming. They may call themselves organic, ecological, regenerative, holistic, biodynamic, or just family farmers. All of these alternative approaches share a common philosophy of farming as a social and ethical way of life, as well as a way to make a living. These farmers accept the responsibility of caring for the land and caring about their communities and society, as well as caring for themselves and their families. They understand that a farm is a living system and to be sustainable, must be managed as a living ecosystem. These new farmers are creating a new future of farming.

These approaches to farming are firmly rooted in the scientific principles of agroecology, which applies the science of ecology to agriculture.ⁱⁱ Ecology is a study of the relationships of living organisms, including humans, with the other elements of their natural and social environment. In living systems, all things are interconnected. All elements of farming—soil, plants, animals, workers, farmers—are interrelated with everything else. Farms are also integrally connected with the natural bioregions and social communities within which, and for which, they function. Agri-food economies, being creations of societies, are but one dimension of the agroecological environment. When agroecological farmers do any one thing, they are aware that other things may be affected on their farms as wholes as well as in their bioregions and communities.

No one set about intentionally to destroy the ecological and social integrity or the economic viability of American agriculture. We simply lost sight of the fact that the fundamental purpose of agriculture is not just to produce cheap food, but to meet the needs of people – as consumers, as producers, as members of communities, and as a human society. In our preoccupation with increasing economic efficiency, we neglected to monitor what was happening to the overall quality of life of people. In our preoccupation with increasing production today, we neglected to monitor its impacts the lives of people today legacy we are leaving for people of the future.

Admittedly, the challenge of transforming the agri-food system is formidable but it is not unsurmountable. But we need not wait for changes in farm and food policy to begin transforming the food system. We instead can bring about changes in the food system that ultimately will change agri-food policy. In fact, fundamental, systemic change often must begin by finding points of leverage where small, doable actions can lead to large, seemingly impossible effects – like the small trim tab that turns the rudder of a ship, which in turn causes the whole ship to change direction. In fact, cultural change always begins small, in communities where new ventures succeed in solving problems and realizing opportunities, and evolve eventually to become accepted as new norms.

This new kind of farming is not being developed by USDA, by the Land Grant Universities, or the major farm organizations. The agricultural establishment seems willing to bet the future of humanity on biotechnology – the latest in tool for corporate industrialization. The future of

farming in America is being created by farmers. Literally thousands of “real farmers,” all across the continent, are creating new and better ways to farm. These new ways of farming “promise better days through better ways” even though the “struggles of our former years” have fallen far short of their early promise.

At least six regional “sustainable agriculture” conferences in the U.S. regularly draw more than 1,000 farmers a year. The Upper Midwest Organic Conference, MOSES, has been drawing around 3,500. Several conferences more are added by 300-500 farmers per year, and the number with 100-200 in attendance are too many to count. But perhaps more important, these conferences are drawing more and more young people and their numbers, their enthusiasm, and their optimism for the future seems to be growing each year. These farmers are on the frontier of a new and different kind of agriculture. Certainly, they face struggles and hardships and there are failures along the way. Life is rarely easy on any new frontier. But, a growing number are finding ways to succeed. These are the real farmers of the future.

These new farmers doing collectively what they cannot do individually—conceding some of their traditional independence without sacrificing their sovereignty. They are forming alliances, cooperatives, and collaborations with other farmers, small-scale processor, retailers, and restaurateurs to process, distribute, and deliver their products directly to discriminating customers, bypassing the industrial agri-food system. They created the organic food movement, which has grown to a \$50 billion market and are now creating local, community-based food system to secure the integrity of authentic organic and other sustainable farming systems.

Some of these farmers obviously are just trying to make money. However, hold the same basic values as traditional family farmers. They are pursued of a *more enlightened* concept self-interest than simply trying to make money. They are just seeking sufficient profit for a desirable quality of life. They recognize the importance of family and community, as well as income, in determining their overall wellbeing. They accept the responsibilities of stewardship, not as constraints to their selfishness, but instead, as opportunities to lead successful lives. They recognize that we humans are a social species; we need relationships with other people for our emotional well-being. They recognize that we are a moral species; we need to live with purpose and meaning, in harmony with some “higher order of things,” for our spiritual well-being. They are creating farming systems that are ecologically sound and socially responsible, as well as economically viable, in pursuit of a *more enlightened* concept of quality of life.

Returning to the FFA Creed, “I believe in the future of farming in America, with a faith born not of words but of deeds.” I believe that this new kind of agriculture “can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life.” And, I believe that “we” – you and I – “can exert an influence in our homes and communities, which will stand solid for our parts in that inspiring task.” I believe that those of us who are not farmers can, and must, help ensure the future of farms that will help sustain flourishing rural communities and well-nourished and healthy human societies in both for this generation and for all generations to come. If there is to be a future in farming America, we must stand firm in our defense of the values of “traditional family farms.”

ⁱ Wendell Berry, “Southern Despair,” New Your Times Review of Books, Reply to Nathaniel Rich, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/> .

ⁱⁱ Miguel Altieri, “Agroecology: principles and strategies for designing sustainable farming systems”, University of California, http://www.agroeco.org/doc/new_docs/Agroeco_principles.pdf .