

Economic Colonization in Rural America; Increasing Vulnerability in a Volatile Worldⁱ

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Abstract

The term “economic colonization” typically is used to refer to neoliberal economic development in nations previously colonized politically. Economic colonization today is carried out primarily by multinational corporations rather than national governments. In rural America, economic development is following a pattern similar to economic colonization—with similar negative consequences. Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in traditional farming communities where large, corporately-controlled factory farms have replaced small, independent family farms.

Economic colonization not only is destroying rural culture but also the ecological and social foundation for *sustainable* rural economic development. Equally important, rural communities are rapidly losing the resilience they will need to cope with increasing volatility in a world of global climate change, growing social and economic inequity, and other symptoms of economic extraction and exploitation. Remnant rural cultures have survived thus far through fierce independence and defiant resistance. However, today’s “indigenous”ⁱⁱⁱ rural population seem to face a cultural choice familiar to indigenous people of past political colonies—assimilation or annihilation.

Ironically, the independence and resistance that have sustained remnant rural cultures in the past have become major obstacles to their future survival. People in rural areas must now find ways to succeed together or they most certainly will fail separately. One logical way to begin healing the wounds inflicted by corporate agriculture is by creating sustainable, community-based food systems. Locally empowered food systems could eliminate rural hunger and provide quality employment opportunities in rural areas, while restoring and regenerating the productivity of local natural and human resources. Most important, community-based food systems bring people together around their common interest in good food.

That being said, farmers who produce, or could produce, for local markets have been reluctant to cooperate in creating the alliances essential for replacing the industrial food system with a sustainable food system. Rural voters have been unwilling to join political alliances with like-minded urban voters to force state and federal governments to redirect farm and food policies away from industrial agriculture toward sustainable agriculture. The last best hope for people in rural areas is to work together rather than separately—to choose interdependence over independence, cooperation over self-reliance, and sustainable community development over industrial economic development.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Indigenous here does not refer to Native American but to other long-time rural residents.

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John Ikerd

Margaret Wheatley is a widely respected scholar and one of the leading thinkers in the United States on matters of institutional and cultural change. During an extended retreat in 2011, she identified three major trends shaping U.S. society: 1) “A growing sense of impotence and dread about the state of the nation,” 2) “The realization that information doesn’t change minds anymore,” and 3) “The clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action—that there is no power for change greater than a community taking its future into its own hands.”¹

I agree with Wheatley. I believe her revelations are even more relevant to rural America today than in 2011. First, I think “a growing sense of impotence and dread” accurately describes the prevailing mood of people in rural America. Fred Kirschenmann is a distinguished scholar at the Leopold Center at Iowa State University. He has observed that the “predominant attitude toward rural communities is that they have no future. In fact, this attitude seems to prevail even within rural communities.” He quoted from a 1991 survey conducted in several Midwestern rural communities indicating that people in most rural towns harbored one of two visions for their communities. “One vision sees their town’s death as inevitable due to economic decline.” The other vision is also of “a dying town” with only a fading hope that “they can keep the town alive by attracting industry.” The widening rural-urban divide since the early 1990s seems to confirm a transition in rural attitudes from *impotence and dread* to *desperation and anger*.

Secondly, I agree that information no longer changes minds, certainly not concerning issues such as global climate change, species extinction, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). For example, for decades the proponents of industrial agriculture called for decisions based on “sound science.” The early bits of research available on this controversial issues had come from the agricultural colleges – the academic allies of industrial agriculture. Now, a large and growing body of scientific information from other respected academic institutions provides compelling evidence of the negative ecological, social, and economic impacts of industrial agriculture on rural America.² The response of the “agricultural establishment,” and even the agricultural academic community, has been denial or rejection.

I agree also with Wheatley that any hope for a positive future for rural America depends on local communities taking action – rural people taking their future in their own hands. In order for people in rural areas to shape their own destiny, they must be willing and able to work together for the common good of their communities. But first, they must come to a common understanding and acceptance of the ultimate source or root cause of rural economic, social, and ecological degradation and depletion.

The Economic Colonization of Rural America

The sense of impotence and dread in rural American is a consequence of decades of economic extraction and exploitation carried out in the guise of rural economic development. Rural areas are suffering the consequences of prolonged “economic colonization”—a term typically used in reference to neoliberal economic development in nations previously colonized

politically. Rather than being colonized by national governments, most economic colonization today is carried out by multinational corporations, which is the case in rural America. Much like colonial empires of the past, transnational corporations have been extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of people in rural places all around the globe. Rural people are losing their sovereignty, as corporations use their economic power to dominate local economies gain control of local governments. Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and cultures, are being exploited – not to benefit rural people but to increase the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations are purely economic entities with no capacity for commitment to the future of rural communities. Their only interest is in extracting the remaining economic wealth from rural areas. This is classic economic colonialism.

Historically, political colonialism was defended by the ethnocentric belief that the moral values of the colonizer were superior to those of the colonized – that those colonized ultimately would benefit from the process of civilization. Today, economic colonialization is defended by the urban-centric belief that rural people are incapable of developing their own economies and must rely on outside investment for rural economic development. That corporate investments will bring badly needed jobs and local income and will expand local tax bases. That economically depressed rural communities will be afforded the opportunity for better schools, better health care, and expanded social services, and will attract a greater variety of retail businesses. These are the same basic promises made to previous political colonies.

In general, people in rural communities are led to believe they have been left behind by the rest of society, and accepting outside corporate investments are the only means by which they can hope to catch up. In cases where promises of prosperity have failed to persuade the people, corporations have resorted to economic favors promised to local leaders or outright “bribery.” If all else fails, they simply refer to commerce laws to claim the economic right to force their way into communities where they are unwanted. These are the same basic strategies colonial empires have used with the indigenous peoples of their colonies throughout history.

After decades of so-called development, previous political colonies were left in shambles. Indigenous social and political structures were destroyed, leaving the people with no foundation for reestablishing self-government to address the shameful legacy of colonialism. Traditional ways of life were destroyed, cultures were lost, economic resources were depleted, and natural environments were degraded and polluted with the toxic wastes of industrial extraction and exploitation. Admittedly, in some cases, colonization has brought economic and social benefits, at least to some people. In these cases, such as North America and Australia, the indigenous populations were sufficiently small to be essentially eliminated by colonial immigrants. The people native to these countries were given a choice of assimilation or annihilation. The *indigenous* people of virtually every previously colonized country of the world, including the United States, still harbor deep resentment of their former colonial masters.

Like slavery, political colonization eventually became morally unacceptable to civilized society. It was abolished because it became obvious that colonization wasn't about civilization; it was about exploitation. However, the economic colonization of rural areas continues virtually unchecked everywhere, including rural America.

Ironically, the rural descendants of past political colonizers have become the colonized: the unwitting victims of economic colonization. The European colonists first settled in rural America to exploit the economic wealth of its wildlife, timber, and minerals that had been left intact by Native Americans. Once the resources in particular places were used up or depleted of economic value, the exploiters moved on. Only “ghost towns” remained where many fur trading, logging, and mining towns had once thrived. Today, many farming towns are struggling to survive and avoid becoming the new ghost towns of American history. During the late twentieth century, manufacturing plants were attracted to rural areas by a strong work ethic and low wages—a legacy of farm families displaced by agricultural industrialization. Whenever rural people began demanding a living wage, multinational corporations found people in other countries who would work harder for less money. Many rural communities were left with only empty factories and people who no longer remembered how to make a living for themselves.

Whether intentional or coincidental, industrial agriculture has become a means of colonizing rural areas. As with other industries, the industrial practices of corporate agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes. Corporate contracts replace thinking, caring farmers with tractor drivers and hog house janitors. Once the resources of rural America have been depleted, the corporations will simply move their operations to other areas of the world where resources are more productive and land and labor costs are cheaper. Rural communities will be left with depleted soils and aquifers, streams and groundwater polluted with agricultural chemical and biological wastes, and farmers who no longer know how to farm.

Today, rural communities compete for prisons, urban landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, animal slaughter plants, and even giant confinement animal feeding operations. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than providing places to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative economy. As in indigenous cultures of the past, the children of many rural families are abandoning rural communities for better economic opportunities and a more desirable quality of life in the cities. This kind of rural economic development is economic colonialism—pure and simply. With today’s trend toward economic globalization, the corporate colonization of rural areas seems destined to spread to every corner of the world, until every remaining pocket of natural wealth has been extracted from every rural place in the world. This kind of rural economic extraction and exploitation quite simply is not sustainable.

The remnant rural populations who still cling to the indigenous rural American culture have every reason to harbor feelings of distrust, resentment, and even hatred of the outsiders they identify with their oppressors. Like the remnant indigenous people of previous political colonies, they have fought long, costly, desperate battles to preserve their chosen way of life. They have survived thus far through fierce independence and self-reliance.

In defiance of urban culture, some rural folks have created their own version of an “affluent society,” with big 4x4 pickup trucks; jeans, hats/caps, and boots; and in-your-face country music. They eat giant hamburgers to show their disdain for “healthy eating.” They drink real beer from the big American breweries rather than boutique brews from local microbreweries. Wine is for sissies and liberals. Organic food is anything that grows. “Politically correctness” is rural

profanity. They have their own RFDTV cable channel and rely on the FOX News network for a common version of political reality. The American Farm Bureau Federation is the ultimate authority on everything agricultural.

The lingering economic recession of nearly a decade, however, has taken at heavy toll on their hopes of sustaining a thriving parallel rural culture. The outsourcing of jobs following the Clinton-era “free trade” agreements hit rural areas particularly hard. Many remaining rural manufacturing jobs were low-skilled, low-paying, non-union jobs that were easily “exported” to Mexico or the Pacific Rim under “free trade” agreements. In rural America, NAFTA is a “four-letter word.” More recent environmental regulations, particularly those targeting species extinction and global climate change, have disproportionately affected rural economies that rely on extractive industries such as coal, irrigated agriculture, forestry, and private use of public lands.

Industrial farmers have prospered in recent years, but farming is no longer a major source of rural employment, even in so-called farming communities. Farming accounts for only about 6% of nonmetropolitan employment in 2014.³ Agricultural profits now accrue mostly to investors in corporate agribusinesses. The few jobs associated with extractive natural resource industries, such as fracking and coal mining, have gone mainly to outsiders who add little to local economies of communities. Rural or nonmetropolitan employment overall has recovered far slower than metropolitan employment since the recession of 2008, leaving rural employment well below levels of 10 years ago.⁴ The fierce independence and defiance of rural people is being severely tested by the current economic and political environment.

Wendell Berry summarized the current plight of rural America in a recent letter to the book editor of the New York Times: “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.”⁵ There are good reasons for the growing sense of impotence and dread, and even anger, in rural communities. In desperation, some indigenous rural Americans are fighting back by all possible means—in what might be their “last stand.”

The Integral Consequences of Economic Colonialism

Contrary to what many rural people have been led to believe, the ecological threats posed by economic exploitation are real, and they certainly are not limited to agriculture. Continued denial will not shield rural America from the consequence of inaction. Gustave Speth, founder of the World Resources Institute, co-founder of the Natural Resource Defense Council and author of *Red Sky in the Morning*, wrote in his book, *Bridge at the Edge of the Earth*, “For all of the material blessings economic progress has provided, for all of the disease and destitution avoided, for all the glories that shine in the best of our civilization, the costs to the natural world, the costs to the glories of nature, have been huge and must be counted in the balance as tragic loss.”⁶

Speth proceeds to reference the loss of half of the world's tropical and temperate forests, half of the world's wet lands and a third of the mangroves, 90% percent of large predator fish, 75% of healthy fisheries, and 20% of coral reefs, species disappearing a thousand times faster than normal, over half of agricultural lands in states of deterioration to desertification, and persistent agricultural chemicals now in the bodies of nearly every human on earth. Global climate change is but the latest in a long string of environmental crises to gain widespread public attention.

An early benchmark in the modern environmental movement was Rachel Carson's 1962 classic book, *Silent Spring*,⁷ which foretold the consequences of agricultural industrialization. She warned: "For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death."⁸ The latest benchmark is the global Agreement on Climate Change reached at a Convention of the United Nations (UN) in Paris in 2015.⁹ The environmental movement has been an ongoing battle to convince humanity to avoid self-annihilation.

The UN call for adoption of the Paris agreement states: "Recognizing that climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet and thus requires the widest possible cooperation by all countries, and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, with a view to accelerating the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions; also recognizing that deep reductions in global emissions will be required in order to achieve the ultimate objective of the Convention and emphasizing the need for urgency in addressing climate change..."¹⁰

Of the 197 nations attending the Paris Convention, only the United States and Syria have refused to sign the agreement. Nicaragua refused to attend the Convention because they didn't not believe the goals were sufficiently ambitious to address the problem. Gustave Speth's conclusion of nearly a decade ago are still valid today. "All and all, today's environmental movement has not been succeeding. We have been winning battles, some critical ones, but losing the war."¹¹ Speth concluded that the environmental movement has been systematically depleting its resources in battles over specific issues and policies that fail to address the root problems. He writes, "today's environmental reality is linked powerfully... to growing social inequity and neglect and erosion of democratic governance and popular control."¹²

Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical on Climate Change, *Laudato Si*, also focuses on the failure of the environmental movement to address the social and economic roots of growing threats to "our common home" – the earth. He wrote, "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."¹³

Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything*, also focuses on the challenges of global climate change. Like Pope Francis, she emphasizes that climate change is but a symptom of major ecological, social, and economic problems that threaten the future of human life on earth. Addressing the root causes of climate change ultimately must "change everything." She writes: "So this book proposes a different strategy: think big, go deep, and move the ideological pole

far away from the stifling market fundamentalism that has become the greatest enemy of planetary health.”¹⁴

Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, in his book, *The Price of Inequity*, links economic inequity and ecological degradation directly to irresponsible government policies. Governments have allowed exploitation of natural resources to provide unearned “rents” or profits for corporations rather than to benefit the rightful owners of the resources – the people in common. Stiglitz documents that recent growth in the U.S. economy has been captured almost entirely by the wealthiest Americans – by the top ten percent and mostly the top one percent. “For the past 30 years, we’ve become increasingly a nation divided; not only has the top been growing fastest, but the bottom has actually been declining.”¹⁵ The richest 20 percent of Americans earn more, after taxes, than the bottom 80 percent combined. He makes the case for a Green GDP, which includes social and ecological indicators of progress as well as the usual economic indicators.

Pope Francis also points to the negative effects of relying on economic measures of success and supports Klein’s call for a radical change in thinking. “The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue, in popular and non-technical terms, that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth. They may not affirm such theories with words, but nonetheless support them with their deeds by showing no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behavior shows that for them maximizing profits is enough.”¹⁶ Pope Francis challenges global society “to move forward in a bold cultural revolution.”¹⁷

Impacts of Industrial Agriculture on Rural Communities

Agriculture in general and industrial agriculture in particular are major contributors to the ecological challenges confronting humanity. In fact, the competitive advantage of industrial agriculture depends on its efficiency in extracting and exploiting natural and human resources. The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) estimates that American agriculture accounts for about 10% of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S., which does not include emissions in food processing or distribution.¹⁸ The global food system is estimated to contribute one-third of total emissions of greenhouse gasses linked to global warming, with agricultural production accounting for 86% of the total.¹⁹

The lower agricultural percentage for the U.S. is due to the dominance of other polluting industries in the U.S.—not less pollution from U.S. agriculture. The livestock sector accounts for about half of total greenhouse gas emissions by agriculture.²⁰ Industrial livestock operations, or factory farms, are the major contributors. The expected intensification or industrialization of livestock production to meet anticipated global demand is projected to present even greater ecological challenges in the future.²¹ The U.S. is the leading proponent of industrial animal agriculture, both domestically and globally.

With respect to water, the EPA has also identified “agricultural nonpoint source (NPS) pollution as the leading source of water quality impacts on surveyed rivers and streams, the third largest source for lakes, the second largest source of impairments to wetlands, and a major contributor to contamination of surveyed estuaries and ground water.”²² Industrial agriculture, with its heavy use of animal manure and commercial fertilizers, is also the major contributor to the eutrophication of surface water in the so-called developed nations of the world.²³ Eutrophication has led to massive “dead zones” in the Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay, and other coastal areas of the U.S. These dead zones cannot be allowed to continue to grow indefinitely.

Water depletion also is a major challenge confronting U.S. and global agriculture. Globally, agricultural irrigation was estimated to account for 70% of total water use and 93% of water depletion in 2000.²⁴ The UN report indicated that increasing water scarcity will likely compromise future food production as water is diverted from agriculture to meet environmental, industrial, and domestic water demands. Fred Kirschenmann cites reports that the Ogallala Aquifer, which provides one-fifth of U.S. irrigation water, “is now half depleted.”²⁵ He names water degradation and depletion as one of four major ecological challenges threatening the future of food production.

The ecological, social, and economic crises in rural America are all clearly linked to the industrialization of American agriculture. Cultural anthropologists and rural sociologists have compiled more than 70-years of research documenting the adverse impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities in the U.S. – beginning with Walter Goldschmidt’s classic 1944 research, *As You Sow*.²⁶ His study “showed that largescale, especially industrial, farm structures in one community were associated with adverse community conditions. Smaller-scale, owner-operated farms in the other community, were associated with more vibrant, diverse economies and with higher standards of living.”²⁷

In a 2006 meta-study, Curtis W. Stofferahn,²⁸ who was commissioned by the State of North Dakota Attorney General’s Office, updated a previously commissioned report by Linda Lobao.²⁹ Stofferhan’s study included 56 articles in peer-reviewed journals assessing the socio-economic impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities. He concluded: “Based on the evidence generated by social science research, we conclude that public concern about the detrimental community impacts of industrialized farming is warranted. In brief, this conclusion rests on five decades of government and academic concern with this topic, a concern that has not abated but that has grown more intense in recent years, as the social and environmental problems associated with large animal confinement operations have become widely recognized. And it rests on the new round of risks posed by industrialized farming to Heartland agriculture, communities, the environment, and regional development as a whole.”³⁰

An extensive 2½-year study of “industrial farm animal production” was commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trust. Their 2008 report concluded: “The current industrial farm animal production (IFAP) system often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals themselves.”³¹ They added: “The negative effects of the IFAP system are too great and the scientific evidence is too strong to ignore. Significant changes must be implemented and must start now.” Five years later, in 2013, an assessment of the industry’s

response to the Pew Report by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health concluded that few if any positive changes had been made.³² Meanwhile the scientific evidence supporting the initial indictment continues to grow.

A 2009 meta-study focusing on rural socioeconomic impacts concluded: “Economically speaking, studies over the past 50 years demonstrate that the encroachment of industrialized agriculture operations upon rural communities, results in lower relative incomes for certain segments of the community and greater income inequality and poverty, a less active ‘Main Street,’ decreased retail trade, and fewer stores in the community.”³³ The socioeconomic studies consistently show greater social and economic inequity among residents of rural communities that are more dependent on industrial agriculture. While much has been written about the exacerbation of social and economic inequality by climate change, social scientists are just beginning to understand that inequality is a major driver of climate change³⁴ – a vicious cycle.

Finally, a 2016 independent study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability described the evidence condemning industrial agriculture as “overwhelming”³⁵ – cited more than 350 studies. The study 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.”³⁶

Apparently, no amount of sound, logical, science-based information is sufficient today to change the minds of many people with deeply held opinions. The coping strategy of choice for remnant rural populations has been denial and rejection, as they have endured more than a half-century of economic extraction and exploitation of their natural and human resources. This has left them resistant to “scientific facts,” particularly government endorsed facts. They have also been left vulnerable to the “alternative facts” touted by defenders of the corporate, industrial status quo. Their acceptance of “facts” presented by climate deniers and “free market” economists is likely more a matter of hope than of actual belief. Regardless, the decades of the abuses under economic colonialism have left rural communities poorly prepared to face the ecological, social, and economic crises of their future. The dominant characteristics that have sustained remnant rural cultures in the past are now their greatest vulnerability.

Rural Vulnerability in a Volatile World

As if to “add insult to injury,” rural American must now bear a major portion of the burden of addressing the growing ecological and social crises that has been created by economic colonialism. Admittedly, there are pockets of prosperity in rural areas. These are mainly areas with scenic landscapes and other natural attractions for people of wealth seeking to escape negative impacts of urban industrial abandonment. However after decades of economic colonialism, most rural communities are rapidly losing the resilience and will needed to cope in an integral and increasing volatility environment of global climate change, growing social and economic inequity, and other symptoms of relentless economic extraction and exploitation.

These challenges simply cannot be met by individuals working independently. Collective governance is the only means society has of imposing social and ethical values profit-driven

corporations. The persistent independence in self-reliance of rural people has become a major obstacle to the widespread commitment to public interest and to the common good essential for effective governance. Corporations have seized on this weakness as an opportunity to exert their economic influence over agricultural and rural policies at federal, state, and local levels. Rural people have also become victims of a corporate reeducation or propaganda campaign that extolls the virtues of unlimited individual freedom in order to undermine public confidence in government. Remnant rural populations have been particularly vulnerable to this message because it fits with their traditional survival strategies. They are lead to believe that people who are economically unable to take care of themselves or their children are too lazy to work or have been too foolish to save enough money for their old age. They blame the Clintons and NAFTA, rather than corporations, for moved rural jobs other countries and live in fear of losing corporate jobs that remain in rural areas—regardless of the negative ecological or social consequences.

Rural people tend to be vehement opponents of government regulation, the only means of protecting them from the negative ecological, social, and economic impacts of industrial agriculture. In the guise of creating jobs and promoting rural economic development, government programs instead support and promote the continued economic exploitation of rural resources. Farm programs initially were designed to provide a “safety net” for family farms, which in turn supported viable rural communities. However, farm programs no longer protects either family farms or rural communities, but instead ensures their continued economic exploitation by industrial agriculture. Without agricultural policies that exempt industrial agriculture from effective regulation and ensures against their inherent risks, large factory farms simply would not be able to compete with smaller diversified family farms.

Distrust of government, particularly welfare programs, has left many in rural communities in opposition to the government programs that do the most, and could more, to meet their economic needs. The real government safety nets for rural communities are Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Programs. These so-called social programs are all under continual threats of government budget cuts and privatization. Their fierce pride in individualism and national patriotism leads them to support massive government spending program, particularly military spending, that robs government of the economic means of providing economic security for the rural unemployed, disabled, poor, and hungry.

The previous industrial abandonment of urban areas created urban ghettos; the industrial exploitation of rural areas is now creating rural ghettos. Remnant rural populations have been joined by those attempting to escape urban poverty by moving to rural communities where lower costs of living reflect persistent rural poverty. Urban refugees are joined also by immigrants from Mexico, the Caribbean, and other economic refugees who come to America for low-paying jobs in industrial agriculture. They find work in livestock and poultry slaughter houses, industrial livestock operations or factory farms, or harvest crops in California, Florida, or other industrial fruit and vegetable growing regions. New immigrants to rural America add cultural diversity and ultimately could provide badly needed economic resilience and regenerative capacity to rural areas. However, during periods of resettlement and assimilation, culture diversity often creates social divisiveness. Cultural differences in customs and values challenge the already fragile socioeconomic capacities of rural communities to provide essential public services. A recent Wall Street Journal piece documents that levels of unemployment,

chronic illness, teen pregnancy, crime, and drug abuse in many rural areas now exceed those of inner cities.³⁷ It may take decades, at best, to restore the sense of common commitment to shared values among the diverse cultures that increasingly constitute rural communities.

The challenge of restoring ecological, social, and economic integrity to rural communities is exacerbated by the barrage of negative political rhetoric that blames the economic plight of people in rural America on urban liberals and immigrants from other countries who “steal their jobs.” This is not only a rural issue or political state of mind; it is a reflection of the natural evolutionary tendencies within mature democracies. More than 2300 years ago, Plato wrote of the tendency for democracy to devolve into oligarchy and then to tyranny. Some people in any society will always have greater abilities and opportunities to become rich and powerful than others. In the absence of effective government or other means of redistributing or moderating the accumulation of wealth and power, oligarchies naturally emerge from human societies.

A fundamental purpose of any government in a democratic society is to ensure the basic human rights of the governed. Thus, governance is the logical means of restraining the tendency toward oligarchy within democracies. However, Plato believed the inevitable and insatiable demands for ever greater independence and freedom within democracies eventually would lead to a loss of public trust and respect for government. Governance would then be misdirected to promoting economic growth, resulting in even greater social and economic inequity, rather than restraining individual liberties in order to ensure social justice. Rather than working through government to restore democracy, Plato believed that people in democratic societies would turn to tyrants to depose the oligarchs, in a desperate effort solve their economic problems. He wrote, “*So tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny out of the most extreme form of liberty.*”³⁸

In the early 1800s, Alex De Tocqueville also wrote of the natural tendency of people in democracies to become preoccupied with individual freedoms and to lose their sense of the common good. He wrote, “Not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is for ever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.” America, particularly rural America, is at a point in time where we must learn to succeed together or we most certainly will fail separately.

Restoring Power to the People through Community

It would be easy to lose hope for the future of rural America – or for the future of America in general. The defenders of the corporatist status quo are economically and politically powerful. However, I agree with Margaret Wheatley “that there is no power for change greater than a community taking its future into its own hands.” I believe the key to survival and revival of America, rural America in particular, is “through local communities taking action.”

We cannot change the rural culture of independence and defiance by changing presidents or political parties that control of the U.S. government. But, individuals in rural communities can change, or at least influence, the hearts and minds of people they know—people in their own local communities. They can also work with like-mind people in their communities to change their local governments. Changes in local government can restore confidence in governance and

eventually restore the consent of the American people to be governed. By working together, people in local communities have the power to take their futures into their own hands.

The key is to find points of leverage people in local communities can use bring about ever greater change in the rest of America. By way of analogy, changing the small “trim tab” on the rudder of a ship allows the larger rudder to be changed, which in turn changes the direction of the entire ship. A logical trim tab or point of leverage for rural communities would seem to be the issue of rural hunger. More than 50 years of industrial agriculture has left about one-in-six children in the U.S. living in food insecure homes—disproportionately in rural areas.³⁹

Quoting *Feeding America*: “Seventy-six percent of counties with food-insecurity rates in the top 10 percent are located in rural areas. Rural areas also account for 86 percent of counties with the highest rates of *child* food insecurity.”⁴⁰ Sixty-three percent of all counties are rural. However, rural counties have 76 percent of total food insecurity and 86 percent of total severe food insecurity. A serious commitment to eliminating hunger rural communities would likely gain widespread local support – from both the politically Left and Right. Few people feel comfortable with the reality of so many hungry children in one of the one of the richest nations in the world.

To ensure enough safe, nutritious food to support healthy, active lifestyles for all, we must create a sustainable food system. A sustainable food system, by definition, must meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. Thus, meeting the basic food needs of the present is the first condition of agricultural sustainability. We simply cannot expect people to allow their own children to go hungry in order to moderate climate change or conserve and protect soil, water, and other resources essential to meet the needs of future generations. By linking the elimination of hunger to *local* agricultural sustainability, rural people can meet the basic food needs of all without compromising the future of their communities.

The research and knowledge base needed to develop and sustain such farming systems is already available. The UN report by the International Panel of Experts in Sustainability concluded: “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.”⁴¹

The report continues: “The key is to establish *political* priorities, namely, to support the emergence of alternative systems which are based around fundamentally different logics, and which, over time, generate different and more equitable power relations”⁴² We may not be able to change political priorities at state or national levels, but the priorities of individual local communities could logically be changed by a serious commitment to eliminating local hunger.

First, we must come to a common understanding that markets are fundamentally incapable of eliminating hunger.⁴³ Markets respond to scarcity, not by necessity. Markets only provide

enough food to those who have enough money to buy enough food. We have to work together through government to eliminate hunger. The concept of “community food utilities” is one possibility for bringing people together and restoring confidence in government by eliminating local hunger.⁴⁴ Public utilities are already commonly used to provide water, sewers, electricity, and communications to everyone in rural communities. The same basic approach could be used to ensuring that everyone has enough nutritious food to meet their basic needs by working together through local government.

The community food utility could be committed to procuring as much of its needs as possible from local farmers. Local farmers who commit to producing nutrient dense foods by sustainable means could receive prices that would cover their costs of production plus a reasonable return on investment, much as suppliers of other public utilities are paid today. The community food utility would provide a solid economic foundation for continuing local expansion of sustainable farming. Local processing and distribution of food products also would add to local employment. Community-based food utilities could form networks with utilities in other communities to secure foods local farmers cannot produce and to expand markets for things local farmers can produce. These community-based networks could eventually become regional, national, and even global in scope. Perhaps most important, the shared values essential for effective local governance and sustainable community development could emerge from the personal relationships formed by people working together with a common commitment to eliminate local hunger.

Much has been lost in rural America, but there are still opportunities to create and sustain vibrant and viable rural communities. There are rural communities that still have clean water, clean air, scenic landscapes, and people who care about the land and about each other. Many rural people are just awakening to the possibilities of creating and sustaining vibrant *agricultural* communities, if are willing to reject industrial agriculture and embrace an approach to agriculture that produces good food for all while contributing to a desirable quality of rural life. Rural people need not continue to live with the sense of “impotence and dread;” there are positive possibilities for a new and better future.

However, none of these positive possibilities will be realized unless rural people are willing to communicate, collaborate, cooperate, coordinate, and in general, work together with a shared commitment to a common cause of ecological, social, and economic integrity. Communities of collaboration can start small, but if the benefits and achievements of these collaborations are sufficiently appealing and compelling, others will choose to join or to form similar collaboratives of their own. Eventually, rural cultures of *independence* could be replaced with cultures of *interdependence*—meaning people trust and depend on others as a matter of choice. Even if cooperation is ultimately a necessity, people must willing choose to cooperate in order to preserve their sense of individual sovereignty.

Thus far, farmers who produce, or could produce, for local markets have been reluctant to cooperate in creating the alliances essential for replacing the industrial food system with a sustainable food system. Local food initiatives have been struggling to find ways to move beyond farmers markets and CSAs to reach more local people with safe, nutritious food. Rural voters have been unwilling to join political alliances with like-minded urban voters to force state

and federal governments to protect the natural environment and rural communities from ravages of economic colonialism or to support local food initiatives.

Learning and practicing the art and science of human relationships may well be the greatest single challenge to the survival and revival of rural communities and to the sustainability of human life on earth. Decades of competitiveness, aggressiveness, assertiveness, and independence has left us as a disconnected, dysfunctional society incapable of working together, through governance or otherwise, for the common good of our society and the future of humanity. Nowhere are these characteristics more evident than in rural communities that have been subjected to decades of economic extraction and exploitation in the guise of economic development. The last best hope for people in rural areas is to choose interdependence over independence, cooperation over self-reliance, and create sustainable rural communities. “There is no power for change greater than a community taking its future into its own hands.”

“The Rural Sociology Society is a professional social science association that promotes the generation, application, and dissemination of sociological knowledge. The Society seeks to enhance the quality of rural life, communities, and the environment.”⁴⁵ Human relationships are the most fundamental attribute of communities, societies, or anything “sociological.” I can think of no more important challenge to the Rural Sociological Society than to make a commitment to help people in rural communities learn, develop, and practice the art and science of effective human relationships. A rural renaissance could provide a point of leverage, like the trim tab on the rudder of a ship, for changing the future of America in general and of human society. Regardless, the greatest challenges to rural America in overcoming the legacy of rural economic colonialism and coping with an increasing volatile ecologic and socioeconomic environment may well be developing and sustaining positive social relationships. Rural sociology would seem the logical academic discipline to help rural America meet this challenge.

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