

Agricultural Leaders of the Future Reconnecting Food and Farming with Society and Natureⁱ

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The *agricultural revolution* of some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago is widely heralded as fundamentally transforming human life on earth. Agriculture emerged at different times and in different ways in different parts of the world. However, the transition from hunting and gathering to farming eventually transformed societies in virtually every part of the world. Some historians see the agricultural revolution as a blessing while others see it as a curse.¹

Agriculture made possible an explosion in human population from some five million people 10,000 years ago to more than seven billion people today. Increases in agricultural production have more than kept pace with the growth in human population—at least so far. However, the costs to the earth have been great—including extensive depletion and pollution of soil, air, and water and alarming losses of biological diversity. Less appreciated are the social costs of agriculture—including persistent malnutrition, reflected in both hunger and obesity, and a diminished sense of economic equity and justice. Growing concerns about the sustainability of agriculture must be a priority for agricultural leaders of tomorrow.

Throughout much of human history, food was understood and appreciated as physical, mental, and spiritual sustenance or nourishment—not simply fuel for the body. Food was a means of connecting with both God and the earth. Religious holidays were celebrated with festive meals shared among family and friends. Food was also central to every secular family and community gathering. “Breaking bread” was an expression of confidence, trust, and willingness to share. Early farmers understood they could not dominate or control nature, even if they wanted to do so. They were simply attempting to tip the balance of nature in favor of humans—much like every species in nature’s ecosystems. So, there is nothing inherently unnatural or wrong about agriculture.

As Pope Francis stated it: “The biblical texts are to be read in their context, recognizing that they tell us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving”² Early farmers apparently understood that farming had to be a balance of tilling and keeping—of provision and stewardship. In fact, the etymology of the words “farm” and “farmer”^{3, 4} suggests that farming historically has always been multidimensional. Farming has always had an economic dimension as a means of making a living. However, farmers have also been provisioners of food, facilitators of festivals, and stewards of the earth.

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I don't know how the agricultural leaders of these earlier times might have been characterized. However, I suspect they were not unlike the *Yeoman farmers* extolled by Thomas Jefferson. He wrote, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if He ever had a chosen people, in whose breast He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."⁵ I suspect the early agricultural leaders were respected and exalted in their communities and by society, first and foremost, as being "good people."

Farming as a "way of life" as well as a "way to make a living" persisted well into the 1900s. When I was growing up on a farm the 1940s and 1950s full-time, diversified family farms were still the norm rather than the exception. Most people were either farmers, had grown up on a farm, or knew farmers or someone who had farmed. Many people still thank God for their food and also thank the farmers who help bring forth their food from the earth. Until fairly recently, there was still a strong sense of connectedness among the eater, the farmer, and the earth.

In the 1930s, "Clover and Prosperity" was a University of Missouri Cooperative Extension program promoting crop rotations and cover crops to restore soil productivity and control soil erosion. The "Balanced Farming" program of the 1940s encouraged farmers to balance soil conservation and productivity to improve the quality of life of farm families.⁶ However, the balance among economics, conservation, and quality of life shifted dramatically with the agricultural technologies that emerged from World War II, including synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides and affordable farm tractors.

Commercial fertilizers and pesticides replaced crop rotations and integrated crop and livestock systems. Farmers no longer needed to rely on soil health to produce an abundant harvest. Farmers were able to benefit economically by employing the basic strategies of industry: specialization, mechanization, and consolidation into larger farming operations. Livestock moved first into specialized cattle, hog, or chicken farms and then into large confinement feeding operations or factory farms. Crop production no longer depended on the health of the soils. Animal production no longer depended on the health of the crops on the farms where the crops and livestock were raised. The sense of connectedness was lost among the health of people, livestock, crops, and soils.

The *industrial agricultural revolution* might accurately be called the "great separation." Farmers lost their sense of connectedness to their land, to each other, and to their communities. Consumers no longer knew who produced their food, where it was produced, or how it was produced. What happens to food between the earth and the eater has become largely a mystery. Food for family gatherings and religious holidays are of economic importance to the food industry but have little social or spiritual significance beyond following cultural traditions. The dependence of humanity on the earth for food is no less than during the early times of hunting and gathering. But, the sense of connectedness between the eater and the earth has been lost.

The agricultural leaders of the post-war era were the early adopters who benefitted economically from the new industrial technologies. Increases in agricultural production kept downward pressure on prices for agricultural commodities. Farmers who resisted were pressured to either follow suit or get out of farming. The need for more land to expand the farming operation became more important than the need for good neighbors. Larger farms mean fewer

farms and fewer farm families, further weakening the sense of connectedness between farmers and their communities. Agricultural leaders were simply those who had learned how to survive.

Since the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, profits clearly have replaced the provision of human needs or stewardship of the land as the motivating force of the food system. Reliance on the impersonal market economy rather than local farmers has allowed the food system to specialize, and mechanize, to achieve economies of scale. However, the impersonal transactions of the industrial food system have destroyed our sense of personal connectedness with each other and with the earth. As a consequence of the “great separation,” we are confronted with a global multidimensional ecological, social, economic crises. Agriculture is a big part of the problem, and thus must be a big part of the solution. This is the challenge of agricultural leadership in the 21st century.

Returning to the wisdom of Pope Francis: “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.”⁷ He identifies myopic economic self-interest as the root cause of this crisis. “Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.” “Everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.” Agricultural leaders of the future must have the wisdom to understand that the future of humanity depends on farmers fulfilling their responsibilities both as members and caretakers of the earth’s integral community.

Integral agriculture is not simply some theological or philosophical rhetoric. It is an emergent reality of today’s most thoughtful and innovative farmers—the agricultural leaders of tomorrow. The early leaders of the organic food movement—Rudolph Steiner, Sir Albert Howard, J. I. Rodale—understood the inherent connectedness between life in the soil, life on the farm, and life in society. The farm, the farmer, the community, and society are all part of the same whole. They understood that only healthy soils can produce healthy crops, healthy livestock, healthy people, healthy communities, and healthy societies.

The sustainable agriculture movement grew out of the organic movement. Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. Ecological integrity, social responsibility, and economic viability are essential and inseparable dimensions of sustainable farms and sustainable agri-food systems. The local food movement is but the latest and perhaps most important stage of sustainable agriculture. The call for local foods recognizes the importance of reconnecting eaters with their local farmers who are committed to restoring the health of the soil to restore the health of crops, animals, communities, society and securing the future of humanity.

The local food movement is simply the American version of the global “Food Sovereignty Movement,” which proclaims: “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”⁸ Agroecology provides the *science* to support the *farming systems* essential for *food sovereignty*.⁹ Agroecology integrates the science of physical and social ecology with agriculture. In the worldview of ecology, everything is integrally connected. Thus,

agroecology provides a scientific foundation for the *integral* approach to agriculture extolled by the early advocates of organic farming, by Pope Francis, and by millions of other knowledgeable and thoughtful people who understand the fatal flaws in industrial agriculture.

The need for a fundamental shift from agricultural industrialization to agroecology is clear and compelling. For example, a 2016 independent study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability (IPES) described the evidence as “overwhelming”¹⁰ – cited more than 350 studies. The report concludes: “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.”¹¹

Humanity simply cannot afford agricultural leaders who continue to be guided by the failed model of industrial agriculture and a blind faith in the global economy. Agricultural leaders of the future must have the moral courage to ask, again quoting Pope Francis, “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity.”¹² I believe agricultural leaders of the future must be spiritually rooted, socially minded, family farmers who are committed to both *tilling* and *keeping* the earth for the benefit of themselves, their families, their communities, and for the future of humanity.

End Notes:

- ¹ Jared Diamond, “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” *Discover*, May 1987, <http://discovermagazine.com/1987/may/02-the-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race> .
- ² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, para. 67. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html .
- ³ “Farmers,” <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/farmer>, (accessed September 15,2014).
- ⁴ “Farm,” from Wikionary, Open Content Dictionary; cites The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia; Wedgwood, Atkinson, A dictionary of English etymology; and Mantello, Rigg, *Medieval Latin: an introduction and bibliographical guide*, 11.3, <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/farm> , (accessed September 15, 2014).
- ⁵ Thomas Jefferson (1900). John P. Foley, ed. *The Jeffersonian Cyclopedia: A Comprehensive Collection Of The Views Of Thomas Jefferson*. Funk & Wagnalls, p. 323. <https://books.google.com/books?id=2D0gAAAIAAJ&pg=PA532#v=onepage&q&f=false> .
- ⁶ J.W. Birch, The Missouri Plan (Balanced Farming), *Journal of Farm Economics*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Part 2: Proceedings Number (Nov., 1949), pp. 870-87, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1233752?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents .
- ⁷ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, paras. 139, 66, & 70. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- ⁸ Nyelini Forum on Food Sovereignty, “Declaration of Nyeleni,” February 27, 2007, <http://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290> .
- ⁹ Miguel Altieri, “Agroecology: principles and strategies for designing sustainable farming systems”, University of California, http://www.agroeco.org/doc/new_docs/Agroeco_principles.pdf .
- ¹⁰ Andrea Germanos, “Overwhelming' Evidence Shows Path is Clear: It's Time to Ditch Industrial Agriculture for Good” *Common Dreams*, Thursday, June 02, 2016, http://www.commondreams.org/news/2016/06/02/overwhelming-evidence-shows-path-clear-its-time-ditch-industrial-agriculture-good?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=socialnetwork
- ¹¹ IPES – Food, International Panel of Experts on Sustainability, *From Uniformity to Diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems*, June 2016, p. 3, http://www.ipes-food.org/images/Reports/UniformityToDiversity_FullReport.pdf
- ¹² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, para. 160. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html