The Unfulfilled Promise of Rural America¹

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More than twenty five years ago, in 1993, I wrote about my hopes for a renaissance in rural America. The paper I wrote became a chapter in my book, Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture. I explained how I had grown up on a small family farm during the 1940s and early 1950s, during a time when the future of family farms and rural has seemed brighter than at any time in American history. The post-World II economy boom, affordable farm tractors, and new commercial fertilizers and pesticides had brought a period of prosperity to farming communities. Rural communities were widely recognized as good places to live and raise families.

By the 1960s American agriculture had entered a long period of chronic “farm crises” caused by periodic oversupply. A change in U.S. government farm policies during the early 1970s encouraged all-out expansion of production exacerbated this ongoing problem. The new farm programs encouraged farmers to employ the strategies of industry: to specialize, routinize, mechanize, and consolidate into larger farming operations to achieve economies of scale. Farmers were advised to “either get big or get out” of farming. The industrialization of agriculture not only reduced costs but also allowed each farmer to produce more and increased total production faster than the growth in demand for agricultural commodities. As some farmers to get “big bigger” others were forced to “get out.” One prominent agricultural economist referred to this as the “curse of agricultural abundance.”

Most rural communities in the U.S had emerged and evolved as farming communities—not only to support farms but also farm families. In 1993, I wrote about impact of the farm crisis on rural communities. I wrote: “Over the past fifty years, many rural communities seem to have lost their purpose. The trend during this period has been toward fewer, larger, and more specialized farms. The result has been declining rural populations, declining demand for local markets and locally purchased inputs, and a resulting economic decay of many rural communities... Some communities attempted to diversify their economy to reduce their dependence on agriculture... Industry hunting became a preoccupation... Jobs, any kind at any cost, seemed to be the primary objective... Many rural development activities, were rooted in nothing more than short-run exploitation of undervalued human and natural resources in rural areas.

Some new rural economic activities such as tourism, vacation homes, retirement communities, and rural residences can have strong geo-economic foundations in climate, landscapes, or proximity to urban employment. Such activities have helped some rural communities survive the harsh reality that they no longer had any important purpose. However, most American rural communities continue to search for a new purpose for their existence.

¹ Prepared for presentation at the “Farm to Fork Festival,” Slow Food in the Tetons, Jackson, WY, Oct 5, 2019.
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My assessment of America may have seemed a bit harsh at the time, but my overall message was actually quite hopeful. In spite of the chronic crises in farming, rural communities were still good places to live. I quoted the “principle of universal cycles”—that everything on earth tends to move in cycles. Sooner or later, prosperity would return to rural America. The leading futurists of the time believed that the desirable quality of life in rural areas would provide an incentive for new era of urban to rural migration. In his widely quoted book, PowerShift, futurist Alvin Toffler wrote that the forces of industrialization had run their course and are already reversing. “The most important economic development of our lifetime has been the rise of a new system of creating wealth, based no longer on muscle but on the mind.” Peter Drucker, a noted guru of business management, in his book The New Realities, wrote “The biggest shift – bigger by far than the changes in politics, government or economics – is the shift to the knowledge society.”

Robert Reich, U.S. Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, in his The Work of Nations identified three emerging categories of work: routine production service, in-person service, and mind work, which he called “symbolic-analytic services.” He pointed out that mind workers often work alone or in small teams, connected only informally and flexibly with the larger organizations that employed them. They could choose to live and work anywhere—including rural areas. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, in Megatrends 2000, called their mind workers “individual entrepreneurs.” They wrote that entrepreneurial individuals, working alone or in small groups, would seek out community for companionship. They suggested that a sense of community, which was all but destroyed by industrialism, might be restored in rural areas by individuals empowered by knowledge. They wrote, “In many ways, if cities did not exist, it now would not be necessary to invent them.” “Free to live almost anywhere, more and more individuals are deciding to live in small cities and towns and rural areas.”

By the 1990s, many people had abandoned cities for the suburbs for quality of life reasons: lower crime rates, better housing, and recreational opportunities. Suburbanites were now free to abandon the suburbs for rural areas for additional quality of life reasons: more living space, fresh air, clean water, a cleaner overall environment, prettier landscapes, and, perhaps most important, to regain a sense of community—a sense of belonging. The new economic challenge of rural communities would be to create places where the new mind workers could live agreeably, work productively, and raise their families—where immigrant and homegrown mind workers alike would choose to relocate and create ecologically and socially sustainable rural communities. The idyllic quality of rural life would be the key to prosperous and resilient rural communities. At the turn of the 21st century, there was every reason to hope that such a rural renaissance had begun.

My hope for the future of rural America came from the changes I had seen in agriculture. After graduating from high school in 1957, I was able to attend the University of Missouri, where I earned my PhD degree in agricultural economics in 1970. I then spent the first half of a 30 year academic career as a traditional, “bottom-line” agricultural economist. I was an advocate of industrial agriculture. We were going to help farmers reduce their costs of production and eventually make good food affordable for everyone. In the process, we would create economic opportunities for innovative farmers who would support prosperous rural communities. But this meant that farming had to become a business, not a way of life. Farmers who choose to “get out” rather than “get big” would simply need to find another way to make a living.
For me, that way of thinking was severely challenged during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s. Agricultural production expanded rapidly during the 1970s to supply growing and profitable global markets. When a global recession during the 1980s caused a collapse in export markets, prices of farm commodities fell to unprofitable levels. Farmers who had “gotten big” by borrowing lots of money during the 1970s were caught with huge debts at record high interest rates. They couldn’t even make interest payments. Nightly network news programs regularly featured farm foreclosures and bankruptcies—farmer suicides were not uncommon. The large farms also were polluting the air and water with agricultural chemical and biological wastes. This industrial agriculture we had created was not sustainable—economically, ecologically, or socially.

Thankfully, the sustainable agriculture movement rose to public attention in the late 1980s. I was able to secure a grant from USDA in 1989 that allowed me to redirect the rest of my academic career to educating and advocating for agricultural sustainability. In the sustainable agriculture movement, I saw, and still see, the potential for changes in agriculture that will play an important part in a rural American renaissance. Sustainable farms can restore and regenerate the productivity of the land and help restore economic viability of rural communities. They function in harmony with the living ecological and social systems within which they exist and in fact are a part. Sustainable farms must meet the basic needs of people, not only as consumers but also as producers, farmers, members of rural communities, of society, of present and future generations.

The emergence of the modern organic food movement in the 1980s and its rapid growth in 1990s and early 2000s helped fuel hope that of an agricultural renaissance. The rapidly increasing numbers of farmers markets, signaling growth of a new local food movement, renewed hope that small and mid-sized family farms would play a prominent role in a sustainable agri-food revolution. The global Slow Food movement also linked good food to small, local, sustainably-managed farms. Sustainable farming took on many different names: organic, biodynamic, ecological, holistic, regenerative, restorative, innovative, and others. All of these emerging farming systems were “knowledge-based” approaches to farming. The sustainable agriculture movement clearly was part of the “knowledge-based” transformation that was taking place in the larger economy and society. The outlook was hopeful, if not optimistic.

However, the hope for a 21st century rural renaissance has yet to become a reality. A 2017 Wall Street Journal article labeled rural America as the “New Inner City.” In terms of poverty, education, teenage births, divorce, death rates, disability, and unemployment, rural counties now rank below inner cities.” Drug abuse and crime, once urban problems, now plague rural communities. What happened to the rural renaissance? I think the futurists failed to anticipate the economic and political power of the corporations that now control and benefit from industrial agriculture. Government farm programs and “rural development” strategies have implicitly sanctioned and supported the economic colonization of rural America.

Wendell Berry—farmer, philosopher, and author—in a 2017 letter to the New York Times described it this way: “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.”

What did Americans actually gain from this desecration? The industrialization of agriculture didn’t feed the hungry. In 2017, one-in-eight Americans were classified as food insecure and one-in-six American children lived in food-insecure homes. More people are now classified as “food insecure” than back in the 1960s. Whatever has been gained by lower food costs has been more than offset by rising costs of health care. An epidemic of diet related illnesses, such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancers now threatens the physical and financial future of the nation.

So what will it take to reclaim the integrity of the agri-food system and fulfill the promise of rural America? I think it will take a major consumer/taxpayer revolt. Quoting Molly Anderson, a highly respected international scholar and expert in matters of agri-food sustainability wrote, “Among the requirements for transformation is a citizenry that is sufficiently outraged by ‘business as usual’ to demand change by electing people to public office who will support the public good instead of private interests, and then holding those officials accountable.”

Scientists have researched and written reams of peer-reviewed articles and reports documenting the negative ecological, social, and rural economic impacts of industrial agriculture on rural America. The basic problem is that scientific information simply doesn’t change enough minds or create sufficient public “outrage” to seriously challenge “business as usual.”

I believe a transformation in the American agri-food system will require the kind public outrage that brought about the American Revolution. In 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence wrote that the basic purpose of government is to secure the God given, unalienable rights of all people, including life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They continued, and I quote, “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” That outrage led to the Revolutionary War.

I believe a similar outrage is welling up in rural America today, but it need not lead to a violent revolution. For the first time in several decades, I see the possibility for a fundamentally change in government. A 2019 Congressional Resolution calling for a Green New Deal is essentially a reaffirmation of the American Declaration of Independence. In spite of opposition by those who oppose its emphasis on mitigating climate change and support by those who hope to profit from a new “green economy,” the most important of its provisions express a reaffirmation of responsibility of government to protect basic human rights. The U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 109 states: “It is the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal... (D) to secure for all people for generations to come— (i) clean air and water; (ii) climate and community resiliency; (iii) healthy food; (iv) access to nature; and (v) a sustainable environment; and (E) to promote justice and equity by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression.” The resolution has been endorsed by virtually every major candidate seeking the Democratic nomination for President of the U.S.
The Green New Deal clearly states that clean air and water, healthy food, community stability, and a sustainable environment are basic rights of all people for all generations. The Green New Deal would mandate government farm policies supporting sustainable agriculture, much as farm policies since the 1970s have supported industrial agriculture. The Green New Deal provides new hope for “good food for all” by supporting the principles of “food sovereignty:” “the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” It also is the core philosophy of the Slow Food Movement by ensuring good, clean, and fair food, meaning good food for everyone, not just for those who can afford to pay market prices for it.

The unfilled promises of a rural renaissance are all consequences of the failure of governments to secure the basic rights of all people. Fortunately, such failures can be fixed by the collective actions of a knowledgeable and motivated citizenry. Once the American people begin to understand that polluted air, unsafe drinking water, and unhealthy foods are violations of basic human rights, I believe the public outrage against “business as usual” will be sufficient to bring about real and lasting change. Americans will “elect people to public office who will support the public good instead of private interests, and will hold those officials accountable.” This can be done and is in the process of being done. I still have hope that knowledge-based, sustainable family farms can help lead a renaissance in rural America. I still have hope that the unfulfilled promises of rural America will be fulfilled.

End Notes:

2 Toffler, PowerShift, 9.
6 Naisbitt and Aburdene, Megatrends 2000, 332.
7 Naisbitt and Aburdene, Megatrends 2000, 329.