

The Butz Stops Here: Why the Food Movement Needs to Rethink Agricultural History

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After Donald Trump's surprise victory over Hillary Clinton, commentators and journalists turned their attention to rural America, where Trump won three times as many votes as his opponent, in order to understand what had just happened.¹ They wrote about forgotten places: small towns populated by opioid addicts,² dying Rust Belt cities with abandoned factories at their centers,³ and mountain hamlets populated by xenophobes and racists.⁴ These writers described a conservatism so total and inexplicable it seemed part of the landscape.

Yet the history of rural America reveals a different story. From the 1890s to the 1930s, rural Americans played a vital role in radical leftist politics.⁵ Over the decades, some of those

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1. Helena Bottemiller Evich, *Revenge of the Rural Voter*, POLITICO (Nov. 13, 2016), <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/hillary-clinton-rural-voters-trump-231266>.

2. E.g., Zoë Carpenter, *Did the Opioid Epidemic Help Trump Win?*, THE NATION (Dec. 7, 2016), <https://www.thenation.com/article/did-the-opioid-epidemic-help-donald-trump-win/>.

3. E.g., Brian Mann, *Rural America Supported Trump, But Will His Policies Support Them?*, NPR (Feb. 6, 2017), <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/06/512037502/rural-america-supported-trump-but-will-his-policies-support-them>.

4. E.g., Kevin Baker, *Bluxit: A Modest Proposal for Separating Blue States from Red*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER: FACT TANK (Mar. 9, 2017), <https://newrepublic.com/article/140948/bluxit-blue-states-exit-trump-red-america>.

5. See generally, e.g., JIM BISSETT, *AGRARIAN SOCIALISM IN AMERICA* (Red River Books ed. 2002) (analyzing the farmer-fueled rise of the most electorally successful Socialist organization in the nation); David Brody, *On the Failure of U.S. Radical Politics: A Farmer-Labor Analysis*, 22 INDUS. REL. 141 (1983) (contending that the farmer-labor alliance played a central role in early 20th Century radical politics); LAWRENCE GOODWYN, *DEMOCRATIC PROMISE* (1976) (arguing that the Populist movement was an agrarian revolt against the corporate state); Eric Foner, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, 17 HIST. WORKSHOP 53, 71 (1984) (explaining that the Socialist party's strength in the

people chose to leave, but more of them were driven out due to policy—agricultural policy, in particular. Republicans and Democrats, alike, have supported laws that favor corporate agriculture, which continue to drive small farmers out of business and depopulate the countryside. While specialists know this history well, the public tends to know a folk history, written by figures associated with contemporary food movements.

This folk history rests on several key myths, which cover different periods of modern history from the New Deal to the present. We challenge these myths, not to attack particular authors or engage in pedantry, but to reveal the causes and extent of the suffering endured by rural families in the 20th century, which in turn, decimated the populist left. A reconsideration of the history of agricultural policy will help food-system reformers develop a more radical—and more effective—vision for rural America.

Myth: The New Deal Was for Small Farmers

A number of writers in the folk-history tradition have interpreted New Deal farm bills and the Agricultural Adjustment Act—the era’s signature law—as designed to help small-scale farmers and the poor, with the unintended consequence of inaugurating our current crop-subsidy system. New Deal farm “programs were specifically tailored to assist sharecroppers and the rural poor,” writes Daniel Imhoff;⁶ “the 1933 Farm Bill was designed to save small farming in America,” writes Bill Eubanks;⁷ “small landholders,” writes Marion Nestle, “grew

United States was rooted in an “unusual amalgam” of constituencies, including small farmers, rather than in factory workers). Although Marxists sometimes dismissed farmers as members of the petit bourgeois, socialist organizations in the United States were generally more ideologically flexible, in no small part due to the activism of farmers. As Harrison George put it to fellow Communists in 1932, “The impoverished farmers are on the march. We cannot order them to retreat, even if we desired.” Harrison George, *Causes and Meaning of the Farmers’ Strike and Our Tasks as Communists*, 11 *THE COMMUNIST* 918, 931 (1932).

6. DANIEL IMHOFF, *FOOD FIGHT: THE CITIZEN’S GUIDE TO THE NEXT FARM BILL* 40 (2d ed. 2012).

7. William S. Eubanks II, *A Rotten System: Subsidizing Environmental Degradation and Poor Public Health with Our Nation’s Tax Dollars*, 28 *STAN. ENVTL. L.J.* 213, 217

dependent on support programs . . . and began to view them as entitlements.”⁸

While crop subsidies were an important part of the New Deal, these writers misrepresent the class politics that decided FDR’s agricultural agenda. Historians and economists have reached an overwhelming consensus that the New Deal farm bills were designed to aid large farmers and succeeded in doing so: The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) “accelerated the increasing concentration of land,” writes Pete Daniel. “Obviously, large landowners reaped most of the federal money.”⁹ An aide to Henry Wallace, then the secretary of agriculture, later said the AAA was “militantly for the larger farmers.”¹⁰ Those farmers benefitted tremendously: government payments increased from 3 percent of net farm income in 1929 to 31 percent by 1940¹¹ and farmers’ incomes doubled in the 1930s.¹² These funds went mostly to large-scale operations.¹³

Meanwhile, farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers were “shoved aside in the rush toward bigger units, more tractors, and less men per acre.”¹⁴ From 1930 to 1950, the number of farmers declined by 14 percent, with a 37 percent decline for black farmers.¹⁵ Between 1930 and 1945, white tenants and croppers declined by 37 percent and black tenants and croppers by 32 percent.¹⁶ More catastrophic losses were to follow, as the government remained “militantly for the larger farmers” on through the present.

(2009).

8. Marion Nestle, *Utopian Dream: A New Farm Bill*, DISSENT, Spring 2012, at 15.

9. PETE DANIEL, *BREAKING THE LAND* 170 (1985).

10. *Id.* at 105.

11. E.C. PASOUR, JR., *AGRICULTURE AND THE STATE* 77 tbl.7.1 (1990).

12. KATHYRN S. OLMSTED, *RIGHT OUT OF CALIFORNIA* 29 (2015).

13. *See, e.g.*, DANIEL, *supra* note 9, at 170-173; GILBERT FITE, *COTTON FIELDS NO MORE* 139 (1984); CHARLES KENNETH ROBERTS, *THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION AND RURAL REHABILITATION IN THE SOUTH* ix, 29 (2015).

14. Farm Security Administration official John H. Caufield quoted in ROBERTS, *supra* note 13, at xx, discussing conditions in Texas.

15. BRUCE J. REYNOLDS, U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., *RURAL BUS. COOP. SERV.*, RBS RES. REP. 194, *BLACK FARMERS IN AMERICA, 1865-2000* 24 tbl.3 (2015).

16. GAVIN WRIGHT, *OLD SOUTH, NEW SOUTH* 245 (1997).

Myth: Black Farmers Left the South to Find Better Jobs

Most accounts treat black migration out of the South after the New Deal as a voluntary and profitable move. “Millions of poor farmers,” writes Robert Paarlberg in *Food Politics*, “left the land [to take] higher paying jobs in urban industry.”¹⁷ The legal scholar Jim Chen called this migration a “liberating moment” that allowed rural black Southerners to escape to the urban north, away from “the dreariness of their former lives on the farm.”¹⁸ He concluded, “[t]he jobs were there, the wages were better, and black America was ready to move.”¹⁹

In reality, historians have established that white Southern leaders encouraged mechanization and co-opted policy in order to pressure blacks to leave. With the backing of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), large farmers cut costs and drove small farmers out of business, while local USDA agents discriminated against black farmers on a systematic basis: by 1920, there were 925,000 black farmers, and by 1970, 90 percent of them were gone.²⁰ Some of these farmers left for better opportunities, but more were forced out in one of the “largest government-impelled population movements in all our history.”²¹ When they reached the cities, they entered a white-dominated society where they were treated as inferiors,²² and “an economy that had relatively little use for them,”²³ with black unemployment rates between 10 and 15 percent “as early as

17. ROBERT PAARLBERG, *FOOD POLITICS: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW* 102 (2d ed. 2013).

18. Jim Chen, *Of Agriculture's First Disobedience and Its Fruit*, 48 VAND. L. REV. 1261, 1303-1305 (1995).

19. *Id.* at 1305.

20. PETE DANIEL, *DISPOSSESSION* 6 (2013).

21. Donald H. Grubbs, *Lessons of the New Deal*, in *THE PEOPLE'S LAND* 19, 20 (Peter Barnes ed. 1975).

22. See, e.g., JASON SOKOL, *ALL EYERS ARE UPON US* (2014); KAREN R. MILLER, *MANAGING INEQUALITY* (2014).

23. WRIGHT, *supra* note 16, at 247.

1950”²⁴ and “up to 30 percent,” in several major cities, a decade later.²⁵

As the civil rights movement gathered steam, assaults on black farmers intensified. By the 1950s, “any program for small, poverty-ridden farmers in the South became entangled with the civil rights movement.”²⁶ The founder of the Citizens’ Council drew up a plan to remove 200,000 African-Americans from Mississippi by 1966 through “the tractor, the mechanical cotton picker . . . and the decline of the small independent farmers.”²⁷ As government-funded mechanization continued apace, “tens of thousands” of poor farmers were forced out of agriculture: they eked out an existence in the hinterlands, in shacks, without “food or adequate medical care.”²⁸ Black farmers who held onto their land used their independence to support civil rights workers, which often made them targets for lynch mobs and local elites.²⁹ Throughout the South, USDA agents withheld loans black farmers needed to operate—amid other discrimination—which continued after the Civil Rights Act.³⁰ From 1959 to 1969, black farmers declined by over two thirds, almost triple the rate of white farmers.³¹ The story of black

24. *Id.* at 246.

25. Michael Munk, *Revolution on the Farm*, 14 MONTHLY REV. 538, 547 (1963).

26. FITE, *supra* note 13, at 218.

27. BAYARD RUSTIN, *Fear in the Delta*, in TIME ON TWO CROSSES: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF BAYARD RUSTIN 66, 74 (Devon W. Carbado & Donald Weise eds., 2015).

28. FITE, *supra* note 13, at 219.

29. See, e.g., AKINYELE OMOWALE UMOJA, WE WILL SHOOT BACK 59-63, 73-76, 99-105, 160 (2013). When Bob Moses, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader, began his first voting drives in Mississippi, he stayed with E.W. Steptoe, a landowner in Amite County. Steptoe was the local NAACP chapter president and secured Moses space to teach voter registration classes in a one-room church. According to Akinyele Umoja, “Many SNCC workers depended on the protection of and were inspired by Black farmers like Steptoe.” *Id.* at 60. Another landowner and NAACP member, Herbert Lee, sometimes drove Moses around Amite County. A member of the state legislature, E.H. Hurst, murdered Lee, for his work with Moses. *Id.* at 63.

30. DANIEL, *supra* note 20. USDA agents not only withheld loans, they also denied crop allotments and a slew of other services to black farmers, while funneling money and offering expertise to white ones. *Id.* The agency also overlooked fraud and abuse in elections for its powerful county committees, which ensured they were dominated by white elites, who similarly manipulated, and often refused, acreage allotments and loans to black farmers and poor whites. *Id.*

31. REYNOLDS, *supra* note 15.

farmers is so thoroughly omitted from the folk history that, in 2014, a writer for *Modern Farmer* claimed “there are more minority farmers than ever before,”³² when there were almost six times as many black farmers in 1920³³ as there were minority farmers—total—in the latest census.³⁴

Myth: Earl Butz Was A Pivotal Figure

That Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, was fired for a racist joke, may help explain why Michael Pollan has described him as the architect behind America’s industrialized food system. Many writers lead their accounts with remarks on Butz’s character, repeat his admonitions that farmers “plant fence row to fence row” and “get big or get out,”³⁵ then summarize how he dismantled New Deal supply management systems and encouraged maximum production; introduced direct payments; and displaced small farmers.³⁶ One group of writers argues that Nixon’s USDA, under Butz, was responsible for “the last fundamental shift in agricultural policies.”³⁷ Butz “[helped] shift the food chain onto a foundation of cheap corn,” writes Pollan.³⁸ Nestle claims that he “encouraged farmers to produce as much food as possible.”³⁹ Butz “forever transformed . . . the rural landscape once healthfully dotted by profitable small farms,” contends Bill

32. Andrew Jenner, *5 Things You Need to Know from the New Farm Census*, MOD. FARMER (Feb. 20, 2014), <http://modernfarmer.com/2014/02/6-things-need-know-new-farm-census/>.

33. REYNOLDS, *supra* note 15.

34. See U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., NAT’L AGRIC. STAT. SERV., 2012 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE: U.S. NATIONAL LEVEL DATA 63 tbl.61 (2014).

35. See, e.g., Marion Nestle, *Today’s “Eat More” Environment: The Role of the Food Industry*, in *A PLACE AT THE TABLE* 95, 102 (Peter Pringle ed. 2013); Tom Philpott, *A Reflection on the Lasting Legacy of 1970s USDA Secretary Earl Butz*, GRIST (Feb. 8, 2008) <http://grist.org/article/the-butz-stops-here/>; MICHAEL POLLAN, *THE OMNIVORE’S DILEMMA* 51-52 (2006).

36. Nestle, Philpott, & POLLAN, *supra* note 35.

37. Mark Bittman, Michael Pollan, Ricardo Salvador, & Olivier De Schutter, *A National Food Policy for the 21st Century*, MEDIUM (Oct. 6, 2016), <https://medium.com/food-is-the-new-internet/a-national-food-policy-for-the-21st-century-7d323ee7c65f>.

38. POLLAN, *supra* note 35, at 51.

39. Marion Nestle, *In Memoriam: Earl Butz*, FOOD POLITICS (Feb. 12, 2008), <http://www.foodpolitics.com/2008/02/in-memoriam-earl-butz/>.

Eubanks.⁴⁰

Butz inaugurated almost none of the programs his critics say he did: they began under earlier USDA chiefs, who had sided with big farmers since the New Deal. Ezra Taft Benson, not Butz, ended production controls for corn, in 1959,⁴¹ and was the first to urge farmers to “get big or get out.”⁴² Kennedy severely weakened supply management with a farm bill that made programs voluntary for every commodity except wheat.⁴³ Johnson bragged that his bill would drop prices “to the lowest possible cost” and that he would deal with “farm surplus and supply management” through increased exports, which he expected to grow by “50 percent” in a decade.⁴⁴ Johnson’s law also introduced direct payments to farmers, which lasted through the 1980s.⁴⁵

Butz’s farm bill was “the logical extension of the acts of 1965 and 1970,” according to former USDA chief economist and Kennedy adviser Willard Cochrane.⁴⁶ When that bill passed, monoculture had already taken hold. A series of contemporaneous studies found that fencerow-to-fencerow agriculture had been dominant in the Midwest long before Butz entered office.⁴⁷ As Wendell Berry, who inspired Pollan’s food

40. Eubanks, *supra* note 7, at 225.

41. Richard Orr, *New Methods, New Law Hike Corn Surplus*, CHI. TRIB., July 22, 1959, at 5; MILTON H. ERICKSEN & KEITH COLLINS, U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., ECON. RES. SERV., EFFECTIVENESS OF ACREAGE REDUCTION PROGRAMS 167 (1985).

42. JAMES E. SHEROW, THE GRASSLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES: AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY 139 (2007)

43. Jon Lauck, *After Deregulation: Constructing Agricultural Policy in the Age of “Freedom to Farm,”* 5 DRAKE J. AGRIC. L. 3, 17 (2000).

44. President Lyndon Johnson, Statement by the President Upon Signing the Food and Agriculture Act of 1965 (Nov. 4, 1965); *see also* James N. Giglio, *New Frontier Agricultural Policy: The Commodity Side, 1961-1963*, 61 AGRIC. HISTORY 53, 69 (1987) (“By 1965 the Johnson administration. . .focused on expanding exports as *the* way to deal with problems of farm surplus and low income.”)

45. Giglio, *supra* note 44, at 70.

46. WILLARD COCHRANE & MARY E. RYAN, AMERICAN FARM POLICY, 1948-1973, at 84 (1976).

47. *See* Robert I. Papendick, Lloyd F. Elliott, & Robert B Dahlgren, *Environmental Consequences of Modern Production Agriculture: How Can Alternative Agriculture Address These Issues and Concerns?*, 1 AM. J. ALT. AGRIC. 3 (1986) (summarizing early research on modern farming practices and wildlife habitat); Melvin Taylor, Carl Wolfe, &

journalism,⁴⁸ writes, “Butz’s tenure in the Department of Agriculture, and even his influence, are matters far more transient than the power and values of those whose interests he represented.”⁴⁹

Myth: The Farm Crisis Began in the 1980s

Journalists treat the 1980s farm crisis as if it were the “deepest rural crisis since the Great Depression.”⁵⁰ Hollywood saw it that way: studios released two films about the crisis in 1984.⁵¹ A group of musicians held the first Farm Aid concert the next year.⁵² The public believed then, as journalists report now, that, prior to the 1980s, even farmers “on small parcels of land . . . could make a reasonably good living.”⁵³

What makes this story so strange is that the decline was significantly slower in the 1980s than in previous decades.⁵⁴

William Baxter, *Land-Use Change and Ring-Necked Pheasants in Nebraska*, 6 WILDLIFE SOC’Y BULL. 226 (1978) (documenting the rapid spread of fencerow-to-fencerow monoculture in Nebraska after 1964); D. Russell Vance, *Changes in Land Use and Wildlife Populations in Southeastern Illinois*, 4 WILDLIFE SOC’Y BULL. 11 (1976) (finding that wildlife habitat had been virtually eliminated from southeastern Illinois farms by 1974). As the environmental and agricultural historian James Sherow put it, “the big fallout of the ‘get big or get out’ mindset occurred during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.” SHEROW, *supra* note 42.

48. Joe Fassler, *The Wendell Berry Sentence that Inspired Michael Pollan’s Food Obsession*, THE ATLANTIC (Apr. 23, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/the-wendell-berry-sentence-that-inspired-michael-pollans-food-obsession/275209/>.

49. WENDELL BERRY, *THE UNSETTLING OF AMERICA* v (Counterpoint 1996) (1977)

50. Philpott, *supra* note 35.

51. These were *Country* and *The River. Places in the Heart* also came out that year, but was set in the Depression era. Associated Press, *Lange, Spacek, Fonda: 3 Hollywood Actresses Relate Farmers’ Plight*, L.A. TIMES, May 6, 1985, http://articles.latimes.com/1985-05-06/news/mn-4387_1_jane-fonda.

52. *Farm Aid: A Concert for America*, FARM AID, <https://www.farmaid.org/issues/industrial-agriculture/farm-aid-thirty-years-of-action-for-family-farmers/> (last visited May 12, 2017).

53. Siena Chrisman, *Want to Understand Trump’s Rise? Head to the Farm*, CIVIL EATS (Oct. 27, 2016), <http://civileats.com/2016/10/27/want-to-understand-trumps-rise-head-to-the-farm/>

54. There was a 13.9 percent decline in white farmers from 1982 to 1992 (and only 6.6 percent from 1982 to 1987), versus 16.2 percent from 1969 to 1978, 23.3 percent from 1959 to 1969, and 28.7 percent from 1950 to 1959. The same general trends were evident for black farmers, but their rates were much higher. See REYNOLDS, *supra* note 15. A 2004

There was a difference, however: a wealthier class of farmers was affected. A group of sociologists who interviewed a representative sample of Iowa farm operators during the crisis found that “persons most at risk of forced displacement from farming are found to be younger, better educated, and large-scale operators.”⁵⁵ Wealthier farmers had been much more likely to take out large loans to expand their operations in the 1970s. As a result, when the Federal Reserve suddenly curtailed inflation in 1979, these farmers were hit hard by astronomical interest rates.⁵⁶

The farm crisis itself was real: families were forcibly and tragically displaced from their farms during the 1980s; the myth-making begins when writers portray it as a starting point. Numerous families lost their farms prior to the 1980s, often at higher rates, yet their displacement was not perceived as a catastrophe, since they came from marginalized populations. By treating the farm crisis as an aberration, these writers conceal this larger tragedy and the decades of policy-making that caused it.

Myth: Land Consolidation Was Inevitable

Between 1930 and 1992, the number of white farmers fell by 65 percent and black farmers by 98 percent,⁵⁷ as farms became larger, almost all of them owned by white men.⁵⁸ Willard Cochrane ascribes these changes to a “technological

USDA study concluded “that the 1982-86 farm financial crisis did not affect exit rates much.” JEROME M. STAM & BRUCE L. DIXON, U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., ECON. RESEARCH SERV., AIB-788, FARMER BANKRUPTCIES AND FARM EXITS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1899-2002, at 25 (2004).

55. Gordon Bultena, Paul Lasley, & Jack Geller, *The Farm Crisis: Patterns and Impacts of Financial Distress among Iowa Farm Families*, 51 RURAL SOCIOLOGY, 436, 436 (1986).

56. See NEAL HARL, THE FARM DEBT CRISIS OF THE 1980S 13-17 (1990), for a summary of the economic factors contributing to the crisis. Black and female farmers also struggled during the decade—between 1982 and 1987, they were 15 percent and 13 percent more likely to exit than whites and men, respectively—but their misfortunes were less visible. ROBERT A. HOPPE & PENNI KORB, U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., ECON. RESEARCH SERV., ERR-21, UNDERSTANDING U.S. FARM EXITS 17 (2006).

57. See REYNOLDS, *supra* note 15.

58. See U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., NAT’L AGRIC. STATISTICS SERV., 2012 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE: FARM TYPOLOGY 9 tbl.1 (2015).

revolution”;⁵⁹ Jim Chen writes that “technology inexorably increases farm size”;⁶⁰ Laurie Ristino and Gabriela Steier attribute consolidation to “efficiencies of economies of scale,” the “adoption of tractors . . . and combines,” and “the Green Revolution.”⁶¹ These writers share a—sometimes unstated—belief in autonomous technological “forces,” part of a discourse of technological determinism rooted in conservative ideology.⁶²

Experts agree that neither economies of scale nor technology give large-scale farms an edge over smaller ones.⁶³ In 2013, USDA researchers surveyed the literature and concluded that “most economists are skeptical that scale economies usefully explain increased farm sizes.”⁶⁴ Similarly, technology itself does not inherently—or as the USDA researchers put it, “explicitly”—benefit owners of large-scale farms.⁶⁵ What technology does is allow farmers to substitute capital for labor, enabling those with sufficient capital to reduce labor costs.⁶⁶ As a result, labor-saving technology can lead to land consolidation when combined with policies that provide commercial farms with easy access to capital, while withholding it from smaller ones, as happened in the United States.⁶⁷

59. WILLARD COCHRANE, *THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE* 352 (2d ed.1993).

60. Jim Chen, *The American Ideology*, 48 *VAND. L. REV.* 809, 852 (1995).

61. Laurie Ristino and Gabriela Steier, *Losing Ground: A Clarion Call for Farm Bill Reform to Ensure a Food Secure Future*, 42 *COLUM. J. ENVTL. L.* 59, 84 (2016).

62. See Shane Hamilton, *Agribusiness, The Family Farm, and the Politics of Technological Determinism in the Post-World War II United States*, 55 *TECH. & CULTURE* 560 (2014).

63. See, e.g., JAMES M. MCDONALD, PENNI KORB, & ROBERT A. HOPPE, U.S. DEP’T OF AGRIC., ECON. RESEARCH SERV., ERR-152, *FARM SIZE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF U.S. CROP FARMING* 22 (2013); Yoav Kislev & Willis Peterson, *Prices, Technology, and Farm Size*, 90 *J. POL. ECON.* 578, 586 (1982) (explaining that economies of scale are “not generally supported by the empirical record”).

64. MCDONALD, KORB, & HOPPE, *supra* note 63.

65. *Id.* at 22-23. See also Interview by Mark Snead with James MacDonald, Chief, Structure, Tech., & Productivity Branch, U.S. Dep’t of Agric., in Kansas City, Mo. (June 9, 2010).

66. MCDONALD, KORB, & HOPPE, *supra* note 63, at 22-23.

67. As *Monthly Review* observed in 1956:

What is behind this great rush to concentration and centralization in American agriculture? It won’t do to repeat pat phrases about science and technology. Science does not apply itself, and technology does not introduce itself. These are functions of individuals, groups,

Since before the New Deal, agricultural planners had advocated for consolidating farmland and mechanizing agriculture.⁶⁸ An advisor under Eisenhower coined the term “agribusiness” to describe the vertically integrated, corporate structures policymakers hoped would come to dominate the production, distribution, and marketing of farm products.⁶⁹ While agribusiness proponents believed technology would force small farmers out of business on its own, they advanced policies that favored large-scale producers anyway. Then, as now, government policy that favored large-scale farmers forced modest growers out of business.

Policy Makes Politics

While conservatives have consistently pushed more aggressive, pro-agribusiness policies, liberals have often responded with pro-agribusiness policies of their own, even when that meant undermining their own natural allies: small and mid-sized farmers, farmworkers, rural minority populations, and the small, independent businesses they support. The Democrats’ approach to agricultural policy has been so perplexing that academics have developed a rich literature, in the field of policy feedback, to understand it. Policy feedback is the study of the ways, as Theda Skocpol recently described it, “in which policy fights and outcomes at one point in time set up, or close off, future possibilities.”⁷⁰

Researchers in policy studies have paid special attention to the Democrats’ relationship with the American Farm Bureau Federation, a conservative interest group that rose to power with

and institutions; and in capitalist society they are functions that can be performed only by those who have the necessary capital at their disposal.

Capitalism and Agriculture, 8 MONTHLY REV. 1, 6 (1956).

68. See DANIEL, *supra* note 20, at 9-10.

69. HAMILTON, *supra* note 62, at 560-561.

70. Theda Skocpol, *A Guide to Rebuilding the Democratic Party, from the Ground Up*, VOX (Jan. 5., 2017),

<http://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/1/5/14176156/rebuild-democratic-party-dnc-strategy>.

federal help.⁷¹ The Farm Bureau “grew out of the movement for improved farming methods,” pushed by businessmen, scientists, and, “especially,” USDA.⁷² The group “eagerly recruited commercial farmers” and was “not at all inclined to expand beyond that constituency.”⁷³ From the beginning it styled itself as a bulwark against government intervention and leftist populism: James Howard, the first president of the Farm Bureau, claimed that he stood “as a rock against radicalism.”⁷⁴

As New Deal negotiations began, the Farm Bureau pursued the interests of white, Southern planters, and liberals made significant concessions to them, out of expediency. One of the most significant was “predominant influence” over the administration of the AAA, which the Farm Bureau used to favor large producers and consolidate its power. The group’s membership increased six-fold between 1933 and 1945, as it lobbied for large growers at the expense of smaller farmers.⁷⁵ As Mancur Olson concluded in his widely cited study of interest groups, “the Farm Bureau was created by the government.”⁷⁶

From that point on, the Farm Bureau played an expanding role in farm policy, using its increasing power to not only push out small farmers but to oppose progressive legislation at every opportunity. The Farm Bureau, among other things, helped pass

71. See, e.g., KENNETH FINEGOLD & THEDA SKOCPOL, *STATE AND PARTY IN AMERICA’S NEW DEAL* (1995); THEODORE LOWI, *THE END OF LIBERALISM: THE SECOND REPUBLIC OF THE UNITED STATES* (2d ed. 1979); GRANT MCCONNELL, *PRIVATE POWER AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* (1966); MANCUR OLSON, *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION* (2d ed. 1971). The political scientist Paul Pierson notes in his classic work on policy feedback, *When Effect Becomes Cause*, “The Farm Bureau’s development has been widely linked to policy feedback, even by scholars not inclined to emphasize the independent role of government activity.” Paul Pierson, *When Effect Becomes Cause*, 45 *WORLD POL.* 595, 600 n.5 (1993).

72. Brody, *supra* note 5, at 146.

73. *Id.* at 160.

74. SAMUEL R. BERGER, *DOLLAR HARVEST* 93 (1971). David F. Houston, secretary of agriculture under Wilson, urged farmers to join local chapters, where they could fight to “stop bolshevism.” *Id.*

75. Robert L. Tantz, *Membership of General Farmers’ Organizations, United States, 1874-1960* 38 *AGRIC. HIST.* 143, 147 tbl.1 (1964).

76. OLSON, *supra* note 71, at 149.

the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act in 1947,⁷⁷ sought to repeal the federal income tax in the 1950s,⁷⁸ bitterly fought Medicare in the 1960s,⁷⁹ opposed the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1980s,⁸⁰ lobbied against health care reform in the 1990s,⁸¹ and boasted of killing the Waxman-Markey climate bill during Obama's first term.⁸² Today, the Farm Bureau continues to oppose a wide swathe of progressive legislation,⁸³ as do its state branches, which often hold conservative positions on social issues such as abortion, gay rights, and medical marijuana.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, Tom Vilsack, secretary of agriculture under Obama, is a member of the Farm Bureau and repeatedly spoke at its annual conference during his term.⁸⁵ His commitment went beyond words: Vilsack pushed the rapid growth of the federal

77. SHEILA D. COLLINS & GERTRUDE SCHAFFNER GOLDBERG, *WHEN GOVERNMENT HELPED* 133 (2013).

78. Berger, *supra* note 74, at 150.

79. *Id.* at 173.

80. Letter from John C. Datt, Dir., American Farm Bureau Federation Washington Office, to Senator Orrin Hatch (May 20, 1983) (on file with authors).

81. Richard Orr, *18% of Rural America Has Little or No Health Insurance*, *USDA Says*, CHI. TRIB., FEB. 7, 1994.

82. CHRIS CLAYTON, *THE ELEPHANT IN THE CORNFIELD: THE POLITICS OF AGRICULTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE* loc. 59 (2015) (ebook).

83. The Farm Bureau's 2016 list of policy resolutions ran longer than 200 pages and expressed, among other conservative positions, the organization's opposition to Medicare expansion, universal health care, government-funded high-speed rail, "efforts to remove references to Christmas," gay marriage, and "special privileges to those that participate in alternative lifestyles." AMER. FARM BUREAU FED'N, *FARM BUREAU POLICIES FOR 2016*, at 16, 33, 35-36, 40 (2016).

84. The Missouri Farm Bureau declared in 2017, *inter alia*, its opposition to the use of "religious legal code"—a euphemistic phrase for Sharia law—in American courts, more stringent gun control laws, and a federal minimum wage, while supporting "right-to-work" legislation, harsher penalties for drug infractions, and a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget. MO. FARM BUREAU, *2017 POLICY BOOK: FACING THE ISSUES* 76-79, 81, 87 (2017). See also Joseph Gerth, *Dozens Protest as Farm Bureau Defends Stance*, *COURIER-J.*, Aug. 25, 2016 (describing protests against the Kentucky Farm Bureau for its "stance on issues including gay rights, union rights, and abortion rights"); *Arkansans Against Legalized Marijuana*, ARK. FARM BUREAU (Aug. 31, 2016), <http://www.arfb.com/news/2016/aug/31/podcast-arkansans-against-legalized-marijuana/> (advocating against a medical marijuana ballot initiative).

85. *E.g.*, Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Agric., Remarks of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to 94th Annual Meeting of the Farm Bureau Federation (Jan. 14, 2013) (on file with authors); Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Agric., USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack Addresses American Farm Bureau Convention (Jan. 13, 2014) (on file with authors); Press Release, Am. Farm Bureau Fed'n, *A Conversation with Tom and Bob: Farm Bureau Town Hall Meeting* (Jan. 11, 2015) (on file with authors).

crop insurance program,⁸⁶ which sends millions of dollars to the Farm Bureau each year,⁸⁷ while hurting smaller farms and the environment.⁸⁸

Vilsack is one in a line of Democratic politicians that have supported conservative policies that undermine their own party. Democrats must develop and articulate an alternative—and progressive—rural policy. Rather than funneling cash to large-scale farmers and corporations, Democrats should support workers and small-scale businesses. Rather than displacing poor and marginalized rural people, the party must empower them. As history has shown, to do otherwise would not only be disastrous for the party, but for the nation as a whole.

86. See, e.g., Press Release, U.S. Dep't of Agric., Remarks of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to 94th Annual Meeting of the Farm Bureau Federation (Jan. 14, 2013) (on file with authors) (statement of Secretary Vilsack) (“[The farm] bill must start with the commitment . . . [to] a strong and viable crop insurance program. . . .”); Press Release, Nat'l Crop Ins. Serv., USDA Secretary Kicks off International Crop Insurance Conference (Sept. 28, 2015) (on file with authors); O. Kay Henderson, *Departing Vilsack Offering Farm Bill Suggestions*, RADIO IOWA, Jan. 2, 2017 (“Vilsack is urging groups in the farm sector to be more vocal advocates of federal crop insurance subsidiesFalse”)

87. See, e.g., FOOD & WATER WATCH, THE FARM BUREAU'S BILLIONS: THE VOICE OF FARMERS OR AGRIBUSINESS? 2 (2010), https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/sites/default/files/farm_bureau_billions_fs_july_2010.pdf; Ian T. Shearn, *Whose Side is the American Farm Bureau On?*, THE NATION (July 16, 2012), <https://www.thenation.com/article/whose-side-american-farm-bureau/>; LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT, CROP INSURANCE—HOW A SAFETY NET BECAME A FARM POLICY DISASTER (2014).

88. See, e.g., MICHAEL DUFFY, CTR. FOR RURAL AFF., IMPACT OF CROP INSURANCE ON LAND VALUES (2016); ANNA WEIR SCHECHINGER & CRAIG COX, IS FEDERAL CROP INSURANCE LEADING TO ANOTHER DUST BOWL? (2017); Anna Weir Schechinger, *How Crop Insurance Makes Landowners and Big Growers Grow Richer—And Hurts Other Farmers*, ENVTL. WORKING GROUP: AGMAG (Apr. 7, 2016), <http://www.ewg.org/agmag/2016/04/how-crop-insurance-makes-landowners-and-big-growers-richer-and-hurts-other-farmers>; LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT, CROP INSURANCE ENSURES THE BIG GET BIGGER (2014); DANIEL SUMNER & CARL ZULAUF, COUNCIL ON FOOD, AGRIC. & RES. ECON., ECONOMIC & ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF AGRICULTURAL INSURANCE PROGRAMS (2012).