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COMMENTARY

Land reform in the United States: Lost cause or simply a cause that has been lost?

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In this commentary, I consider the topic of "land reform" in the United States, addressing the status of land reform as a key concept and goal among agrifood scholars, food/farm movements, and government actors. I do so in order to encourage sustainable food advocates to consider land reform's importance, its social basis, and its challenges. Informed by secondary literature and my own thinking and doing over 20 years of food systems activism and research, I ask: Why isn't land reform more prominent as a central objective? What dynamics keep land reform off the agenda of U.S. agrarian and food movements? What can previous histories of land reform agitation teach us? How can the elements necessary to advance toward land reform in the United States be built? I explore land reform's lack with an eye especially to those explanations that open up potential avenues for action, in order to spark conversation on potential barriers to land reform efforts, and to suggest potential ways to overcome them. I discuss political-economic, ideological, and organizational barriers and emphasize the role of anticommunism in shaping today's land politics among food and farming movements. It is hoped that the commentary offers researchers and practitioners actionable insights into the need for a land reform agenda, potential strategies toward a land reform agenda, and an honest assessment of the impediments to that agenda's advance.

Keywords: Land reform, Land justice, Food systems transformation

Introduction

In this commentary, I consider the topic of "land reform" in the United States, asking about the status of land reform as a key concept and goal among agrifood scholars, food/farm movements, and government actors.[1] Land reform in its justice-oriented form changes existing relations of landed property—who has access and authority, for what uses and purposes, and with what social and environmental effects—toward goals of democratization, social equity, sustainability, and a livable planet. I believe it is imperative that sustainable food advocates consider land reform's importance, social basis, and challenges. My commentary is informed by secondary literature on the matter, but also more broadly by personal and collective thinking and doing over 20 years of efforts in urban agriculture, food systems reform, political activism, and agroecological research.

My experience and research, including my 2021 dissertation addressing working across differences in California's food movements, lends credibility to the assertion that food movements harbor radical rhetoric and aspirations (especially when led by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color [BIPOC]). That is, some seek to transform the underpinning capitalist and colonial political–economy (see Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Roman-Alcalá, 2021). Even those sectors of environmental and social justice movements unwilling to grapple with grand transformation are compelled to consider the barriers to even small progressive reforms, given entrenched landownership inequalities and undemocratic political institutions. As others have argued, there is no way toward resilient, sustainable, socially just food systems without altering existing structures of land access, tenure, and ownership (Borras and Franco, 2012; Calo et al., 2021). Yet, surprisingly little discussion among U.S. food movements occurs on "land reform" as a strategy or goal.

To be clear, land reform ideas, movements, and policies have appeared in various guises since the United States was founded. Indeed, even today there are efforts to address land among scholars, movements, and governments (which I will address shortly). But the idea that dynamics around land access, distribution, and control might be changed *substantially* isn't a common one—even though U.S. history shows precisely the prevalence of such changes over its

1. I recognize land's relevance to a broader set of interests and movements, such as those concerning decolonization, reparations, and human rights for workers, tenants, debtors, and other structurally marginalized people. The paper seeks to engage and learn from these while staying focused on the agrifood dimension. When I refer to scholars, governments, and movements generically, I am referring to those in relation to agrifood issues/goals.

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history. Land–property relations are not and have never been static: The question is if changes serve or combat the existing order. The problem is that most large changes to land relations in the United States have been marked by violence, warfare, imperialism, and westward expansion (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Colonization itself may be thought of as the first land reform to hit this landmass—although certainly not one that contributed to justice or sustainability. Some historical U.S. land reforms *have* been pitched toward social justice, alongside Jeffersonian dreams of a society of yeoman farmers, but this "justice" was mostly limited to Euro-descended white males, and—against the stated intentions behind legislation to expand and democratize landownership—most U.S. legislation regulating land has tended to reinforce grossly unequal landholding patterns and enrich the already-powerful (Geisler, 1984).

The last time U.S. land reform was seriously on the political and scholarly agenda among agrifood scholars and movements was 40 years ago, following "the new ferment of the 1970s" (Geisler, 1984, p. 9), as evidenced by the activist document "The People's Land: A Reader on Land Reform in the United States" (edited by Barnes, 1975) and the edited scholarly collection "Land Reform, American Style" (Geisler and Popper, 1984). Within these documents and their respective movements, land access issues were considered with regard to varied regions, constituencies, and political commitments. But generally speaking these efforts did not begin from a reckoning with (or rejection of) the United States's foundationally racialized, capitalist, colonial land system, or with previous land reforms as reproductions of that system. Today, land reform may be more thinkable than it has been for decades, as more sectors of food and environmental movements are influenced by BIPOC histories, values, and thinking, and the political radicalism associated. And this possibility raises once again the prospect that land reform could become a vital and unifying struggle that offers real and lasting impacts.

Over recent decades, a small number of researchers and agitators have called for transformative land reforms, or have asked about their absence, keeping the idea in circulation (St. Peter and Patel, 2013; Holt-Gimenez, 2014; Brent and Kerssen, 2017; Williams and Holt-Gimenez, 2017; Van Sant, 2019; Kass, 2021). These pieces broadly agree on the necessity of land reform in a place like the United States and articulate that various communities, especially the most marginalized, are or could be proponents of change to U.S. land regimes. The activist-scholarship collection "Land Justice: Re-imagining Land, Food, and the Commons in the United States" (Williams and Holt-Gimenez, 2017) particularly showcases how land has always been at the core of BIPOC food movements, yet those politics have not always been seen or taken up more widely. Generally speaking, land reform is not a hot topic in food/farm research focused on the United States. Likewise, agrarian, food-focused, and rural social movements have continued to work on land-related issues and policy, and a minority—such as the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) and the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC)—are advancing more substantive proposals and projects in recent years that reflect land reform thinking (Pahnke and Treakle, 2023). Still, it is rare to hear the term "land reform" used, or to see U.S. food, farm, and environmental movements—taken as a whole—as advancing ambitious agendas to transform land relations writ large.

Too many efforts have focused on piecemeal reforms focused on farm businesses, whether tax incentive programs, "land matching" services that seek to match retiring with aspiring farmers, or so-called "incubator" programs to help farm businesses learn the ropes. These are distinctive from land reform primarily for their lack of a vision of a transformed political–economy, and their lack of emphasis on *political struggle over property itself* in achieving that vision. Left untouched by many piecemeal efforts is a land economy based not only on centuries of enslaved labor and stolen land (evidenced in the recent statistic that whites own 98% of privately held U.S. agricultural land; see Horst and Marion, 2019), but equally on an extractive, unequal global economy sustained by U.S. military and economic domination.

Piecemeal efforts also lack proven efficacy toward a transformed food system. For instance, I served as an advisor on a national research project to assess state land incentive programs, which shows that years of advocacy for such programs have netted very little in terms of new access for new entrant farmers, especially for the most marginalized would-be farmers (see also Van Sant et al., 2022). Alongside this weakness is hesitance from politicians and governmental agencies to address agroecological transitions through transformative land policies—although again there are notable, recent exceptions to this pattern. As NFFC's policy director Jordan Treakle told me: "there is movement around land—it's just difficult to make progress, as this land work challenges the very embedded racial capitalist roots of the country" (personal communication, 21/04/2023).

This quote points to the structural limitations of today's political–economic order that works—alongside generations of anti-communist and white supremacist cultural and political interventions—to resist transformative change-making efforts. These factors undermine land reform in a way that may be less obvious than the most common explanation for the lack of land reform discourse/practice: that only a small rural population relies on land stewardship for livelihood. Even counting the many and seemingly growing number of young and aspiring farmers, the 1.2% of the population that is employed in agriculture simply does not compare to earlier proportions rooted in primary sectors of the economy (Economic Research Service, 2023). Yet, regardless of exact demographics, non-elite people rely on land in many ways and are impacted by the society-wide patterns of its management (indeed, one might argue that all are impacted by issues such as vast agrichemical pollution). This link is evidenced in myriad issues: farmworker exploitation; air and water quality; rural economic downturns and rises in extractive and carceral industries in the absence of ecologically beneficial livelihoods; long-term food security, linked to climate resilience and adaptation; infrastructural development and the availability and quality of housing.

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Quality of life for both urban and rural working people remains linked to the who, what, and how of landownership and property relations and provides justification for pursuing the difficult task of land reform.

Yet, given that many civil society groups whose goals toward agroecological transitions, Indigenous food sovereignty, migrant farmworker rights, and land access for BIPOC and young farmers (among other issues) might seem to benefit from land reform, why isn't land reform more prominent as a central objective? I seek to unpack potential explanations—with an eye especially to those explanations that open up potential avenues for action. Starting from the research-based assumption that policy tends to follow social movement agitation and disruptive displays of grassroots power, I ask: What other organizational, ideological, and political–economic dynamics keep land reform off the agenda of U.S. agrarian and food movements? What can previous histories of land reform agitation teach us? What might build the data, commitments, values, networks, and momentum necessary to advance toward land reform in the United States?

The purpose of this commentary is to spark conversation on potential barriers to land reform efforts, and to suggest potential avenues to address them in ways that draw upon and link the work of various social sectors and movements. It is hoped that the commentary offers researchers and practitioners actionable insights into the need for a land reform agenda, potential strategies toward a land reform agenda, and an honest assessment of the impediments to that agenda's advance. It is also hoped that, collectively, the work of researchers, organizers, farmers, and government insiders may help relocate land reform from the margins toward the center of political debate and mobilize would-be land reformers in solidarity across the rural–urban divide.

The need for land reform in the United States

> *Americans have historically looked upon land reform as an issue in developing nations and an irrelevancy at home.* (Geisler and Popper, 1984, p. 3)

First, to briefly cover what I mean by land reform, and why it is important for sustainable food systems.

The U.S. food-farm-land status quo fails on metrics of justice and environment: It is fragile, reliant on nonrenewable resources while also causing environmental harm and is directly involved in causing various social harms. As stated in the Introduction to *The People's Land*: "The object of land reform is not merely to alter and control land *use*, but to alter and control land *ownership*, for it is the latter that inevitably determines the former" (1975, p. x).

Walter Goldschmidt's since-replicated analysis of 1940s rural California established the consequential differences between heavily consolidated agribusiness farm economies and those based on smaller, more "family farm" operations (see Barnes, 1975, pp. 171–175 and Goldschmidt's book *As You Sow*). His conclusion? "Where … farming lands are owned and controlled in urban centers and the men [sic] engaged in production are merely peasants, serfs or hired laborers, democratic institutions do not prevail" (Barnes, 1975, p. 171; for a global view see El-Ghonemy, 1990). These findings are still not widely known, but provide a basic introduction to the need for land reform. And while the focus of this commentary is on the United States, no land reform effort should be thought of in purely national terms, as the political–economy of land is grounded in global histories of colonization, the uneven development of a globally integrated capitalist economy, and ongoing imperialism.

When I speak here of land reform, admittedly I offer general contours rather than detailed plans. Those basic contours include deconcentration and democratization of land access, use, and the benefits of land's use (Borras and Franco, 2012), accompanied by provisioning of capital and infrastructure to support new and expanded agroecological production and localized markets. Importantly, it entails a transformation of private property as the basis for food production. Geisler refers to "redistributive policies intended to eradicate grossly unequal landownership and oppressive tenancy patterns" (1984, p. 7). Ethically, and practically, any worthwhile U.S. land reform agenda must include reparations for colonization and enslavement, and it may even involve thinking about property beyond its traditional basis in nation-state sovereignty. Customary tenure matters, and we can think of property in at least 4 registers: private, state/"public," commons/collective management, and Indigenous relational, responsibility-oriented tenure which doesn't comfortably fit within the other categories. We should not assume that the current dominance of private/public forms is transhistorical, and the latter two offer inspirations for land reform thinking.

Clearly, many versions of "land reform" are possible. These include rightwing versions and versions which may seek justice for some but not for others. There is no room here for regressive politics of land, as seen in the white supremacist, colonial, masculinist movements of the grassroots 1970s "Sagebrush rebellion" to privatize public land (Popper, 1984), the astroturfed so-called "Wise Use" response to environmental regulations, or the Bundy family occupying land to defend their exploitation of federal land resources.[2] In fact, countering the ideologies of such movements—essentially anti-environmental and elevating the private property rights of the (white, male) settler above all else—may be a key precondition to any successful land reform efforts in the United States. As Franco and Borras (2021) argue, any approach to land reform must be attentive to the specific social formations involved—whether helpful or obstructive—and thus connect its "what" to its "who."

There are larger debates to be held about the conceptual-political analysis underpinning land reforms,

2. Wise use leader Alan Gottlieb readily "acknowledges the movement's congruence with the broader agenda of the radical and racist right" (Jacobs, 1998, p. 35).

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and therefore how those reforms would advance. For instance, some argue that decolonization should be prioritized, while others still advocate along the lines of the "yeoman myth" of small, family-unit, owner-farmers, which was itself crucial to colonization's success (Carlisle, 2013; Calo, 2020). While many sectors (including white, "conservative" rural ones) share antitrust sentiments, seeking to overcome the *concentration* of economic power, others are more consistently anti-capitalist, seeing concentration as *inevitable* insofar as capitalism remains the economy's basis. There are debates on cooperative versus individual farm forms, and on whether to focus on reforms to public (government-held) lands or private land. I will not resolve these debates here, although I have my own preferences. Rather, U.S. society needs a debate on the *need* for land reform itself as a precondition to debate details. Such a debate would include those marginalized by the existing land economy, connecting urban and rural constituencies through discussion of largely ignored truths that already link us: our shared reliance on land and our differing but tied identities as *consequentially landless*.

There is one "line in the sand," however, that I'm willing to draw: We must differentiate between land reform as piecemeal reforms, versus "integral agrarian reform" as transformation of the food system and society (Rosset, 2006). Of course, some reforms are necessary as defensive maneuvers, or to liberate via policy much-needed governmental resources. Yet few advocates who desire transformation want to admit that reforms rarely if ever lead us there. Fewer grapple with the counterinsurgent effects of piecemeal reforms, which can blunt feeling-thoughts toward the need for transformation by appeasing subgroups of land recipients (see Franco and Borras, 2021, pp. 36–41). As Thiesenhusen (1995, p. 196) argues:

> *[R]eform, especially that which satisfies the peasant's overt demand for land on a piecemeal basis whenever it appears, resembles counterinsurgency—an effort to buy off or co-opt peasants—more than it looks like a well designed program that is beneficial to poor rural people.*

Solidarity among various "stake-non-holders"[3] is thus key to integral land reform, in order to build the wide coalition necessary to force a deeper change. Today, wide swaths of rural and urban peoples face poverty, displacement, dependence, and political impotence. Low wages, evictions, precarious employment, and the disempowering two-party duopoly are rooted in dynamics of proletarianization and loss of means of subsistence, privatization of common goods and spaces, individualization of collective existence, financialization of everything, and alienation of politics to corrupted and seemingly intractable political structures. Linking rural issues and constituencies to their urban counterparts requires facing such dynamics, and indicates food movements should engage more with (among others) autonomous tenant unions, Black and Indigenous-led space occupations (Ramírez, 2020), resurgent labor organizers, and groups on the margins of the formal economy (Weeks, 2023).[4]

This raises the challenge of bridging the "what is" of the political economy and "what ought to be" of a functional agroecological society. Many challenges can be expected in any path of reform: elite capture, reactionary responses, and the pitting of constituencies against one another. Perhaps not enough has changed since 1975 to alter a general pessimism that "it may well be too late to build a society based on democratic egalitarian and ecological principles" (Barnes, 1975, p. xii). But that remains, today, "the goal of the American land reform movement," if there is one or were to be one.

A very short discussion of contemporary efforts on land issues

There's good news and bad news when it comes to contemporary treatment of the land question. The bad news is that traditional land-oriented farm movements, government initiatives, and research fall short of approaching the depth, intensity, or rigor that transformative land reform would demand. Traditional organizations like the American Farmland Trust continue with market-friendly and relatively ineffectual preservationist agendas, while groups like California FarmLink continue to find opportunities for aspiring farmers at the whims of existing landowners who are willing and able to enter into farmland transition arrangements.[5] Government policy at the state level continues to largely be about tax incentives to encourage land transfer and easements to support ecological agricultural uses. Such approaches, both longstanding ones like California's Williamson Act, and newer laws focusing on urban lands for agriculture, have spotty records in achieving their stated goals of preserved farmland or access for farmers (Havens and Roman-Alcalá, 2016). Critical scholarship that focuses on agrarian land issues while theorizing the rethinking of property is minimal, and there's little debate on U.S. land reform compared with development studies of the global "peripheries" (also known as the "Majority World"), where land politics are a fixture (e.g., the 2010s "Global Land Grabs" literature).[6]

The good news is there are signs of a growing awareness of the need to tackle land, and increasing radicality in

3. Terminology note: The term "stakeholder" refers to colonizing behaviors, driving stakes into land claims, and thus being recognized as a rightful owner. It's not the biggest issue we face, but we may be better off finding different language to describe relevant constituencies to land reform (Reed, 2022).

4. See Autonomous Tenants Union Network (https://atunrsia.org/), Myers and Sbicca (2015), or the ways Brazilian landless movements include urban "surplus populations" (Wittman, 2009).

5. I'd like to acknowledge that as a traditionally white-serving organization, FarmLink has been dedicating more resources to BIPOC farmers, including a greater emphasis on providing capital, not just land access.

6. In addition to focusing on the U.S. case, more analysis should apply domestically insights from global land politics.

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how this is to be done, which I believe stems from an increase in approaching land through the lens of historical—and ongoing—injustice. In terms of movement and policy, we've seen calls for "#LandBack" to Indigenous communities lead to local government efforts to do just that (Pieratos et al., 2020). At the national level, the 2022 Justice for Black Farmers Act introduced by Senator Booker proposes a suite of interventions in land policy to benefit Black farmers in particular and "socially disadvantaged" farmers in general (Pahnke and Treakle, 2023). In scholarship, more work is beginning to focus both on challenging status quo property norms in thought, law, and politics, and on the radical rethinking demanded by diverse BIPOC and grassroots movements. This is exemplified by the diverse communities contributing to the aforementioned "Land Justice" edited collection (Williams and Holt-Giménez, 2017). All these indicate there is a change afoot: A new willingness to look toward structural changes after decades of piecemeal reform. This is an exciting development!

Less recognized explanations for land reform's lack

Here I address explanations other than the obvious: the relative lack of constituencies for rural land reform, relative to past U.S. conditions. This lack combines with its corollary of lowered societal knowledge of and interest in rural land economies to create a weak prospect for strong movements in favor of land reform. Yet as has been outlined by others, plenty of smaller constituencies *could* be rallied behind a land reform agenda, given political efforts to weave them together and grow them. This problem remains central, and the solutions remain the same as always: organize, educate, and agitate. A particular need is to develop among rural *and* urban people a collective self-image as "landless," and thus "placeless." Besides its material importance—general conditions of landlessness subject people to the harms of industrial-capitalist agriculture and the whims of the unjust job economy—placelessness leaves people bereft of meaningful and embodied connections to the places they live. It severs the potential for recreating anew society's relationship to nonhuman nature. Developing a sense of "landlessness" can seed the awareness that society's structure starts with lack of democratic access to land as a means of production and belonging (rather than as a financial asset).

Multigenerational anti-communism

The Unites States has seen generations of anti-communist (anti-anarchist, anti-socialist[7]) cultural and political interventions. These counterattacks have further sanctified the private property regime of the settler colony, making it unthinkable to propose state interventions in land markets that go against generic capitalist ideologies or specific capitalist interests.[8] A result is that farmer movements in the United States have often distanced themselves from the ideas and demands of farmer movements in the Majority World, who have been much more ready to declare visions of a communist future, or have fought against capitalist norms of liberal individual land rights (see Wolf, 1969, for a detailed discussion of peasants' roles in the major socialist revolutions of the 20th century). The successful efforts of anti-communism have compromised and often precluded potential alliances between U.S.-based social movements and their international counterparts over the past hundred years, in contrast to earlier waves of global movement when worker internationalism included—de facto—peasants.

In considering debates on political–economic orders, we cannot forget the fundamental nature of private property as theft, an idea one might attribute to Proudhon, Marx, or various Indigenous critiques (Nichols, 2020). Anti-communism as an ideology includes rejection of so-called "primitive communism"—the ways Indigenous economies were organized, generally and notably in more egalitarian and ecologically beneficial ways. It is not calling up a "noble savage" narrative to admit this historical reality: evidence abounds in ethnobotany, archaeology, and anthropology (Anderson, 2005; Akins and Bauer, 2021; Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). We don't know if modern sustainable land use at large could have emerged from these traditions, because they were actively suppressed, their practitioners genocided and assimilated (especially in settler colonies like the United States). When we witness (eco)modernist, conservative, and even supposedly socialist "revolutionary" arguments against "primitive" forms of communal, relational land use, we should see these as coterminous with capitalist, anti-communist ideology.

Socialism rose over the long 19th century, emerging primarily in Europe as a movement against church, capital, and oppressive authority (Van der Linden, 2022). But modern socialism had non-European influences from its beginning, and it spread to much of the world. Out of these transnational links, it evolved, often combining Enlightenment ideas with anti-colonial nationalism. Socialism has always addressed issues of land, as peasants from Russia and France to Mexico and the Philippines have fought for the overthrow of their exploitation by lords, capitalists, and other landholding elites, against the concentration of land and power among churches, and against the ways that the emerging modern political form of the nation-state colluded with capitalists to exploit, extract, invade, conscript, and accumulate. Although socialism was a broad movement with various internal debates and tensions, its broad adoption across the globe was certainly a "specter" haunting more than

7. Length limits preclude a deeper discussion on varieties of communist–socialist–anarchist thought and movement. Suffice it to say that all these left-wing sectors have been attacked.

8. U.S. rural movements have included reactionary, white supremacist elements that oppose socialism while proclaiming anti-state sentiments. Such sentiments superficially match those of libertarian socialists (anarchists), but lack the latter's equal rejection of capitalism, social hierarchies, and relations of domination.

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just Europe (see Van der Linden, 2022, for histories of early socialism).

This threat led to the first intense U.S. "Red Scare," which occurred at the turn of the 20th century and heightened in reaction to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. This period of intensive government repression in concert with vigilante, "bottom-up" violence effectively dismantled the highly successful revolutionary union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW was one of the major forces organizing rural, mining, and agricultural workers across the U.S. West—and they were one of the few labor unions at the time to organize across racial divides. They are also a great example of how older U.S. movements could address the here-and-now of working-class needs (such as wage increases), while advancing a political critique of the system itself (wage labor), and generating buy-in from masses of diverse people for an alternative world (socialist, run by workers, anti-racist). Radical leftists of the IWW (especially anarchists) faced deportations, show trials, and "anti-espionage" legislation that outlawed their soapbox oratory and political organizing (White, 2022). The IWW survives today and includes organizers among fast-food workers, but its suppression was one defeat among many for the vitality of U.S. socialist unions.

Anti-communism never fully retreated from the 1910s to the 1950s. The interwar period saw Black-led anticolonial and transnational land and labor struggles usurped into "race-liberal" thinking and policy that could deny socialist desires (Ayazi, 2022). In the 1930s capitalist elites had to fight against surging Communist party organizing among farmworkers and others, reaching its zenith in that decade; the agitation from which generated the political conditions for the New Deal. But it was the midcentury Red Scares characterized by the McCarthy witch-hunts and House Un-American Activities Committee that helped create a long lull in the U.S.-focused radicalism (Cornell, 2016). In this period, anti-communism built heavily on its tried-and-true methods of anti-Blackness and racialization as mutually reinforcing tools to mobilize ideological opposition and ground troops to suppress and co-opt insurgency (Burden-Stelly, 2017).

We should keep in mind the interactive nature of radical politics between the imperial Minority World countries (among which the United States is central) and the global periphery. The threat of communist insurgency domestically has always been linked to uprisings elsewhere, especially in the decolonizing regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Hence, the substantial and decades-long investment of the U.S. government in anti-independence interventions: the CIA, by some counts, contributed to the prevention or overthrow of 60–80 progressive, democratic, or socialist governments abroad (Levin, 2019; O'Rourke, 2020). These coincided with domestic counterinsurgency—from infiltration to outright assassination—against political radicals, especially Black and Indigenous efforts, as exposed in the FBI's Cointelpro papers. The student unrest of the 1960s, especially, generated renewed vigor from right-wing leaders to promote a law-and-order crackdown response, as exemplified by Ronald Reagan as California governor (and later, president). The legacy of hard on crime rhetoric and its mobilization against any leftist agitation in the United States is quite alive today.[9]

The post-1960s era saw an explosion in "food movements" shaped by the counterculture, back to the land initiatives, and continuities of earlier struggles (such as U.S. Southern Black farmer cooperatives and Southwestern efforts to defend traditional collective water management acequia systems). While the larger multifaceted capital-M "Movement" of the 1960s included multiracial internationalism, food movements over the following decades were increasingly characterized by domestic environmentalist, consumerist, and white middle-class considerations. Many (mostly white) "family farmers" lost their farms when both land values and commodity prices plummeted at a time of high farm debt levels and interest rates, their progressive organizations lost political influence, and those movements' erstwhile members were enrolled in increasingly right wing rural political organizing (aided by the racist, xenophobic rhetoric of politicians). Tensions still remain between overlapping liberal and right-wing movement elements, and the more radical, socialist, and internationalist roots of food and farm reform, whether focused on land or labor.

What does this multigenerational anti-communism lead to? I suggest today's weakness of radical visions and demands vis-à-vis land, food, farming is causally rooted in this history. This weakness manifests in ideological and infrastructural registers: a lack of ideological development, imagination, or clarity with regard to political horizons, and a lack of organizational infrastructures (whether socialist parties, mutual aid societies, radical labor unions, or other elements of the strong left of the turn of the century). In the absence of such a strong left, today we have a plethora of narrow-scope nonprofit organizations (NPOs), a consistently anti-radical and demobilizing Democratic Party, and neoliberal identity politics representing the horizon of what "radical" politics can mean.[10] Today's U.S. food movements lack a communist regard for building working-class power to overthrow the capitalist system in its entirety, as existed among the IWW, the "Magonista" rural workers who built the Mexican Revolution, the Black Panthers organizing free breakfast programs, or the Indonesian peasant masses massacred in the U.S.-supported "Jakarta Strategy." Such regard has been almost universally replaced by advocacy for reforms.

At the same time, food and farm formations have lost much of the internationalism and global-historical ambitions of previous movements, with notable exceptions. The *Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy* and *Pesticide*

9. Also, research shows the interactive, linked nature of counterinsurgency techniques, as U.S. police forces and militarized forces abroad share equipment, techniques, and strategies (Schrader, 2019).

10. To be clear, I am not arguing for class "over" identity. I'm merely noting the ease of "elite capture" of left identity politics away from its radical, socialist origins and its subsequent replacement of solidarity with competition (among working-class groups), and of attacks on oppressive systems with aspirations to join those systems.

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Action Network-North America maintain visions for agroecology in the United States that are linked to opposing ongoing U.S. imperialism via trade policy. U.S.-based *A Growing Culture* works to share narratives from the Majority World while influencing Minority World food movements to adopt more consciously anti-imperial politics. *La Vía Campesina* has its North American chapter, whose organizations work mainly domestically but maintain spaces of dialogue with partners abroad. Still, these kinds of efforts are in the minority.

Structural limitations of the liberal political—economic order under capitalism

One of the most pernicious barriers to change in food systems reform movements is the price parity paradox. Put simply, within a capitalist economy, any entity producing products for a market must contend with competition in that market, and conducting a farm business in a more ethical manner with regard to environment and labor is bound to cost more, compared with a less ethical approach. This means that "good" farm products become less accessible to working and lower-income people, creating a tension between parity for farmers or accessibility for consumers, and sustainability and justice in production.

This relates to land reform insofar as such dynamics are the foundation upon which decisions about land management/stewardship are made. Without a decommodification of agriculture or reduction in the pressures of market forces on food producer decisions, there is little chance of systemic transition in the treatment of land or labor. Integral agrarian reform, of a kind which greatly shifts the calculus of land tenure, could increase these chances. Yet existing values-driven farmers are busy trying to make the economics of "alternative" agriculture work, which itself reduces their incentives to pursue land reform (which for obvious reasons is seen as more difficult and ambitious, and less realistic).

There is also an uncomfortable force in contemporary food movements: the classed economic interests of farmers as landowners (even "alternative" ones). Insofar as farm movements are farmer-serving, and farmers are largely landowners (a dynamic that varies regionally), they are less likely to challenge property and tax law that encourages expansion, acquisition, and ever-increasing land values (Buttel, 1984, p. 67). The importance of land markets and those increasing values is shown in the absorption of alternative desires into conventional markets and industrial methods, due largely to land market pressures (Guthman, 2004). But this also goes beyond farmers, as possessing land property as a means of economic security appeals to existing owners, but also the lower classes, even if it remains often out of reach to them. Land-as-property remains strong as an ideology and as a structural fact defended by many, even if underclasses would likely benefit materially if it were challenged.

It could be argued that strong antitrust action might reduce the impacts of agribusiness, and this does form one aspect of existing food movements across the right-to-left political spectrum. Yet antitrust government action has been limited since its legislative origins in the earlier 20th century, especially against agribusinesses and especially since the 1980s, and has been ineffectual at arresting the continued consolidation and vertical integration of meat conglomerates, seed and chemical input industries, and food retailers. Some would blame this inadequacy on technical issues in enforcing antitrust law, but I would suggest they go deeper than that, because of the systemic collusion of state actors and capitalists. Reforms do happen, but they are pushed back easily by capital interests under routine state-capital collaboration. Polanyi (1944) presented this idea as the "double movement" toward and away from reforms. The historical record does not, unfortunately, lend itself to a clear case where the "arc of history bends towards justice." There is more wealth consolidation today and less antitrust success than there was in even the U.S. "Gilded Age." Some might blame such dynamics (in food/farm sectors) on the desire of politicians for both economic growth and cheap food for the masses. Whatever your preferred explanation, the situation remains one where quotidian liberal capitalist political economy avoids systemic change quite effectively. Recent work on food sovereignty policy internationally shows little success in steering toward a new agrarian political economy via state-oriented reform even with leftist administrations, making it hard to advocate for changes in law and policy as the way toward land reform in more regressive political environments like today's United States (Vergara-Camus and Kay, 2017; Giraldo and McCune, 2019; Tilzey, 2019). Yet, many would argue that the state remains essential: "all successful redistributive land reforms required a state to expropriate land from powerful elites, whether these elites agreed or not" (Franco and Borras, 2021, p. 18). The U.S. state's reticence thus is a major barrier to land reformers.

Not wishing to give an unduly one-sided analysis of liberal capitalist structures, we might also point out the failures of alternative forms of economic organization within the larger U.S. economic structure. In particular, co-op models have been tried many times in alternative agricultural movements in the United States, and many (if not most) of these projects have failed. Part of this widespread inertia results from the price parity tension, and part stems from the lack of structural support for cooperative rather than capitalistic models of business. For instance, I learned through my work supporting grassroots environmental justice organizers that the California Department of Agriculture had not one staff member versed in cooperatives, and was thus unable to support those organizers in their project development (not to mention that state funding often does not reach cooperative business formations). But frankly, cooperatives also have failed because of the difficulty in managing economics collectively, especially when so many co-op founders and participants are novices in this area.

These two factors together—decades of racialized anticommunism and the regular and self-stabilizing operation of the political–economy—have generated a status quo with little space for ambitious agendas like land reform.

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Yet there are other reasons and dynamics, and historical lessons to take, to which I now turn.

What other dynamics keep land reform off the agenda of U.S. agrarian and food movements?

A larger scholarly project is needed to deeply consider where land reforms *have* occurred and what political conditions enabled them. Here, I can only offer a truncated, selective discussion of U.S. agrarian movement history, with one key lesson (of the many possible).

When we look at the more successful movements for land reform through U.S. history, going back to the agrarian Populists and Grange organizations of the 1800s, we see "a magical formula [of tactics]: economic self-organization, cooperation, and mutual aid; no involvement in legislative electoral politics but militancy on social and economic issues" (Wilson, 2003). Key features of that militancy included strikes and blockades, instances where everyday people withdraw their consent and interfere with the normal working of society. These disruptive tactics were essential, in addition to any use of petitional, electoral, educational, or reform-oriented tactics. Such approaches continued throughout the turn of the century's labor upheavals, the decade and a half of the IWW's sudden rise, and with the 1930s "Farmers Holiday" movements of the Midwest, agitation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (Gilbert and Brown, 1981), and striking Communist farm workers in California (Olmsted, 2015; Montenegro de Wit et al., 2021). In the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, such tactics could be seen in the 1960s rebellions among Indigenous people, including the occupations at Wounded Knee and Alcatraz Island, and in more recent anti-oil-pipeline struggles (Chua and Bosworth, 2023). There were also strikes among the UFW's farmworker base, direct actions among the "family farm" movements of the 1980s, and mutual aid efforts of "food conspiracies" and farm equipment co-ops like those of the National Land for People movement in California (Welch, 2017). Although the details of course vary among these and other instances of land agitation (and contrary to Wilson's claim, not all groups rejected negotiation with state forces), there is a common thread among these of direct actions that confront and threaten economic and political elites while creating practical alternatives. This matches research on major policy changes in the country beyond land, as in the work of Piven and Cloward (1977).

Hence, I work from the perception that policy change tends to follow from social movement agitation, alternative institution building, and disruptive forms of grassroots action. If we acknowledge that land reform entails a massive transformation of society away from current patterns of landownership and dominant ideologies of property, it therefore requires big shifts in political institutions that generally resist changes to these. If we acknowledge that such transformations to the state are most likely with some degree of grassroots agitation that disrupts the regular function of society, then the question of why land reform is so absent in the United States also points to certain organizational, ideological, and political–economic constraints on those forms of action and their legitimacy. While disruptive action is not the *only* tactic necessary, and is not in itself necessarily *sufficient* (indeed, one must admit that reactions of the powerful to disruption can either aid or compromise movement momentum), the contrast between previous rounds of struggle *inclusive of* such action, and more contemporary approaches to land issues that *rarely include* disruptive action, is worth considering.[11]

For any major land reform, there needs to be a true threat to elite power. Ideally, such a threat is linked to wide and committed networks of advocates, educators, and would-be reform beneficiaries. In the absence of such networks, it may seem foolish to call for radical land reforms. And so, among other dynamics, I look below at the factors that preclude such approaches.

Organizational

In what is by now a well-trod argument (INCITE!, 2017), we can point to the organizational constraints on the disruptive tactics and transformative ambition necessary to a land reform movement's likely success. These are the results of nonprofit social movement structures, or what has been called the "nonprofit industrial complex" (NPIC). The NPIC is not only counterrevolutionary in overt ideological terms, bending movements to the ideologies of funders, but also more basically, by keeping organizations chasing immediate and practical outcomes, to the detriment of larger scale aspirations and campaigns of disruption. When projects need to be planned, reports need to be written, funding needs to be secured, donor preferences must be complied with, and organizational needs are prioritized, there is little time left for long-term thinking, let alone thinking directed toward overhauling the societal structures of property.

These days there seem to be NPOs for each and every constituency: young farmers, Black farmers, farmworkers, urban farms, organic-loving consumers, anti-GMO, environmental critics of industrial agriculture, and so on. The nonprofitization of movements is ubiquitous and seemingly inescapable (see Beam, 2017). The idea that across these constituencies "food movements [could] unite" (Holt-Giménez, 2011) is a good one—but is it really happening? Some might argue that some convergence is taking place around racial injustice, as seen in coalitions like the HEAL Food Alliance, which links health, environmental, agricultural, and labor issues via a consciously anti-racist analysis of the food system and politics. Groups like HEAL exhibit a tendency more commonly seen in recent decades: a measure of radical rhetoric around issues of inequality, race, and social movement-driven change. Yet, in practice and policy, nonprofits like HEAL tend to push for politically possible reforms. Their radical rhetoric serves as framing, while the real work of such groups is pragmatically advancing worthwhile changes (via what they view as politically possible reforms) while

11. To be clear, I agree with Chua and Bosworth (2023) that we should not fetishize disruptive action or prioritize it above all else.

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maintaining themselves as organizations. "Realism" is embedded structurally in operating nonprofits, regardless of their operators' actual ambitions.

Separate from questions of the nonprofit form are those about whether the people of disparate food movements are ready to take up large-scale land access, were it to be offered. Generally speaking movements lack the skills and practice in economic cooperativism that might enable effective use of opportunities for land access that arise. There are few ready, would-be land stewards who are experienced in the cooperative structures—or who even are familiar with cooperative alternatives due to the anti-communism mentioned previously—required for less capitalist and beyond-family-farm production units called for by many movements. Institutions and infrastructures to take on new cooperative forms of land stewardship are just now appearing, and are not strong or deeply rooted.

Ideological

Ideologically, the U.S. populace is constricted by a belief in capitalist realism, that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to the liberal-democratic status quo. Alkon and Guthman (2017, p. 319) invoke TINA to insist that food movements reject a fixation on *only somewhat effective* "alternative economies" (e.g., farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture models, volunteer-driven urban farms) and re-orient toward contesting state politics. But the consistently co-opting, de-radicalizing force of the U.S. state may be one of the greatest impediments to major alternatives coming about. This means land reform requires ideologies that can simultaneously push on the state for reforms while not operating within a reformist mindset: a challenging balance to attain.

The regular working of policymaking tends to reproduce hegemonic ideologies, wherein structural momentum reproduces the worst of the existing property system, even while advocates work incredibly hard to advance small but important changes here and there. Especially important are defensive measures that avoid deepened dispossession, such as the work on "Heirs' Property" to protect Black farmers from further land loss (NFFC, 2023). Groups like NFFC are actively working on national policy campaigns to combat corporate speculation on land, and NYFC has the "Million Acres" campaign intended to transfer farmland to young farmers through a diversity of policy mechanisms. A strategic consideration is how to mount defensive campaigns that can simultaneously build alignment across constituencies toward constructive, but also visionary, aims (as has been seen historically in the IWW and contemporarily in Indonesia and elsewhere; see Gilbert, 2020), rather than limit to reformism. Cycles of debate around the U.S. federal Farm Bill exemplify the ways that reformist "realpolitik" forms an ever-present pull on erstwhile land reform advocates, and some would claim that the 2018 Farm Bill had important wins (like on Heirs Property). Still, paltry receptivity to land reform on Capitol Hill means that groups playing the insider game must play it over the long haul and with great uncertainty about how to parlay small wins into the kinds of transformative policy needed to make change at the scale and speed we need (see Pahnke and Treakle, 2023, for details on what the authors claim are anti-racist innovations advanced via that insider game).

My research on BIPOC food movements shows that often, real-world experiences and intergenerational cultural–political traditions can engender skepticism of the state. Such skepticism sometimes leads movement actors away from investing in campaigns to influence the state. And yet, land reform at some point seems like it would require state action. Conversely, those who believe in the validity of the state (as neutral arbiter of social issues) are more likely to believe in working for piecemeal reforms. Thus, these latter actors will be more likely to make deals with the powerful, and less likely to hold out for more ambitious "unrealistic" goals, or to support obstreperous parts of the movement along the way.

TINA might be seen as a simple outcome of the generational anti-communism mentioned above, but it's not only that people deny *particular* alternatives to capitalism ("democratic socialism," "communism," or "anarchism"), but that they believe the status quo is inevitable, even if it doesn't work for them or they believe in the necessity of alternatives. Belief that no alternative *could* come about is one of the biggest barriers to even discussing challenging political goals like land reform. One result is resignation that the only way to achieve any societal change is through tweaks to capitalism or the liberal-state regime that manages it, or that only small changes are possible. Capitalist realism precludes the possibility that society could be substantially different, including land relations beyond the public/private property dichotomy, or governance possibilities beyond the capitalist nation-state.

Counterinsurgent violence and co-optation

Governmental counterinsurgency is a key element of the political–economy that prevents the rise of a movement for land reform. This ranges from co-optation efforts to direct suppression of upstart movements. The recent movement to Defend the Atlanta Forest (from the proposed development of "Cop City," a militarized police training facility) shows the depth to which questioning land use decisions (in this case, decisions by governments) is responded to with extreme force (CrimethInc, 2023). Though the movement does not call for land reform, per se, land defenders have been faced with arrest and charges of terrorism for attending events on public land, and one young environmentalist was murdered by police—both elements of a counterinsurgency attempt to dissuade further dissent. This short example shows that the kind of disruption that pressures elites for reforms will not receive a fair response from those elites.

But counterinsurgency also and always includes elements of co-optation and pretensions of including dissenting voices. Since the George Floyd uprisings of 2020, "DEI" (diversity, equity, inclusion) work has become a cottage industry, propping up institutional re-brands as newly concerned with racial inequalities. Yet, as critical abolitionist scholar Rodriguez (2020, 2022) argues, DEI acts as an element of a broader effort of counterinsurgency that uses reform as a cudgel against more demanding radical visions

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of change and the future. This indicates why narrowly racialist or identitarian framing of land reform is problematic: pitting land claimants against each other by identity metrics, rather than a broadly framed lack of access that implicates society more broadly and forces discussion of structural impediments, is not a winning strategy. Of course, we must also always elevate inequities in informing reform approaches: This is emphatically *not* a denial of the particular needs or demands of certain groups. But land reform supporters must be careful about how they frame racialized inequalities in land control, lest they be more easily absorbed into counterinsurgent efforts.

Toward a U.S. food movement that centers land reform

Generating movement toward land reform requires a building of *values-based commitment* among individuals and political groupings, who rely on relevant *data* to make compelling political arguments, forming into resilient *networks* of mutual support, and—through ever-expanding *circles of solidarity* and political alignment—build the momentum and disruptive power needed to gain state concessions or achieve land reforms by other means. I end with some ideas on each aspect, and an imagined path that could suture them together.

Data

Data by itself are insufficient to move toward a land reform agenda. Ultimately, land politics are more so a matter of power than of truth. Still, we must gather and utilize data on landownership, use, inequalities, and impacts. Understanding current land-owning patterns is difficult, as ownership records differ widely across jurisdictions, and ownership lines are often convoluted, partly due to legal incorporation methods (e.g., Limited Liability Corporations, or LLCs) that obscure lines of ownership (Shade and Van Sant, 2023).

Targeting particular landlords can be a strategic form of research and can link with active campaigns. For instance, the 20th-century machinations of California's Central Valley land magnate J.G. Boswell has been investigated in detail (Arax and Wartzman, 2005). What is less known is how Boswell's agribusiness continues to control local land and water politics to its benefit, against poor communities of color. Flooding from successive storms in early 2023 was redirected by the company toward the Black community of Allensworth, reportedly in order to protect its own fields in time to plant government insurance-protected tomato crops (Henry, 2023). These sorts of actions by large landowners must be continually investigated and exposed and linked to alternatives. Beyond individual landlords, more generally it is important to continue the tradition of "studying up," and exposing how and where the powerful are exerting unethical and harmful influence on society. Landownership is a key part of this (e.g., NFFC, 2023), but so are ownership of resources such as water and mineral rights, relations among political and economic elites, and the ways that non-elites are absorbed into the campaigns and interests of elites in order to avoid society-imposed redistribution.

Another important research agenda is to more clearly investigate the limits of existing policy reforms regarding land. For instance, the previously mentioned incentives-based programs with weak track records of creating changes.[12] Researchers can be building the case against inadequate reforms, alongside finding potential places to improve them—but should not sacrifice the former for the latter. Related to the previous point on studying up, research on failed land policies/approaches needs to also address the class politics that influence policies in ways ranging from overt to subtle. More critical research on the Farm Bureau, for instance, might link questions of lobby power, who existing reforms benefit, and why reforms look as they do.

Last, in terms of the data needed to move toward land reform politics, is the low-hanging fruit of sharing existing knowledge on the dynamics and histories of land reform within and outside the United States. U.S. movements can and must learn from social movement success in keeping land reform on the agenda (from Mexico and Brazil to Indonesia and Zimbabwe) and governmental efforts to enact reforms (among other examples, in South Korea, Pakistan, and Japan). Modern syntheses of existing research would especially be useful in generating general public understanding on the issues if published in more popular venues and media.

Commitments and values

The last point on data leads to this one: A land reform agenda requires profound change in "hearts and minds" about the need for—and possibility of—transformative land reform. Land reform needs to be made less scary, and more reasonable. For precedent in this difficult task, we might look to the example of white anti-racism: While such attitudinal change is difficult to engender in white populations, it is not impossible. The building of "agrarian citizenship" and working-class self-identification as landless (including among urbanites) are key areas of work (Bowness, 2021).

Part of this attitudinal change will be based in a clear and positive vision of the future society that land reforms could generate. Movements for land reform cannot be only reactive and problem-focused. They must incorporate art, visionary notions, even aspects of utopianism (Albero, 2019). Utopian visions are an antidote to the relentless capitalist realism and limited options peddled by political representatives that delimit what activists "can" think. These days, those who are building such visions are more often "SolarPunk" YouTubers, on-the-ground land projects, and obstreperous land defenders—like those around the country currently working against Cop City, anti-ecological border walls, oil pipelines, new lithium mines, and nuclear waste disposal.[13] There are also those sectors maintaining

12. One might consider that such studies' authors should push back on funders of the research, including the USDA, asking them for support to move well beyond such obviously failed approaches.

13. See https://www.youtube.com/c/Andrewism, https://www.shelterwoodcollective.org/, https://communitymovementbuilders.org/stop-cop-city/.

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specific Indigenous, migrant, Black, Latinx, Asian, queer, and other experience-based imaginaries of different land, political, economic relations—these are critical resources for building land reform constituencies and visions of a land reformed future. Reparations is a particularly urgent framework to envision, debate, develop, and promote (which I come back to in the conclusion). As mentioned, such visions must also speak to urban people, as land reform implicates housing access, environmental outcomes, and development at large—not just agrifood systems.

To build commitment and values for land reform, our efforts must also seek to connect internationally, utilizing and contributing to the travel of concepts and frameworks across myriad boundaries. That this has already been the case with concepts like food sovereignty and climate justice gives hope for similar dynamics to land reform coming into the U.S. context. However, with Via Campesina operating from a very Majority World-focused imagination of land issues (see Roman-Alcalá, 2015), and Northern constituencies reluctant to take on "land reform," more work is needed to clarify land politics and strategy even within food sovereignty and climate justice movements. U.S. movements need to ask themselves: What is land reform and (why) do we need it? What values should it embody? How would we get there?

Networks

A complex mesh of social sectors (researchers, social movement groups, government agencies, NPOs, and private businesses) make up the field where land reform is advanced or suppressed. With such a diverse set of actors and interests, contradictions within and between these sectors are bound to appear. I have discussed, for instance, the contradictions between governmental agents and movements, or between established NPOs and unaffiliated grassroots efforts; more attention is paid lately to tensions between marginalized practitioners of agroecology and more privileged researchers. But rather than interpret contradictions in order to vouch simplistically for change emerging from one or the other sector, the first step to orient existing networks toward land reform is to recognize, work with, and seek to minimize the harm these contradictions can cause.

Taking a cue from my previous research that shows how racial influences can radicalize food movement politics, I'd propose that attending to marginalized sectors (e.g., BIPOC, undocumented, queer) can elevate radical demands like land reform. But we cannot allow a focus on particular segments of the population to obscure the class analysis or revolutionary ambition required for transformative land reform. This means we cannot limit ourselves to politics that focuses exclusively on one or another oppressed group. Organizational spaces and initiatives for specific groups are essential, but so is the linkage between groups. Connecting across groups also implies connecting issue areas (e.g., farm justice with anti-mining and urban housing access groups), as land reform proponents have argued (Van Sant, 2019). In 2019 a collaborative of land justice-focused organizers did just that, coming together to create a "100-year vision" for land justice, asking:

> *Could we deepen relationships between housing justice groups working to prevent evictions, expand rent control, and develop long-term solutions to displacement; indigenous-led organizations working to protect sacred sites and reclaim traditional lands; and food and farm justice organizations working to localize food systems, support sustainable agriculture, and transform farmland access, stewardship, and ownership . . . ?* (SELC, 2019)

To unify wider networks, more mainstream organizations must become more radical, through questioning themselves, studying radical history, and opening up to "utopianism" and more diverse tactics than their current portfolio. This has occurred to some limited extent with environmental groups. But counterinsurgency still reigns supreme, especially in reaction to disruptive tactics by unaffiliated masses. At the least, larger, more well-funded, and more reformist organizations could accept (if not actively support) the role of such disruptive action (as has been seen promisingly in the Stop Cop City movement). On the other side, radical organizations might move toward the mainstream, by being willing to engage problematic institutions and processes rather than holding onto radicalism as a moral shield and security blanket. Both of these moves, ideological and practical, can build more mutually supportive networks toward land reform.

In thinking about networks, we should consider the governmental factor, wherein the *adoption* of movement demands (sometimes by state actors who used to be part of social movements) are also processes of *absorption* that can undermine larger movement goals. People motivated authentically from inside government will push for changes, but these will likely seem inadequate or disappointing to those on the outside, with potentially demobilizing consequences. These contradictory dynamics have no easy solution but must be considered in building networks.

Lastly, building toward land reform requires better global integration, and actually listening to Majority World social movements demands, in order to advocate more forcefully domestically. As an example, we might consider the debates on a "Green New Deal," and the relative lack of attention in these to global calls for repayment of historical ecological debt from Minority to Majority worlds (Ajl, 2021). Leaving aside such considerations reduces the chances that a U.S. land reform movement maintains strengthening ties to allied movements abroad.

Momentum

As alluded to, action by government, civil society, independent farmers, worker organizations, and allied researchers will better succeed if conducted in more overtly interactive, communicative, and collectively strategized ways. This entails making more common the

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explicit disclosure of theories of change, values, and assumptions among these players. Broadly speaking, this practice would develop more self-conscious and integrated inside/outside strategies, with (I would assert) a greater focus on disruption as a currently missing piece. The alignment of ideas and solidarity in practice among the constituencies I've mentioned can lead to enlarging circles of "we"; greater feelings of belonging to that "we" in turn builds political force and mitigates against efforts to peel off any particular constituency on the winding, treacherous path toward reform.

Such a strategy does not require "masses" as in a majority of the population, but it certainly requires more than a 1% working-class minority. The fact is that other countries' land reforms took place in the context of having much larger peasant populations. Replicating the critical mass needed for effective disruption action in the United States will entail increased recruitment and mobilization of populations with much to gain from land reform. For instance, Latinx and Asian migrant populations that composes farm labor and small farmer sectors in some areas like California's Central Valley are a valuable group, as are the urban poor facing housing and employment insecurity. Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) offers inspiration here, in that their direct actions toward land reform have included both urban and rural people as participants and beneficiaries (Wittman, 2009, p. 124). The MST has built wide legitimacy throughout Brazilian society in part due to this wide base.

But reality is not pleasant, and the MST example also shows there will be resistance to land reform. We can expect those invested ideologically and materially in white supremacy, capitalism, and private property to respond legally, discursively, violently, and in combinations thereof. Because of the powerfully enduring cultural myths of property in the United States, even "actions to establish a strong public regulatory presence are bound to meet resistance" (Jacobs, 1998, p. 36).

Some ways forward: Reparations, visioning, and building land reform culture

Building toward land reform will involve structural and cultural changes, concrete and short-term goals but also increasingly ambitious expectations for change among diverse actors—all advanced by movements with ever-increasing solidarity and alignment.

One ambitious goal whose pursuit may build the necessary wider solidarity and alignment is achieving broad buy-in to land-focused reparations for Black and Indigenous people as a precondition and part of any worthwhile U.S. land reform agenda (with ramifications for other non-elites beyond those groups). Reparations may not be the vision or demand that farm movements currently rally around, but it should be, as it offers a constructive platform to build a new and larger "we" and greater identification as "landless." It can also build motivation by identifying the primary enemies of land reform. Without reparations forcing farm movements to confront internal differences on questions of racism and decolonization, land reform as motivating frame and as concrete proposal cannot mature into a more actionable form, suited to the U.S. context. That is, although reparations challenge a "race-blind" or "colonization-blind" approach to land issues that may be more comfortable to some sectors—such as white back-to-the-land ecofarmers—it is a pivotal concept and debate to advance. The current ecological farm sector, established advocacy organizations, and philanthropists especially must grapple with culpability and responsibility when discussing their own roles in historic harm, reparation, and land-focused demands. Ambitious demands like reparations operate as vehicles to develop self-awareness and united fronts as movements.

Such demands need not be oriented exclusively toward state institutions, and indeed should be rooted foremost in imaginative grassroots processes that elaborate longer-term visions beyond narrow "policy" horizons, such as the "100-year vision" described above. This visioning example shows the kind of concerted discussion of land reform that should be advanced by a diversity of sectors and organizations. Although I critique NPOs' weakness as sole change-making structures, prominent NPOs taking up the land reform frame, or even new NPOs formed specifically to advance it, would be useful to conducting visioning processes and building more unity on the issue. A resulting stronger, more ideologically cohesive movement ecology would better underpin any eventual pushes for policy. Such an ecology is stronger also insofar as its constituent elements have a material–spiritual basis in land and resources, like anti-pipeline struggles based in Native landholdings and farmers/ranchers defending territorial integrity (rather than relying mainly on NPO staff who are often salaried and urban). When movements work from a foundation of resource-based autonomy, they are better positioned to leverage policy opportunities without succumbing to governmental absorption, demobilization, or reducing visionary goals.

Still, different roles are needed—especially as specific movements seek to build momentum from smaller victories—to translate visions into actionable projects, campaigns, policies, and research questions. This is where "science for the people" has a role, as scholars and knowledge-makers (credentialed and otherwise) engage with movements, consider their work as political, and are willing to self-organize alongside other sectors. Efforts of many kinds—for example, local land rematriation to Indigenous nations, taking land out of speculation and into community-owned land trusts, building physical centers for political and technical training in agroecology—can articulate with the blockades and direct actions needed to attack concentrated power and pressure the powerful to concede power and resources. Movements can and should use any available means to create pockets of land reform culture, from individual farms to politicized land use sites, organizations, and even problematic institutions like universities.

To build this culture against legacies of anticommunism, renewed anti-capitalist and socialist political education and organization is also essential. Only in this way might a vision and culture of land reform flourish that starts with reparations but does not limit itself to Black

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and Indigenous people. Food, farming, forestry, fiber, natural medicine, and mutual aid programs that advance socialist critiques and proposals (not simply operating as "green businesses") all must be created, strengthened, and supported—especially (again) insofar as these integrate the material and ideological: connecting political formation to engagement with the land.

All of these processes could generate cultural change regarding the role of land in society, promoting land systems that provide for human needs regardless of capitalist markets, while challenging harmful ideologies of private property that remain dominant. With such cultural changes and the normalization of political ambitions for a transformed society where landless workers can become landed producers, where placelessness gives way to belonging, policy changes that do not simply reproduce the U.S. history of regressive land reforms become possible. From un-thunk to thinkable to possible to unavoidable: This is the only path by which land reform can emerge in the United States.

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Competing interests

None.

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