

PORK CHOP POLITICS:

Constructing Rural Economies and Imagining Alternatives

by

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Abstract

In 1992 Smithfield Foods opened the biggest hog processing plant in the world in Bladen County, North Carolina. This paper attempts to make sense of this reconfiguration of landscapes and livelihoods by examining how Smithfield became a commonsensical approach to economic development and job creation in a low-income rural region. I also examine how this approach worked in conjuncture with changing agro-food regimes to promote the emergence of N.C. Choices—a network that supports small-scale hog producers through training and marketing and connects them with processors, retailers, and consumers. Building on economic historian Karl Polanyi’s conceptions of embeddedness, I argue that whereas economic development vis-à-vis corporate hog production positions the economy as a dominant societal force, push backs like N.C. Choices work to re-embed the economy within society. My goal in exploring these dynamics is to place alternative agro-food debates within critical development studies and consider how the momentum of various movements—environmental, labor, and food justice—can be elaborated to rethink economic development strategies.

Acknowledgments

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Preface

As I exit the library the smell of barbeque wafts from across the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. On the central quad an undergraduate student group called FLO (Fair, Local, Organic) Foods has organized a “People, Pork, Power” demonstration and teach-in about Smithfield Foods.¹ Smithfield, the world’s largest and most profitable producer of pork, has a powerful presence in North Carolina where it dominates hog markets and operates the world’s biggest hog processing facility. The Tar Heel plant, located in eastern North Carolina, has gained national media attention as the site of one the longest standing labor disputes in U.S. history and persistent complaints of human rights abuses by workers. The FLO students are petitioning the university to stop carrying Smithfield products in the school cafeteria.

On the lawn about 300 people are gathered, eating and waiting in line for barbeque from a pig donated by local farmer Eliza McCain who raises heritage breed hogs in an intensive rotational grazing system. Students hold protest signs penned with slogans like, “Rather than creating healthy, sustainable employment, factory farms tend to create dangerous low paying jobs.” The line-up for the teach-in is unique in that it includes many of the people I have spent the last few months interviewing, and whose voices and fragmented stories bring this project to life—union organizers, environmental activists, community organizers, farmers, and the director of N.C. Choices, an initiative that supports small-scale hog producers and connects them to local markets. This event, in bringing together people who work on different facets of the same issue but rarely get to convene marks for me a moment of conjuncture and represents the tensions and hopes that are at the heart of this work—the imperative to grapple with systemic injustice and create alternative social and economic possibilities simultaneously. I offer an introduction to this paper by way of a few sound bites from the day that speak to the contradictions involved in doing just that:

“The system [intentional grazing system] has allowed me to give back to my soil and preserve the genetic integrity of rare breeds,” Eliza McCain, local farmer.

“It’s no mistake that all of these hogs are sitting in black communities...They tell people it’s going to be economic development—it’s going to be hard to find people that don’t go along with it. They knew to stop those hogs near the beach,” North Carolina Environmental Justice Network community organizer. Many confinement hog operations are located in low-income communities.

“We’re here to make the jobs better, we don’t want to put them out of business,” Libby Manly, United Food and Commercial Workers’ union organizer.

“You’ll know when you get to Duplin County. That’s another reason they brought me here, because I live there...policymakers look you in the face and say there’s not a problem...No one really wants to bow with the industry, they’re afraid, they have jobs with the industry—driving trucks, transporting animals,” Devon Hall, co-founder of Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help, a organization that runs health-watch campaigns to monitor the hog industry.

“All the change is happening in the marketplace...we need to pool resources and create demand,” Jennifer Curtis, project director N.C. Choices.

“The injustice is not just Smithfield, but the way the state handled the investigation,” UNC-Chapel Hill student, whose 25-year-old cousin Glen Birdsong died at the Smithfield Tar Heel plant when he was exposed to fumes while working on a tanker hose. “He wasn’t trained to do the job,” she said. OSHA fined Smithfield \$4,323 for Birdsong’s death. His family has received no compensation from Smithfield for his death.

Introduction

In 1992, Smithfield Foods, Inc., opened the world's biggest hog processing plant in Bladen County in eastern North Carolina. At the time, government officials had flagged Bladen County as one of fourteen counties in the "Corridor of Concern," a strip of low-population, high-poverty counties stretching from Virginia to South Carolina, east of I-95 and west of the coast. Local economic developers praised the plant as a "godsend," a "real win" for the county, and as "a ripple effect [that] keeps going."² What some hailed as an economic savior, others denounced as an environmental and labor nightmare, yet debates at the time spoke little to alternative development possibilities. Since then, hog populations in eastern North Carolina have skyrocketed from 2 to 10 million, and it just outpaced Iowa as the top hog producing state in the nation.³ However, the first-place crowning comes with 19 million tons of hog waste that leaches into groundwater and causes airborne contamination. And the plant, which now employs 5,500 workers and slaughters 32,000 hogs per day, is also the site of one of the nation's longest standing labor disputes. Since the plant opened, the United Food and Commercial Workers have been trying unsuccessfully to organize a union.

This paper attempts to make sense of this reconfiguration of landscapes and livelihoods by examining how Smithfield became a commonsensical approach to economic development and job creation in a low-income rural region. I also examine how this approach worked in conjuncture with changing agro-food regimes (Friedmann and McMichael 1989) to promote the emergence of N.C. Choices—a network that supports small-scale hog producers through training and marketing and connects them with processors, retailers, and consumers. Building on Polanyi's conceptions of embeddedness, I argue that whereas economic development vis-à-vis corporate hog production positions the economy as a dominant societal force, push backs like N.C. Choices work to re-embed the economy within society. I investigate the process of making Smithfield make sense by way of these pushbacks. In doing so, I also suggest that recent theorizations of how socio-political relations form economic relations and also how economic relationships (and conceptions of the economy) form social relations (Mitchell 1998, 2007; Escobar 1995; Gibson-Graham 1996) provide frameworks to better understand Smithfield and N.C. Choices, and to think critically about the potential of local food movement activity in constructing moral economic alternatives to Smithfield.

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Passing Shankle Road where I should have turned, I encounter a stretch of asphalt that is covered in white feathers. I am temporarily confused until I see a sign for the House of Raeford chicken processing plant—outside in front of the plant are long rectangular stacked crates; huge metal fans run from generators aim breeze towards the scrunched birds. A few weeks prior the *Charlotte Observer* published a six-day investigative series on the exploitative working conditions at House of Raeford processing plants, a multi-state company based in Hoke County.⁴

I am on my way to John L Council Farms, a family farm outside the town of Raeford that is part of the N.C. Choices network. John Council's 68-acre farm is split by a narrow two-lane road: on one side are vegetable gardens, strawberry beds, cows, hogs, and the site for a new greenhouse; on the other side of the road are the laying hens, meat birds, goats, and nut and fruit orchards including several experimental banana plants protectively wrapped in burlap sacks. Next to the chicken yards are their on-farm store and delivery truck, whose door has been made

into a sign listing the farm's different cuts of chicken, beef, and pork. John, a 71-years-old retired maintenance and construction worker, has been farming his whole life. He grew up close to where his farm is now, which he bought in 1992. As a child, his family grew tobacco, cotton, corn, peanuts, hay, tomatoes, oats, and rye on 40 rented acres. John's daughter and grandson help him run the farm now.

News has just broken of the largest meat recall in U.S. history and it is the first thing John wants to talk about.⁵ The Humane Society of the United States released an undercover video of the Southern California Westland/Hallmark Meat Company plant's "downer" cows entering the country's food supply.⁶ The video showed workers electrically prodding and moving cattle with bulldozers who were too sick or injured to walk to the slaughterhouse. The USDA recalled 143 million pounds of meat, 50 million of which were destined for school lunches and other federal food assistance program. John is disgusted by the animal cruelty and health dangers, and is also afraid that his market for meat will be affected by consumer paranoia. As John shows me around the farm, he says, "I want everyone to see what I'm doing, all of them—everything concerning the farm." He wants everyone to see how his farm is different from Westland/Hallmark. This is a different kind of transparency than that offered by the traceability of industrial standards and codes. It is about transparency in relationships and exposing the intertwined acts of production and consumption.

I offer this vignette for two reasons: First, it points to a prevalent disconnection in America between the food we consume and its source. Indeed, in a triumphal expression of commodity fetishism, most people think that food comes from the supermarket. Yet in Hoke County, both John's farm and the House of Raeford assembly line display the intimate sociality of production and consumption, and make such an abstraction seems absurd.⁷

Secondly, John's farm grounds a point of contrast not only to the uniquely modern phenomenon of one-stop mega-marts, but also to the late-capitalist factory-farm landscapes that supply them. Agriculture and animal husbandry in North Carolina have long depended on smallholders supported by New Deal supply-side management. However, the 2004 tobacco buyout combined with the state's aggressive pursuit of investments in packaging, processing, livestock, and slaughterhouses has marked a turn towards a new ethos of market liberalism and demand-side policies and a transition away from smallholder farming. While the transformation of agriculture from a primary occupation to a primary products sector--the keystone of development economics and one of the most dramatic aspects of "modernity"--has been long underway in late-capitalist countries like the United States, it remains an uneven, unfinished, and contested project.⁸ As new technologies and labor practices have developed--from the horse drawn plough to the McCormick reaper to Smithfield Lean Generation Pork™ to contract farming where farmers are proletariats on their own land, the modernization of agriculture has continued privileging the commodification of all else at the expense of nature and society (Fitzgerald 2003; Watts 1994). It was this transformation that preoccupied the renowned economic historian Karl Polanyi.

In 2001, Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, was reprinted. The new edition speaks not only to the work's tour de force, but also to the relevance of Polanyi's over half-century-old insights in understanding the present-day revival of market liberalism, and associated counter movements. In the introduction to the new edition, sociologist Fred Block writes, "There is good explanation for this durability. *The Great Transformation* provides the most powerful critique yet produced of market liberalism—the belief that both national societies and the global economy can and should be organized through self-regulating markets. Since the 1980s, and

particularly with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, this doctrine of market liberalism—under the label of Thatcherism, Reaganism, neoliberalism, and ‘the Washington Consensus’—has come [again] to dominate global politics” (Block in Polanyi 2001: xviii).

Polanyi was concerned with spatial-historical conjuncture of the early nineteenth-century English Industrial Revolution and the ideological rise of market liberalism, both fed by technological advancement and the massive dislocation of people from their land. According to Polanyi this critical period represents the first articulation of the utopian vision of a self-regulating market. The churning of this “satanic mill”—powered by a motive of individual gain and interest—brought forth immense human degradation and a radical reordering of society (31). Whereas the economy had always been embedded in society, market liberalism flipped this age-old reality and subsumed society under the ideal of a self-regulating market. This “great transformation” became an organizing mechanism for the world, and a modern economic rationality that Polanyi railed against, repeatedly decrying the dangers of falsely commodifying nature and humans.⁹

Yet, according to Polanyi this self-regulating market system could never exist outside of an ideal type because man, lest risk alienation from society and nature, and eventual destruction, would pushback against his own exploitation (commodification). This pushback Polanyi termed the “double movement”—the play between laissez faire market expansion and a protective countermovement that works to re-embed society in the economy (3-4). Following Polanyi, I suggest that both Smithfield and N.C. Choices can be understood as pushbacks against the self-regulating market system. Governmental official and county residents pushback by promoting Smithfield as a logical, even commonsense, process of regional economic development so as to not be lost to “free trade”—politicians publicly praise the company for saving the economy, and they expect it to be seen as a given that the economy needs to be saved before “society” can be. But at the same time, even as Smithfield is hailed as a savior, groups of producers, consumers, and concerned citizens pushback against their own exploitation by contesting Smithfield’s valuations of land, labor, and capital, and by organizing alternative production systems.

In an era marked by more flexible systems of production, corporate search for higher profits in new and multiple territories, a concentration of markets, the freer flow of goods across borders, greater disparity in income inequality, drastic decreases in union membership, and a displacement of small farmers from their land, I believe Polanyi’s scathing indictment of liberalism and his prediction of the pushback suggest productive ways for us to better understand contemporary resistance movements like N.C. Choices and possibilities therein for articulating alternative economic relationships.



The evidence presented in this paper is drawn from a year of reviewing relevant literature, media, policy briefs, and historical archives, and face-to-face and phone interviews conducted between January-March 2008. The voices of farmers, sustainable agriculture advocates, project directors, union organizers, activist academics and students, Smithfield plant workers, residents, and community organizers bring this story to life. While each of these stories is unique and situated in a time and place, they speak across difference and add fodder to conversations about how we can create a more just world.

This paper is organized into 4 chapters. In the first chapter, I provide a short economic analysis of eastern North Carolina and describe the impact of hog production in the region. The critical role that citizens have played in contesting the industry is detailed, as in environmental groups contesting agro-industrial practices and the United Food and Commercial Workers ongoing Justice at Smithfield campaign. I continue in chapter 2 with a discussion of N.C. Choices project and its relationship to Smithfield. This paper continues with chapter 3 where I discuss how small-scale farmers prop up the local food movement and systemic challenges faced in creating local/ethical markets.

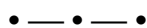
Chapter 1: Contentious Landscapes: Remaking Porkopolis

Driving eastward on I-40 from Raleigh-Durham, the flat landscape alternates between patches of timber lots and barren countryside. It is February and most of the fields lay fallow or in cover crops; some are dotted white with cotton stubble—evidence of the imprecision, if efficient use, of combine harvesting. At the edges of the fields, behind rows of long leaf pines stand seemingly innocuous, rectangular warehouses. From the highway, these extensive unmarked structures themselves reveal no hint of their contents. There is nothing particularly agricultural about them other than their location. However, if one veers from the highway, a fetid odor makes clear that these tin boxes are stocked with something alive.

“There are generally between 800-900 animals in each of those houses,” Steve Wing, an epidemiology professor and activist researcher at the UNC’s School of Public Health, tells me.¹⁰ We are on our way to Duplin County, where he and two of his graduate students will be presenting research on the impacts of hydrogen sulfide emitted from the hog lagoons at a community meeting sponsored by two organizations--REACH (Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help) and DEHA (Duplin Environment Health Awareness). At the edges of the fields, there is sometimes just a lone house, at other times, a cluster of several. Steve likens the confinement operations to small cities with no waste treatment systems. The lagoons are open-air cesspools that extend below the water table and cause ground water contamination. Steve points out that since confinement operations have taken over Duplin County, the municipality has extended water services to rural resident whose previously dependable well water is now undrinkable, an inadvertent subsidy to the industry that often goes unaccounted. “Other states don’t allow industries to grow hogs like this,” says Steve.

Steve has been working with residents in Eastern North Carolina around issues of environmental racism and justice since 1995. He has helped community groups in Halifax County convince county commissioners to implement stricter zoning criteria for contained animal feeding operations, testified at hearings with the legislature, and written scores of articles on the health implications of the industry (Avery et al. 2004; Wing et al., 2000; Wing et al., 2002). “It’s the systemic things that people need to organize around,” he says. “You can’t talk about hogs, without talking about environmental racism.”

The Black Belt, once the core of the American South’s plantation system, and a region characterized today by high African American populations, above average poverty rates, and rural decline, cuts through North Carolina’s rural coastal plain. North Carolina’s slave populations, which grew from 6,000 in 1730 to a peak of 331,059 in 1860, were heavily concentrated in the coastal plain in which bright leaf tobacco, cotton, and forestry thrived as export industries in the region’s rich sandy soil.¹¹ While North Carolina has been referenced as a state of smallholders in comparison to its plantation-holding neighbors, historical landownership data show regional counties with the largest farms in the mid-1800s are now top hog producers. These figures point to the socio-political and economic embeddedness of current labor and resource exploitation—the conditions to which Smithfield was drawn (Furuseth 1997; Hart and Chestang 1996; Edwards and Ladd 2000).¹²



While oligopoly in industrial meat production is not new, nor is the ability for companies to rearrange the geographies of the trade, what is new is the spatial reconfiguration of the industry and attendant reorganizations of cultural landscapes, by which landscapes shaped by nature-society interactions and vice versa. In the last thirty years, Chicago's Union Stockyards—which in the mid-1800s spanned a hundred acres and held over 118,000 cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses—have moved east and multiplied.

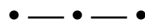
To understand the meat industry today and its imprint on the landscape of North Carolina, I want to emphasize that Smithfield arose from an existing structure of corporate-controlled packing. As early as the mid-1800s in Chicago the Big Four—Hammond, Nelson Morris, Swift, and Philip Armour—dominated the industry in packing and trade. By exploiting economies of scale and converting the whole hogs into standardized products and by-products (soap, glue, oleomargarine, fertilizer, hairbrushes, pepsin, insulin, low-grade canned meats, and animal feed), the Big Four locked-in consumer demand, acquired bigger and bigger markets, and eventually undercut local processors and butchers. Environmental historian William Cronon describes this new corporate order: “by linking and integrating the products of so many ecosystems and communities, [it] obscured the connections it helped create. It's tendency was to break free from space altogether, managing it's activities with organizational charts that stressed function rather than geography...The sensible things to do was not to invest more capital in Chicago but to set up new plants that could take advantage of more favorable conditions elsewhere” (Cronon 1991: 257). By 1960 Chicago's major packers had shuttered their factories, and by 1970 the stockyards followed suit, first setting up in the Mid-West and then expanding to the Southeast (259).

In the hog industry, the Big Four have been supplanted by in pork packing by a new cartel dominated by Smithfield, Tyson (IBP Inc.), Cargill (Excel), and Swift and Company (ConAgra).¹³ In 2006, together these companies had sales of \$52 billion, outnumbering the GDP of all but sixty countries in the world. Smithfield and Tyson's take alone of meat markets is 70 percent. Smithfield tops the four in pork production and processing, and reports revenues of \$12 billion in 2007 (Smithfield 2007). Through mergers and acquisitions and expansion into foreign markets from 1990 to 2005 the company grew by more than 1,000. It is also a leader in turkey processing, cattle feeding and is the fifth largest beef processor in the world. The company's brand names include: Farmland Foods, John Morell, Gwaltney, Butterball, Stefano Foods, Cook's, Armour, Cumberland Gap, Patrick Cudahy, Eckrich, and Animex (Smithfield 2007). In 2005, Smithfield slaughtered and packaged 27 million hogs; that is one out of every four pigs killed in the United States.

One way that agro-industry expands and minimizes risk is through contract production and vertical integration. In farrow-to-finish hog operations, companies like Smithfield dictate the genetic makeup of animal herds, feed formulas, and antibiotic cocktails, all of which they supply to contract growers; in turn, farmers provide land, buildings, equipment, utilities and labor. Perhaps most significantly, they relinquish their autonomy in making on-farm decisions. In 2003, 39 percent of the United States' agricultural products were produced under contract compared to 11 percent in 1969 (USDA 2007). Over 90 percent of North Carolina's hog farmers labor under contract. In addition to owning company farms, Smithfield Foods buys up more than half the products of these “independent” farmers (Lancaster 2001).

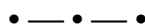
The social and ecological repercussions of this system are no better illustrated than in Duplin County. Duplin County located along the Cape Fear River has the most dense hog population of anywhere in the world. Home to over 2 million hogs and 54,352 people, Duplin's

other mainstay industry is poultry.¹⁴ The mastermind of the legislation that paved the way for North Carolina's hog ascent, Wendell Murphy, lives in Duplin County. He made his fortune as the president of Murphy Farms Inc., the largest hog producer in the nation in the 1980s. In 1991, Murphy, who was serving a one-time term as state senator co-sponsored legislation that exempted large-scale hog farms from local zoning regulations. Combined with the state's existing right-to-work and right-to-farm laws, Murphy's law was instrumental in ensuring that he would be able to offer a steady supply of hogs to Smithfield, which opened the Tar Heel plant in Bladen County the following year.¹⁵ Pork barrel politics conspired with promises of quality jobs and a brighter future to transform eastern North Carolina into a hinterland for the nation's increasing demand for the other white meat.



In eastern North Carolina like many other rural areas nationwide, the 1980s were marked by sharp declines in agriculture and manufacturing. As a 1986 report entitled "Shadows in the Sunbelt" warned, "For a majority of counties in the rural South...the economic forecast is dark and growing darker." The North Carolina economy historically centered on textile manufacturing and small farming and, as such, was particularly vulnerable to the agricultural and industrial restructuring of the period. Between 1983 and 1986, land values and other agriculture assets in the state dropped more than \$2 billion, and more than 13,000 farms went out of business between 1980 and 1985.¹⁶

At the same time, North Carolina's textile industry crumbled, losing 32 percent of manufacturing jobs and 40 percent of apparel jobs between 1978-1997. This trend has continued unabated since: from 1997-2002, the state lost 100,000 jobs in textiles and an additional 70,000 in apparel, or 12 percent of total manufacturing jobs in the state (Conway et al. 2003). In an environment of economic uncertainty, economic developers saw hog production not only as a replacement for farming losses but also for manufacturing. According to McBride and Key (2003) "A concerted effort was made by the State government, land-grant university faculty, and entrepreneurs to focus on hog production as one area of economic growth and to develop a pork industry that could compete on a national level" (McBride and Key 2003: 6). I want to emphasize here that the replacement of one branch plant for another represents not only footloose capital but also the bounded conceptions of possible responses; it is akin to trading out one sliding pivot for another in Irving Fisher's famous 1892 model of the economy, which political science professor Timothy Mitchell describes as "a network of cisterns, levers, pipers, rods, sliding pivots and stoppers, through which the flow of water represented the working of the principle of utility" (Mitchell 1998, 96).



It is raining when Steve, his students, and I arrive at the Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help (REACH) office for a pre-meeting with Devon Hall, the organization's co-founder. Before it rains, growers often spray waste from lagoons onto nearby fields to avoid the risk of them overflowing, which, as journalist Jeff Tietz writes, "can turn hundreds of acres -- thousands of football fields -- into shallow mud puddles of pig shit. Tree branches drip with pig shit" (Tietz 2006). Aside from normal waste disposal, which is hazardous in its own right, the industry has an egregious record of accidents. In 1995, the lagoon at Ocean View Farms, one of

Smithfield's competitors, ruptured, spilling over 20 million gallons of hog waste into the New River. It was the biggest spill in North Carolina history, leading to a sixteen-mile dead zone in the river and igniting environmental debates.¹⁷ Four years later, Hurricane Floyd washed another 12 million gallons of waste into the Tar, Neuse, Roanoke, Pamlico, New, and Cape Fear Rivers. In addition to the cocktails of antibiotics that the pigs are given, their waste contains ammonia, methane, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide, cyanide, phosphorous, nitrates, and heavy metals. REACH formed in the wake of Hurricane Floyd with a mission to improve the socio-economic status and quality of life of Duplin County residents.

The community center where we meet is a simple one-room cinderblock structure with a kitchen. In addition to Steve, his students, and me, in attendance are REACH staff, a United Food and Commercial Worker union organizer, a Duke University public policy student who is researching the development of environmentally superior technology for hog farming, and 35 concerned community residents. All the residents are African-Americans, except one Latina woman who worked in Smithfield's Clayton-based bacon processing plant for 90 days until her hands went numb from extreme repetitive motion, a common injury among factory workers.

Over dinner, Steve and his students present their research findings on the connection between the anaerobic decomposition of hydrogen sulfide from lagoons and stress, depression, asthma, upper respiratory problems, and vomiting. They point out that odors are intensified by blowing out the hog houses, spraying lagoon waste onto fields, and from dumpsters of animal carcasses called dead boxes near farms.

Residents at the meeting who live near hog houses confirm Steve's findings that odors are strongest in the evening. Growers spray when they are not supposed to after five o'clock. "They [the waste managers] are never looking. If you want to avoid regulations, you need to have a department of environment that's short on people," says Steve. While spraying is monitored, it is only done so during the 40-hour workweek, leading to excess dumping in the evening and over the weekend.

REACH and DEHA are running a campaign that encourages residents to document odor levels, and any other industry infractions they observe. The campaign is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency as part their Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving program, an initiative that began in 1994 to "support environment and public health improvements in low-income communities around the nation."¹⁸ Since then, the EPA has funded over \$31 million to 1,000 community-based organizations. REACH received \$100,000 in June 2007 to "reduce resident's exposure to air and water contaminants with local hog operations in Duplin County...[and] encourage Duplin hog operations to comply and provide incentives for operations to utilize new technologies that would eliminate the need for lagoon and spray fields."¹⁹ This move towards devolved environmental regulation represents a new form of governance: what geographer James McCarthy calls, a hybrid between "roll-out" neo-liberalism and increased community-based environmental management systems (McCarthy 2005).

After Steve's talk, Duke student Chris Neda introduces his research on the new technology that REACH is supposed to promote as part of the EPA grant. The environmentally superior technology arose from an agreement that was negotiated in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd in the September 1999, and Hurricane Fran three years earlier. The havoc wreaked in the wake of Hurricane Floyd was an ecological and human disaster unlike the region had ever seen before: in the floods, 2.5 million chickens, 500,000 turkeys, and 100,000 hogs drowned, and the contents of breached lagoons washed over the coastal plain's wetlands, rivers, and coastlines. The uniquely modern state of emergency that followed begged state lawmakers who had been

complicit in environmental deregulation to reconsider how to check and balance big business with citizen welfare. In 2000, Smithfield and Premium Standard Foods (not yet a subsidiary of Smithfield) entered into an agreement with the Attorney General of North Carolina pledging to pay \$15 million to North Carolina State University for the development of new environmentally sound technologies to remedy problems associated with the lagoon-and-spray system and an additional \$50 million towards environmental improvements and compliance monitoring. At the time Attorney General Mike Easley hailed the agreement as a “giant step forward” and “a solution that will protect the environment without sacrificing the farmer or the economy... This industry is an important cog in the State’s economic machinery. This agreement aims to solve what some had seen as competing interests—rural economic development and a clean and safe environment.”²⁰ This quote emphasizes not only econometric modeling writ large but also Smithfield as a necessary gear in Polanyi’s “satanic mill.”

Chris voices skepticism over the implications of this “great leap forward” toward eco-friendly industrialization, “The lagoons and spray fields are a failed system. Real change is down the road.” According to him, because the technology is so expensive and there are 543 farms in Duplin County alone, the likelihood that the new technology would ever be widely adopted is slim. Furthermore, the technology, which consists of putting traps over lagoons to capture methane, but only partially covers the lagoon, does not remedy odor problems associated with spraying or ventilating the confinement operations. As Tietz writes, because the hog houses are so hot, “[e]normous exhaust fans run twenty-four hours a day. The ventilation systems function like the ventilators of terminal patients: If they break down for any length of time, pigs start dying” (Tietz 2006: 1).²¹



After the presentations, one Duplin County resident comments, “When we look around at our communities, economic development is bringing in industrialized animal farms and landfills. They don’t look at the health of people in communities or what’s going to happen to people’s health.... They give these people taxpayers’ money to come.... They tell you how many jobs they’re bringing in, but they don’t tell you the cost of it. They don’t tell you how many people they’re destroying.”

Newspaper archives illustrate that political debates over the proposed Tar Heel plant centered on weighing the balance between environmental degradation and jobs. There is little talk on alternative development possibilities. As one newspaper article put it, “Along N.C. 87 outside Bladen County, town of Tar Heel, a dream is taking shape out of concrete and steel. Some folks hail it as an economic savior. Others denounce it as an environmental nightmare.” The following quotes from local papers reveal how political elites positioned the proposed project:

Paul Butler, Bladen County’s industrial development director: “Smithfield... will be like the answer to a prayer for Bladen County... It’s a real win for Bladen County, and it ain’t going to do anything but keep winning... The economic spillover of the goods and services required by the farming operations, it’s just a ripple effect and it keeps going. We’re giving hundreds of people job opportunities that would not have had an opportunity before.”²²

Walter F. Earle, Wilson County's cooperative extension livestock agent: "We consider the growth a positive thing....It adds jobs. It does a lot to support the community."²³

Everett Davis, director of the Robeson County Cooperative Extension Services: "With development like this, it's going to encourage economic development that might relate to the processing of animals and other products."²⁴

Gregg Schmidt, spokesperson for Carrol's Foods, which raises hogs for Smithfield Foods, "When we move into an area that needs jobs, that needs some type of economic development, that's a good thing."²⁵

These quotes represent a particular vision of the economy as a sphere that necessitates an "outside" to be brought "in" for development to occur. Bladen County is positioned as being extra-economic, something that is left behind—for the county "to win" it must be incorporated into this thing called "the economy." The quotes also reveal how economic development practice and discourse (mis)represents "the economy" and how those representations are produced and reproduced (Mitchell 2007; Tsing 2000)—in this case, a prescriptive version of the development process poses a uni-linear necessitarian logic built around lead firms and corporate drivers. In newspaper archives, there is no counter-argument against the dominant rationality of the time that branch plant development would create a positive multiplier effect, or to use the unfortunate economic metaphor here, a "spillover," by creating new businesses and jobs.

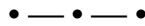
That said, there were lively environmental debates over the proposed plant, some of which were not just confined to Bladen County. With the plant's wide-reaching potential impacts in the region, residents in surrounding counties began debating whether to enact county ordinances for greater governance over farmland and livestock zoning. Proponents of county ordinances argued that weak state environmental standards were not adequate in regulating lagoon sludge, field runoff, dead animal refuse, and wastewater discharge. County ordinances were one way for residents to limit the power of hog producers seeking shelter under right-to-farm laws. Like REACH and DEHA's monitoring campaign, county ordinances suggest another hybrid of neoliberalism and community-based management, and a variation of the Polanyian double movement.

Debates between pro-Smithfield contingents and environmentalist and labor activists revolved around industry accountability, not questioning the structural logic of the industry itself, or the logic of economic development strategies.²⁶ Newspaper archives in these early debates are consistent with how movement actors make claims today. Groups argue for greater state regulations, but also claim that they do not want to push piggeries out of business.²⁷

This dynamic is illustrated by the opening of another \$85 million Smithfield ham manufacturing plant in Kinston, North Carolina, in 2006. Governor Mike Easley lauded the company as providing 206 new jobs for Lenoir County residents, "Smithfield Packing Company's decision to build a new manufacturing plant shows that North Carolina is making the right investments in the right places at the right time," he said. "This announcement is further proof that our aggressive approach to economic development is working."²⁸

Yet, this "aggressive approach to economic development" can be quite grim when big plants close in small communities. As illustrated by a recent article in the local *News & Observer* titled, "Chicken plant's pullout ripples through Chatham."²⁹ With the closing of Pilgrim's Pride

poultry processing plant in Chatham County, the state's fifth largest chicken producing county, 843 workers will lose their jobs, the city will lose a major water customer, and it is estimated that farmers' incomes will drop by up to 25 percent. With unprecedented increases in grain prices, the article calls the closing "an omen for leaders in this state," given the percentage of revenue that comes from livestock production and processing. With skyrocketing grain prices, Pilgrim's Pride predicts that in 2008 it will spend an additional \$700 million on grain alone. In thinking about how the food-fuel duel could shake out in North Carolina, take note that to make one pound of chicken it takes two pounds of grain; four for pork; and eight for beef, whose digestive systems are not even adapted to eat grain, but grass.



When the Smithfield processing plant opened, it was one of the highest paying jobs in the region. With North Carolina's minimum wage at \$6.15 per hour and federal minimum wage at \$5.85 per hour, even starting wages of \$8.10 represent a \$4,000 annual increase above and beyond North Carolina's minimum wage. But, if the financial benefit of this new employment was marginally higher, so were the associated risks.

"There is no way to change the meatpacking industry if you don't look at the world's largest plant," says Libby Manly, director of the Justice at Smithfield campaign for the United Food and Commercial Workers. "At one time packing jobs were good jobs. If you look back to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and all the ways the industry changed after he wrote that book and it was in the 1980s, packing jobs, it was very high union density, you got paid a wage that you could raise a family on. That is sort of what we want again," says Libby.³⁰

It was in this post-Fordist era that supermarket chains had begun to dominate the food retail sector. Now a few big players compete for the consumer dollar, leading to downward pressure on prices and a race to the bottom in which companies crudely trim costs to maintain their competitive advantage. As Horowitz writes, "The modern meatpacking oligopoly had to respond to the requirements of immense orders from a few outlets if they wanted consistent sales for their meat, whether retailers like Wal-Mart and Safeway or restaurant operations such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonalds" (Horowitz 2006: 150). Real retail costs of pork have decreased from approximately \$2.20 per pound in 1970 to \$1.50 per pound in 2004 (Hahn 2004: 11).

To achieve such cheap prices Smithfield and other meatpacking companies relocated to the Southeast. In the uneven topography of U.S. labor organization, Smithfield's expansion to North Carolina, a right-to-work state with the lowest union membership rates in the country at 3 percent, was a fight in part for survival.³¹ About half of Smithfield's plants across the country are unionized. For example, in December 2007, about 1,000 production and maintenance workers at the company's John Morrell plant in Sioux City, Iowa, represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1142, secured a contract with \$1.50 wage increases and increases in sick pay. Average salaries for packing jobs in Iowa are \$14 per hour.³²

In addition to changing geographies of production, this industry shift and technological advances have dramatically deepened divisions of labor on the shop floor. While still highly dependant upon hand labor and knife work, more skilled slaughtering and cutting jobs have given way to oftentimes low-skilled immigrant workers repeating increasingly refined sets of

tasks on dangerously fast and frequently racially segregated production lines (Horowitz 2006: 149; LeDuff 2001).

By June 2006, starting wages at the Smithfield Tar Heel plant were up to \$9.20 per hour, but the same year workers also reported 663 injuries including amputations, skin infections, contusions, blunt traumas, cuts, punctures, burns, avulsions, lacerations, fractures, hog carcasses falling on workers, slipping on wet floors, and being hit by pallet jacks. This number represents a 200 percent increase from 2003 (Human Rights Watch 2007). Smithfield workers, some of whom labor for up to twelve hours a day on the factory line, are on a point system—if they receive twelve points, they are fired. Employees receive points for reporting injuries. Workers receive no sick days and no personal days.

“I was shocked at what was happening. It was a worker slaughterhouse. They were using up human resources,” said Keith Ludlum, a native of Bladen County, who began working at the Smithfield plant in 1993.³³ Keith, who actively supported union activities, was fired by Smithfield twice, rehired once with back wages after a drawn out lawsuit with the company, and now works for the UFCW as an organizer.

Early political discourse over the proposed Tar Heel plant heralded the benefits of *local* job creation. Today, Libby estimates that of the 5,000 plant workers, 800 workers are from Bladen County, 100 from Cumberland, and 1600 from Robeson, and another 600 commute from South Carolina, driving two hours each way. One third are women and under 30 years old. Stepped up Immigration Control Enforcement (ICE) crackdowns in the last year have reversed the racial configuration of the workforce: in 2006, the plant employed approximately 60 percent Latinos, 40 percent African Americans, and a few Lumbee Indians and white workers. Yet, after ICE immigration raids on the Tar Heel plant in January and August 2007, which union organizers and workers claim Smithfield used as scare tactics to suppress union activities, African Americans constituted 60 percent of the workforce and Latinos 40 percent. The hostile immigrant climate only adds to the plant’s high turnover track record-- between 1993 and 1997 Smithfield cycled through 20,000 workers at the Tar Heel plant. While there are many workers who have been at the plant for years, this figure represents the majority of workers who do not make it past 90 days.

“These should be good jobs,” says Libby. “Sure the work is brutal by nature but do you have to be fearful that you’re going to loose a finger or develop some kind of incredible painful repetitive motion injury? We don’t think so. We have plants where there are strong safety and health committees, and people have been at the plant for over 20 years and it’s even Smithfield plants. That’s what we want to get back to, where the industry is more responsible towards workers, and towards the environment and towards the community where they are building these plants in and not just reaping all the \$13 billion, in Smithfield’s case, profits.”

After two botched union elections in 1994 and 1997, in October 2007, the United Food and Commercial Workers again began negotiating with the company to hold union elections. At the last minute Smithfield pulled out of negotiations and brought a class action lawsuit against the union under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. While the case is awaiting trial or settlement, the UFCW is broadening its tactics and is starting to collaborate with groups in the environmental justice network, like REACH. “A lot of farmers are caught between a rock and a hard place,” says Devon, REACH’s co-founder, who has lived his whole life in Duplin County. “It is clear from the data that hog operations are in low-income and people-of-color communities. The industry produces low-cost meat and is able to do so because

people are suffering.” For growers, Devon, says the industry-line is, “If you don’t dance to our tune, we’re going to cut you out...organizing focus should be on the industry, not the growers.”



Smithfield became a technical fix and commonsensical approach to economic development in eastern North Carolina at a time when the region was struggling to counter, and benefit from, industrial global competition. Economic development à la Smithfield represents a strategy of export-led growth and the neoliberal turn towards market-friendly development and self-regulating markets. At the same time, Smithfield itself, as the object of economic development strategies, becomes part and parcel of a double movement—society attempts to reign in the free-market economy to save itself. As Polanyi would have predicted though, a fix in which the economy dominates over society inevitably requires communities to save themselves from their own solution, and own destruction.

In doing so, communities pushback against the industry through environmentally superior technologies and union organizing. These double movements react to Smithfield’s externalities but do not challenge the logic underpinning the existence of Smithfield. This suggests that resistance is constricted because it is layered on top of existing social, cultural, and political relationships, and economic and development logics. In this way, Smithfield speaks to the cultural production of “the economy” and the need for understanding what alternatives get overlooked in the process of “economic development.”

Chapter 2: N.C. Choices—“Make the Choice, Make the Difference”

In the late 1990s when the lagoon of the confinement hog operation at the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS) began to leak, Nancy Creamer was faced with a decision: rebuild the lagoon or figure out an alternative that would bring in the same amount of money.

Nancy is the director of CEFS, a 2,000-acre farm and research center dedicated to sustainable agriculture, extension, and education. Located in Goldsboro in Wayne County, CEFS, also known as Cherry Research Farm, is one of North Carolina’s thirteen agricultural experiment stations formed under the federal Hatch Act of 1887, which established research farms in every state to conduct scientific investigations with the goals of improving profits for the food and agricultural industry. Cooperative extension was later established under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 to disseminate the research and new technologies to rural communities.

Today, CEFS is one of the nation’s largest centers for studying environmentally sustainable farming practices. The farm is a joint collaboration of North Carolina’s two land grant colleges—North Carolina State University (NCSU) and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University (NC A&T)—and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Land-grant schools date back to the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, and are the outgrowth of successful lobbying by societies of businessmen with agricultural interests in the institutionalization of agricultural research (Cochrane 1993: 240). NC A&T, historically the state’s black land-grant university, was established under the second Morrill Act that forced Southern states that discriminated admissions by race to designate separate land grant institutions or cease to make race an admissions criterion.

These educational institutions, and their affiliated arms—research stations and Cooperative Extension—were pivotal in the industrialization of U.S. agriculture. The colleges produced agricultural engineers and economists who fomented a particular industrial logic. As historian Deborah Fitzgerald writes, “These experts were the first to argue that the status quo in farming was unsustainable and undesirable, a view they developed by studying farms surrounding the land-grant colleges where they had gone to school. But these professionals also came to this conclusion because they learned the theoretical and abstract approaches of their disciplines, especially engineering, science, and economics” (Fitzgerald 2003: 22). Both *Smithfield* and *N.C. Choices* show how this structure of agricultural governance continues to drive agricultural development and have great implications for how new information is disseminated to rural areas, and the way that agriculture is reworked under rural economic development strategies.



“The state got money to rebuild [the lagoon], but in the meantime CEFS had developed alternative animal units and really didn’t want a confinement hog operation there,” Nancy tells me. We are sitting at a coffee shop in Raleigh across from her office building. Nancy, who grew up on a poultry farm with 80,000 laying chickens in southern California, has been working with CEFS since it formed in 1994.

“At the time the facility had to raise over a million dollars a year in products. It was a state farm before it was CEFS, so that was the expectation. That was built into the structure, and they needed a revenue stream. So in their minds, they felt like the confinement operation

wouldn't be a part of CEFS, but would be at the location, it would just be over there. But we just didn't want to see that. So, they challenged us to figure out how to make \$250,000 a year from the hogs. Then they would consider it.”

Nancy hired Mike Jones, a small-scale hog producer and agricultural extension agent who works at NC A&T, to draw up a plan for an alternative production unit. At the same time, the Kellogg Foundation, one of the nation's major foundations for sustainable agriculture funding, was soliciting grant applications for new models of university engagement with food systems planning. CEFS applied and received a planning grant for 1999-2000, with encouragement from Kellogg to focus on alternative hog systems.

“At the time N.C. State had a pretty bad history with the environmental groups. That was a time when there was just a lot of opposition and there was the Smithfield Agreement, so there was a lot going on with the environmental groups trying to eliminate the lagoon-based system,” said Nancy. “They saw this press release...and I think that they just couldn't imagine that NC State was going to do something with alternative hogs. So she called me and I said let's take you down to CEFS and she was very excited about what we were doing. She was with the Sierra Club...I guess it was on the way back from this trip in the car and we were talking about how we could work together. And she said, well we have 70,000 members that we could reach by e-mail. We talked about how wouldn't it be great if the environmental groups' work in opposition to the current hog industry could be a market for the products coming off sustainable farms. It would give them a positive way [to spin their work]---she was very excited that they could do something positive.”

Joining with other environmental groups, CEFS re-pitched the project to Kellogg as N.C. Choices, a marketing initiative that would connect small farmers with environmentally conscious consumers. Nancy says:

We started the project and learned that there were just all these huge infrastructure hurdles in the way of getting the product to market. Even though the environmental groups were willing, and we had producers willing, there was no way to get the product slaughtered and processed, we've lost a lot of infrastructure for small-scale producers in the state. So when we had meetings with small farmers and we asked them how we could help market, they would say we have plenty of marketing, it's not the issue. Of course, now as we work out some of the infrastructure problems it's going to be more of an issue. At the time it was we need help with our slaughter and processing facilities, value added products and all these other things, and production support. We kept going on the marketing, developing new innovative ways of marketing, but it was deemphasized, the other stuff had to come first.

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N.C. Choices was not the first organizational effort to connect small-scale hog producers to markets. Several years earlier, Niman Ranch, a California-based corporation that buys hogs, beef, and lamb from approximately 600 independent producers across the country and processes and sells them on wholesale markets, had joined forces with Heifer and A&T to encourage small

farmers to raise hogs: Heifer granted farmers pigs; A&T provided technical support; and Niman was the middleman to markets.

“It was designed to transition tobacco farmers into outdoor hog production, many of whom had no idea how to raise hogs, and so it took on Niman’s cost structure, it’s preferred genetics. Niman tried to figure out the processing. They had a field coordinator. Lots of things broke down because they just really didn’t come from here. Their home base was in the mid-West. And a lot of things around processing became a big problem. They ended up shipping live animals, which was incredible expensive,” says Jennifer Curtis, the project director of N.C. Choices.³⁴ Jennifer has been working for N.C. Choices for the last two years and is a tireless advocate for improving local food systems. Since 2001, she has run her own sustainable agriculture consulting business and before that she was a senior research associate for the Natural Resource Defense Council.

The N.C. Choices model is decidedly different in contrast to Niman, their competitor for anti-biotic free, sustainably raised pork. In addition to actively promoting the development of processing infrastructure, they also provide farmer education (for example, business planning, sustainable farming practices, USDA certification laws); develop new marketing material for farmers in the network; and connect farmers to existing markets or help create new markets (meat-buying clubs, community supported agriculture programs, wholesale buyers, farmers’ markets). N.C. Choices works with approximately 40 of the 100 or so outdoor hog farmers across the state, most of whom are first-generation new farms in the Piedmont region. According to Jennifer, other than three farms run by African-Americans families, all of the farmers in the network are white. In the eastern and western parts of the state, the participating farms are mostly on multi-generational farms.³⁵

“Relationship marketing is really what is going to sustain us in the long run—if farmers can have direct connections with consumers and consumers understand and respect what farmers produce, they become loyal,” says Jennifer. “You might loose Niman to the vagaries of the market and national this and that, but you don’t loose your neighbors and the folks in your community, so it has the potential to be much more sustainable both, just securing the market and it seems to be what everyone really wants, that relationship, that touch point with the farmer, so why not have the farmer capitalize on it.”

N.C. Choices’ strategy towards this end is the promotion of quadruple bottom-line benefits--the notion of triple bottom line, an approach to public sector full cost accounting, with an extra “P”, or, as she describes it, People, Planet, Profit, and Pigs (or animals). By separating out human capital, natural capital, and profits, proponents of the triple bottom line aim to bring into balance the bottom lines of all three. However, even in advocating this approach, premised on the notion that a capitalistic markets can efficiently allocate resources, Jennifer is quick to attest to the challenges small farmers face in the marketplace. This dilemma points to broader questions of the embeddedness of niche markets, and speaks not only to farmers’ market access, but also to that of consumers. It begs the question of who has the ability to pay more for food.

Wholesale hog markets are based on the animals live weights. “Commodity prices for live hogs right now are about 50 cents per pound. They will sometimes go down to 40 though. Niman right now is paying 54 cents per pound,” says Jennifer. “They are hardly paying anything more than conventional, or commodity price. And Whole Foods pays about 75 cents per pound for the top of their very top of the line premium price. They have a tiered strategy.” According to Jennifer and my own interviews with farmers, they want to make a dollar a pound live weight to be adequately compensated for production. It is a challenge though to get data on what it costs to

raise niche hogs. Jennifer says that last year the Leopold Center, a sustainable agriculture research and education center in Iowa, conducted a study, in which 18 different farmers participated and agreed to keep farm records. The results showed 18 different production costs.

“Farmers don’t have time to do record keeping and they really don’t want to, when they look closely they realize they are not making any money. They never value their farm labor, their own labor. It’s devastating. And I’m afraid to look at it too quite frankly because I’m thinking here I am promoting, pushing them toward this market because it’s being filled by wholesale suppliers in other parts of the county, [the question is] can we get it?”

Jennifer spends a lot of her time devising strategies so that N.C. Choices farmers might be able to benefit from wholesale markets. She is encouraged by a recent Packaged Facts report on local food, which calls “local” food a \$5 billion industry in the United States, up from \$2 billion in 2002. Packaged Facts is a market research company that generates reports on trends in the food, beverage, consumer packaged goods, and demographic sectors and then sells them to public and advertising agencies for a \$3,000 to \$6,000 bill. “A lot of people want fresh. People are willing to pay more for sustainable products,” says Jennifer. “They [Packaged Facts] do that based on increases in farmers’ markets, CSAs, organic sales increases. They distinguish local from organics. They make recommendations to the grocery-store industry, saying if you’re not on this train, get on it.”

Jennifer’s takeaway from this report is that N.C. Choices should be trying to figure out how to help grocery stores differentiate based on local farmers. “You can tell their story, and reach out to consumers this way. Grocery stores now have to distinguish themselves against pharmacies that frequently carry food and convenience stores that more and more are carrying food, and Wal-Mart. If you are going to stay a traditional grocery store with a meat counter, you better latch on.So what’s underneath the market? Is there really any support? The problem though is that the interest in the market is in the context of an incredible cheap, I mean, food is not valued in our country, at all, in terms of where people want to put any of their money. The whole system is set up...[in this context] I do not think there is a market to support farmers making a real living, can I just say that.”

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N.C. Choices contrasts itself as an ethical alternative to Smithfield by placing a moral value on land, labor, and resources. This process of revaluing and meaning making in the reterritorialization of “the local” shows how socioeconomic relations can form new market economies and vice versa, but it also points towards how alternatives are still embedded in existing social, cultural, and political relationships (Sonnino 270: 69-70).³⁶ In this way, N.C. Choices’ alternative creates a new set of pork chop politics.

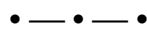
Chapter 3: Rearranging Geographies of Production

Nineteen-seventies agricultural history is remembered by the Nobel Committee awarding the Peace Prize to Green Revolution pillar Norman Borlaug, Congress passing the Plant Variety Protection Act, giving breeders 25 years of control over new plant varieties, Nixon appointing Earl “Rusty” Butz as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, and the United States beginning grain trading with the Soviet Union. The 1972-73 grain deals induced sudden scarcity when the Soviet Union bought three quarters the world’s commercially grown grain (Friedmann 1993: 40). In response Butz ordered farmers to plant “fencerow to fencerow.” In addition to Butz’s famous exhortation to “get big or get out,” his reengineering of the 1973 U.S. Farm Bill, which dismantled New Deal-era farm policies by removing price floors for grain and agreeing to pay farmers the difference, revolutionized U.S. agriculture.

Despite on and off embargos, during the 1970s the Soviet Union demanded an increasing portion of the American grain market. Prodded by high prices, increased subsidies, and Butz’s advice, farmers expanded production, and to do so borrowed money for more land, equipment, and inputs. Shedding the post-New Deal ethos of reduction and conservation, U.S. farm debt more than tripled. U.S. farmers had become so heavily dependent upon grain exports that when Soviet markets collapsed, the United States Department of Agriculture subsidized purchasing.

The federally subsidized grain surge during this era led to a concomitant rise in livestock production. An old trick, “[a]s one nineteenth-century commentator put it, ‘The hog eats the corn, and Europe eats the Hog. Corn thus becomes incarnate; for what is a hog, but fifteen or twenty bushels of corn on four legs?’” (Cronon 1991: 226).

The 1980s farm crisis was consequential of a rush towards modernization and expanded production, and it marks a critical period in shedding light on the present day global food system. Caught in a cycle of overproduction, farmers became further entrenched in debt and it became harder for them to survive during boom and bust periods. The farm crisis explains in part how farmer lobby groups lost their political leverage to agro-food manufacturing and retail corporations (Friedmann 1993: 40-42). With the scraping of barriers to international trade and investment, corporations have grown to seismic scales, and in the race to keep up, farms have grown larger, stayed small and diversified into niche markets, like N.C Choices, or gone out of business.



“I’ve been farming most of my life. It’s been a very frustrating experience because I didn’t own my own farm... My family had lost their land a few generations back. On my father’s side they had never been landowners, they had always been sharecroppers, since colonial times in Eastern North Carolina and Virginia. I come out of a class of generational poverty. It’s kind of invisible in America now, people don’t realize that we still have millions of poor white people that descended from poor people that descended from poor people,” says Mike Jones, a forty-four-year-old hog farmer and extension agent at N.C. A&T and member of N.C. Choices, is a native of Nash County.³⁷ I’m sitting with Mike at his stall at the Raleigh Farmers’ Market, a state-run indoor-outdoor facility directly off the interstate. Until Mike bought his own farm in 2005, he had worked in confinement agriculture and leased hog and poultry confinement facilities.

Mike keeps an inventory of 170-220 pigs at any given time on his Franklin County farm that he and his wife run, along with one part-time hired laborer. State regulations limit the number of hogs Mike is allowed to have on his farm. In 1997, two years after the Ocean View Farms spill, the Clean Water Responsibility Act was enacted, placing a moratorium on new hog farms with more than 250 animals and capping the number of hogs on existing farms. In an ironic double movement, the legislation has limited the production capacity of smaller-scale farmers and in effect locked in Smithfield's monopoly.

"I've kept my farm mainly by being able to market. I find customers for my hogs, my pork, to pay enough to allow me to survive. And then I was able to use my production skills that I gained working in confinement, also working in my university position, those husbandry skills helped me focus on doing a good job raising hogs, it wasn't like I had to learn two skills at the same time—the production and the marketing. I was able to focus on the marketing because the production was already my strength."

Mike's station is decorated with a bulletin board displaying pictures from his farm, an animal welfare poster, and a genealogy of heritage breed hogs. "Want to try some peas?" Mike calls out to passersby. A crock-pot of black-eyed peas stewed with pork sits warming on the cash table next to a laminated *New York Times* article about new marketing trends toward "animal compassionate" labeling in which he's featured. The article discusses how Whole Foods, along with nonprofits like the American Humane Association and the Animal Welfare Institute, are developing standards to shore up the federal government's lack of oversight in regulating animal cruelty.³⁸

Besides the farmers' market and direct farm sales, Mike's other main outlet for selling his hogs is Whole Foods. Whole Foods, according to their website, is "a leading retailer of natural and organic foods" with sales of \$5.6 billion in 2006. Last year, it acquired the Wild Oates chain, boosting its sales accounts by another \$1.2 billion. The company got its start in 1980 as a small store in Austin, Texas, and in the 1990s rapidly expanded by buying up other natural food chains. It now has more than 270 locations throughout North America and the United Kingdom and makes the Fortune 500 list of America's largest corporations along with Smithfield Foods.³⁹ Whole Foods has a five-tiered rating system for meat purchasing. At level four, Mike says he receives not quite twice what the commodity market pays. Whole Foods buys whole hogs, and does processing as an in-house expense. Mike spends about 12 hours a week trucking his hogs for slaughtering and to sell: from his farm, it takes him 2.5 hours to drive to a processing facility and 1.5 hours to drive to Whole Foods.

While Mike stresses that his farm pays for itself, he also says that he cannot afford to quit his extension job or stop going to the farmers' market. He would prefer to just rely on his Whole Food sales and cut out the rest. During the hour and a half that I sat with Mike at the market he made one sale. At the end of my visit, also the end of the market, he counts up his day's sales: 26 transactions and \$200. Mike works around the clock: 40 hours a week as an extension agent and 70 hours a week on the farm. That leaves 8 hours in a 24-hour day to sleep or do something other than work.

Conversations over the non-remunerative conditions under which small farmers labor often leads me to ask them why they do it. Mike's answers, "I wanted to do it since I wanted that lifestyle. I never dreamed it was going to be so hard for so long. I kept thinking that society was going to wake up and realize we need farmers and we're going to help them. We're such a small demographic group—there are only 1.3 million farmers in the whole country. There are more

people in the Raleigh metro area than farmers in the whole country. No politician cares about us. People don't think about us on a day-to-day basis. They'll think about us when they can't eat anymore. Our agricultural systems collapsed twenty years ago. It's been propped up by imports, cheap food and cheap labor. Consolidation in the food industry is allowing that to happen."

Mike's insight here points to a combination of factors that have brought unprecedented changes to agro-food systems worldwide and led to immense concentration in food manufacturing and retail. Declines in barriers to trade and investment flows, farm policy that encourages overproduction, and technological advances in production, communication, and transportation have made it harder and harder for small- and medium-size farmers to eek out a living.

"When I was a boy everyone had hogs in Nash County," Mike says, "All the country folks had hogs and they would round them up and sell them for a little money. People would run down to the stock market and sell a few hogs on the live market, and come back with a little cash. In the fall when it got cold, people would slaughter their own hogs and put them in the smokehouse." Once serving an important function in Southern rural communities, smokehouses have largely disappeared from the North Carolina landscape. In the autumn communities would gather to slaughter and process meat for the year—hogs were transformed into sausage, cracklings, lard, and cured and smoked the hams. Today there are only ten commercial smokehouses in the whole state, pointing to infrastructure challenges in building local food systems.⁴⁰

According to Mike, the traditional way of raising hogs outdoors started to change in the mid-1970s. "People started building confinement operations and going about it at a more commercial scale... You had to specialize, you had to be able to provide large quantities of hogs of a certain quality all the time to meet your customers needs. And then people were locked into hog production because they'd spent money on these facilities and couldn't afford to quit. You owed money to the banks so you had to stick it out. So then you weren't necessarily making good business decisions. That became a harder and harder game to play. And so you had to get good at it. And as you got good at it, a lot of times that meant committing yourself more," says Mike. "And the contracts—the better contracts were awarded to people who got larger and larger... when you got larger you became more involved. Then all of the sudden you had people raising hogs and unable to escape from it. Of course, a lot of people would not go that way because they didn't want to get caught up in it. What happened is that slowly the hog industry transitioned from a small family farm enterprise to a corporate enterprise because large businesses were able to meet those needs... Extension promoted it. They built lagoons and promoted this technology to farmers, who were told, 'To get big, or get out.'"

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Mike's stand at the market is next to Sandra Garner, another N.C. Choices farmer, from Greene County. The week before, I had interviewed Sandra's daughter Genell Pridgen.⁴¹ Rainbow Meadow Farms has been in their family for eight generations and dates back to a 200-acre land grant from King George II in 1746. After a 25-year hiatus of growing pork on the farm, in the late 1990s the Garners and Pridgens started raising pork again, first through the Heifer-N.C. A&T-Niman project, and now as part of the N.C. Choices network.

“In 1982 when the bottom fell out of the hog market, when integrators started putting in start-to-finish operations in Eastern North Carolina,” Genell tells me, “We toyed with the idea of [an industrial operation] but we weren’t interested in putting in lagoons....we were making enough money with tobacco at the time.”

Hard pressed to make ends meet, three years later, in 1985, they entered into a contract to raise chickens for Purdue, the fifth largest poultry company in the country at the time.⁴² A year earlier Purdue had taken over a processing plant in Robbins, a small town in Moore County in the piedmont of North Carolina. At the time chicken sales were surging nationally and business expanded to meet demand. However, six years later with glutted wholesale markets, and a Russian embargo on U.S. chicken, Robbins’s Purdue plant closed. Two hundred nineteen plant workers lost their jobs. The town lost 65 percent of its water and sewer revenue.⁴³ And Rainbow Meadow Farms lost their contract with the company.

“Purdue dumped over 100 producers, leaving farmers with empty houses and a severance package,” says Genell. She says that her father would make \$18,000 every eight weeks raising chickens for Purdue. “Do you know how nice that was? You knew how you were going to make the feed bill. If you didn’t screw up, you were going to get your check, that’s appealing....[Today] new houses will not cash flow at least for the first seven years. Whereas Daddy used to make money, now, for the first seven to ten years, you work for nothing, you are not even making minimum wage...Chicken companies will dump houses, they want new ones...houses built in 1985 are obsolete.”

While Genell says she would not eat a Purdue chicken because of all the antibiotics that are used, “Those things I don’t agree with. I’m very concerned about hormones and early puberty in children...But for the ease of not being a marketer and a jack-of-all-trades, we’d still be raising Purdue chickens. The economics were good.”

But, instead of signing with another company, they decided to diversify away from contract farming and row crops toward small-scale sustainable meat production. In addition to hogs, they raise eggs, poultry, and Dorper lambs, a South African breed for which there is a growing demand amongst local Mexican populations. In changing their production system, they have been able to maintain an edge in the market. However, Genell stresses that if it were not for her parents full-time help on the farm, her husband’s off-the-farm job with state insurance, and land and a house that have no mortgage, there is no way they could make it. “It’s got to be in your blood,” she says. “Some days it’s depressing, you want to go down to the local bar and you ask why in God’s name you do it...because it is in my family for so long, my ancestors through the Civil War and the Depression. It is not mine to throw away and sell. It is here to give to my children, not mine to do what I want. I’m the caretaker.”

Both Mike and Genell’s claims that their farms are fiscally sound, meaning that expenses are covered, but labor hours are not accounted for, are consistent with conversations I have had with other small farmers over the years. This conundrum points to how local food movement, touted by its proponents as a more ethical and environmentally sustainable alternative, while not subsidized by commodity payments, is propped up by unpaid or underpaid labor and off-farm jobs. Combined with the often inaccessibility of local food to low-income population, these stories point to the importance of examining how problems and solutions are framed and interventions employed in local food movement initiatives.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Various pushbacks to protect society from the vagaries of the self-regulating market have led to both Smithfield and N.C. Choices. By gazing at Smithfield and N.C. Choices side by side, we see the challenges and necessity of advocating for alternative models of economic development that build community economies. In doing so, I believe that feminist economists Gibson-Graham's call for new noncapitalist economic models to reflect alternative economic subjects is pressing. As a practice of politics, they say we need "an economic language that cannot be subsumed to existing ways of thinking economy, and instead signals the ever-present possibility of remaking economy in alternative terms" (Gibson-Graham, xi). In addition, such a project must be accompanied by a critical investigation of the contingency of alternative networks and capitalist enterprises. In short, I would argue that the local food movement presents a potentially radical approach for rethinking economic/community development, but that it will be limited if strategies are not attentive to reconstituting larger structures that govern the global economy. We need what Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman aptly call a "reflexive politics of localism" (DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

Holding these possibilities for change in mind, I end here by invoking Polanyi's insights one last time: "That which is ineffectual in stopping a line of development altogether is not, on that account, altogether ineffectual. The rate of change is often of no less importance than the direction of the change itself; but while the latter frequently does not depend upon our volition, it is the rate at which we allow change to take place which well may depend upon us....This role consists often in altering the rate of change, speeding it up or slowing it down as the case may be; if sacrilege to interfere with it—then, of course, no room is left for intervention" (Polanyi 2001:39).

Endnotes

¹ “People, Pork, Power” demonstration and teach-in on University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, campus, March 5, 2008.

² Charles Broadwell, “Slaughtering Plant Divides Bladen,” *Fayetteville Observer*, January 1, 1992; Lee Weeks, “Region Bullish on Hogs,” *Fayetteville Observer*, November 1, 1994.

³ North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services Statistics, see <http://www.ncagr.com/Stats/>.

⁴ Poultry series in *The Charlotte Observer*, February 10-15, 2008, see <http://www.charlotte.com/poultry/>.

⁵ I interviewed John Council and his family at their farm in Shannon, North Carolina, February 19, 2008.

⁶ Andrew Martin, “Largest Recall on Ground Beef is Ordered,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2008.

⁷ I am drawing here on Marx’s argument that in industrial capitalist societies the division of production and consumption—the separation of “use value” from “exchange value”—leads to commodity fetishism.

⁸ While the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed history of this topic, it is worth mentioning why smallholder agriculture became the nemesis of capitalist modernization. This is important because such ideology remains resilient in economic development practice today.

Post-colonial development practices in the 1950s were intended to raise lesser-developed countries out of poverty and into the competitive economy. Early development theorists (Rostow 1962; Lewis 1963) divided the economy into two sectors, traditional and modern, and embraced a Smithian model of growth in which intensification in the division of labor is suppose to drive mass production and lead to efficiency. Published in 1962, Rostow’s immensely popular *A Non-Communist Manifesto of Growth* was a defense of democratic ideals and capitalism. It represented the incredible optimism of the post-war era, the unbridled success of the United States, and a widespread faith in econometrics. In his proposal Rostow sought to persuade the recently independent African and Asian countries to embrace U.S. capitalist growth models instead of Soviet-style communism. He set forth a uni-linear progression of development along a five-staged path—from traditional society to the preconditions for take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity, and finally to the age of high mass consumption. In this development prescription small-scale agriculture is the antithesis to prosperity and capitalist modernization; the success of the model is predicated on the modern sector subsuming the agricultural sector and manufacturing becoming the engine of growth. According to Rostow, “revolutionary changes in agricultural productivity are an essential condition for successful take-off; for modernization of a society increases radically its bill for agricultural products” (Rostow 1962: 8). Rostow’s claims are important to understand today because his model still has tremendous cache among economic development practitioners and policymakers.

⁹ Polanyi writes, “Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored, be mobilized; land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual money, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power

which, as a rule is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labor, land, and money is entirely fictitious” (2001: 76).

¹⁰ I interviewed Steve Wing and his students on the drive from Raleigh-Durham to Duplin County, February 13, 2008.

¹¹ The Piedmont region also has a history of slavery. There were fewer slaves in the Mountain region of the state. Counties that had more than 10,000 slaves included: Edgecombe, Greenville, Halifax, Warren and Wake Counties, all top producing hog counties today. Data from University of Virginia historical statistics database, U.S. Census data.

¹² It is vital to draw this out more in subsequent research, but beyond the scope of time right now.

¹³ Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan, “Concentration of Agricultural Markets,” Aril 2007, see <http://209.85.173.104/search?q=cache:qf1QjTh2JFIJ:www.nfu.org/wp-content/2007-heffernanreport.pdf+concentration+agricultural+markets+2007+hendrickson+heffernan&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=firefox-a> (accessed April 10, 2008).

¹⁴ The poultry industry, upon which the hog industry was modeled, was launched in Duplin in the 1950s. By 1985, Carolina Turkey, the nation’s largest turkey processing plant was built. Today Carolina Turkey has changed its name to Butterball and is the largest turkey producer in the world. Smithfield owns 49 percent of the company, a joint venture with Maxwell Farms, Inc. Each year over 806 million pigs, turkeys, and chickens are reared and slaughtered in North Carolina alone.

¹⁵ In 2001, Smithfield launched Murphy-Brown LLC, buying up Murphy Family Farms, Brown’s of Carolina, Carroll’s Foods, and Circle Four Farms. The founding of Murphy-Brown is key in the company’s vertical integration strategy.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Leland, “Rural Depression: Farm, Factory Failures Case Shadow on Southern Economy, Country Way of Life,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 16, 1986.

¹⁷ Ronald Smothers, “Spill Puts a Spotlight on a Powerful Industry,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1995.

¹⁸ EPA Press Release, “North Carolina Nonprofit Receives \$100,000 Grant to Reduce Resident’s Exposure to Pollution to Hog Farms,” June 6, 2007, see <http://yosemite.epa.gov/OPA/ADMPRESS.NSF/bb1285e857b49ac4852572a00065683f/f99c1c07c2a71f7a852572f2004f2e93!OpenDocument> (accessed April 8, 2008).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Easley Announces Landmark Agreement with Largest Hog Producer to Replace Open-Air Lagoons in North Carolina, N.C. State University Takes Lead Role in Technology Development,” Press Release issued by the N.C. Department of Justice, July 25, 2000, see http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/waste_mgt/smithfield_projects/smithfieldsite.htm (accessed March 2, 2008).

²¹ Beyond the scope of expanding on now, but important to note: For James O’Connor both “the second contradiction” (Polanyi) and “the conditions of production” (Marx) are important in the formulation of his “conditions of production” (those environmental, personal, and communal conditions that enable production to be carried out), which captures “the umbilical connection between capitalism, the domain of human production, and the realm of biophysical nature” (Castree 2007: 29). According to Noel Castree (2007), “O’Connor’s central argument is that capitalism has a tendency to ‘under produce’ these conditions of production, though not necessarily all at the same time or to the same degree....[because] the biophysical world has a

materiality that capitalist production cannot ultimately master or control” (29). Because conflicts over different views on how to value the biophysical world, as “source of spiritual meaning, aesthetic pleasure, subsistence use-values,” the nation state must keep in check the capitalist system’s internal contradictions and regulate the external conditions of production—all to health so that the economy can be stable and grow. When conflicts arise over such regulations, and become politicized, the state must also mediate. What O’Connor highlights here is that meanings over how problems are framed and actor’s ability to influence regulatory regimes are just as “important as objective realities pertaining to the conditions of production and the substantive economy” (31).

²² Charles Broadwell, “Slaughtering Plant Divides Bladen.”

²³ Julie Power Rives, “Eau-de-pig Doesn’t Please Noses of Farm Neighbors,” *News & Observer*, October 25, 1991.

²⁴ Charles Broadwell, “Slaughtering Plant Divides Bladen.”

²⁵ Ben Stocking, “A stink about Stench: Hog Farms’ Neighbors Hold Noses,” *News & Observer*, June 19, 1992.

²⁶ Gramscian conceptions of “commonsense” and “goodsense” point to how a set of beliefs become widely accepted in society and act in defense of an existing order. According to Gramsci “good sense” challenges “commonsense” in struggles over the ordering of things. In new frontiers, who decides the order of things?

Anna Tsing writes:

A frontier is an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned... Most descriptors of resource frontiers take for granted the existence of resources; they label and count the resources and tell us who owns what... The landscape itself appears inert: ready to be dismembered and packaged for export... Such destruction is not just human nature or the nature of resources. How do ordinary people get involved in destroying their environments, even their own home places? These questions can only be addressed by getting inside our daily habits and our dreams... the frontier is not a philosophy but rather a series of historically nonlinear leaps and skirmishes that come together to create their own intensification and proliferation. As these kinds of moves are repeated, they gain a cultural productiveness even in their quirky unpredictability” (Tsing 2005: 29-33.)

²⁷ Ben Stocking, “A stink about Stench: Hog Farms’ Neighbors Hold Noses.”

²⁸ Smithfield Foods Press Release, “New \$85 Million Smithfield Packing Plant Will Create 206 Jobs in Lenoir County Area,” see http://www.smithfieldfoods.com/Investor/Press/press_view.asp?ID=247, October 13, 2004.

²⁹ Jonathan Cox, “Chicken Plant’s Pullout Ripples Through Chatham,” *News & Observer*, April 3, 2008.

³⁰ Author interview with Libby Manly, February 2007, Raleigh, NC.

³¹ The other lowest union memberships states in BLS rankings include: Virginia (3.7 percent), South Carolina (4.1 percent), Georgia (4.4 percent), and Texas (4.7 percent). Four states had union membership rates over 20.0 percent in 2007--New York (25.2 percent), Alaska(23.8

percent), Hawaii (23.4 percent), and Washington (20.2 percent). See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> (accessed April 2, 2008).

³² “4,300 UAW Workers Ratify Contract with Ford and More Bargaining News,” AFL-CIO Now Blog News, December 17, 2007-January 4, 2008, see <http://blog.aflcio.org/2008/01/07/4300-uaw-workers-ratify-contract-with-ford-and-more-bargaining-news/> (accessed April 10, 2008).

³³ PPP event, Keith Ludlum

³⁴ I interviewed Jennifer Curtis in Carrboro, North Carolina, January 22, 2008.

³⁵ I interviewed four N.C. Choices farm families in the eastern part of the state. All multigenerational farms, three were run by African-American families, the other one by a white family. Interview not directly cited in text include: Lee Menius (outreach coordinator N.C. Choices), phone interview, February 6, 2008; Harold Wright (N.C. Choices farmer), phone interview, February 7, 2008; Mary James (N.C. Choices farmer), phone interview, February 2008.

³⁶ Roberta Sonnino’s examination of saffron production in Tuscany explains this process of embedding and meaning making in the reterritorialization of the local. Drawing on Granovetter’s reworking of Polanyi’s embeddedness argument, she writes, “Social embeddedness is created through a complex process of mobilization of values and meanings that cement the converging interests of different stakeholders around a renewed identity and sense of community. In the case of saffron [or N.C. Choices’ hogs], this identity is crucial not just to establish the boundaries of the network, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to protect them...The local is not a coherent territorial entity. In its configuration, the local is a dynamic and contested social space that embodies different and potentially conflicting needs and interests. It is, in a work, a ‘relational space’--or, as economic geographers have recently conceptualized, a space of interrelated scales and interdependent subjects where ‘the social, economic, political and cultural inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks’” (Sonnino 2007: 69-70).

³⁷ I interviewed Mike Jones in Raleigh, North Carolina, February 10, 2008.

³⁸ Andrew Martin, “Meat Labels Hope to Lure the Sensitive Carnivore,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2006.

³⁹ “Whole Foods Market Closes Acquisition of Wild Oats Markets, Secures \$700 Million Senior Term Loan to Fund Merger and Signs New Five-Year \$250 Million Revolver,” accessed from company website, see http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/investor/pr07_08-28.html; In 2007 Smithfield ranked 217 on Fortune 500 list, Whole Foods ranked 411. In the Food Production Sectors, top companies include: 1) Archer Daniels Midland (corn); 2) Tyson (poultry and pork); Smithfield Foods (pork, turkey, beef); Pilgrim’s Pride (poultry); and Chiquita Brands International (bananas).

⁴⁰ Author interview with Jennifer Curtis, Carrboro, North Carolina, January 22, 2008.

⁴¹ Author phone interview with Genell Pridgin, January 2008.

⁴² Marion Ellis, “Perdue Brings Yellow Chickens to Carolinas,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 21, 1986.

⁴³ Michael Clinebell, “Perdue: Robbins Chicken Factory to Close,” *Fayetteville Observer*, November 14, 2002.

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