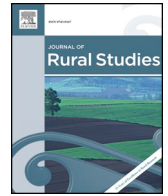




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## Agrarian origins of authoritarian populism in the United States: What can we learn from 20th-century struggles in California and the Midwest?

Maywa Montenegro de Wit<sup>a,1,\*</sup>, Antonio Roman-Alcalá<sup>b,1</sup>, Alex Liebman<sup>c</sup>, Siena Chrisman<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of California Davis, USA

<sup>b</sup> International Institute for Social Studies, Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Lurralde, Chile

<sup>d</sup> National Family Farm Coalition, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president came as a surprise to many – but generally not to farmers and rural communities. We interrogate the politics of rural places in generating both support for and struggle against authoritarian populism. We ask: Why do the politics of the rural US seem so regressive today? What historical forces underlie the recent resurgence of reactionary politics? How does resistance emerge from and produce authoritarian power? Looking to histories of small farmer and farm labor organizing in two agricultural regions – California and the Midwest – we find some answers. California has been a principal site for honing the discourses, strategies, and tactics of consolidating right-wing power in the US. Though often considered a bastion of right-wing sentiment, the Midwest sheds light on a rich tradition of rural organizing that at times led Heartland politics in emancipatory directions. Synthesizing our cases offers the following lessons: First, capitalist growers and business allies in both regions developed new strategies to assert class power through authoritarian populist ideologies and tactics, paving the way for national right-wing successes. Second, socially conservative cultural norms and alliances have been central to organizing this incipient authoritarian populist hegemony. Third, radicalism, liberalism, and liberal policy changes have often fueled the rise of conservative populisms. Fourth, working towards emancipation among non-elites has required working across differences. These lessons provide a roadmap for intersectional and cross-sectoral organizing in contemporary times.

### 1. Introduction

“President Trump has great affection for America’s farmers and ranchers,” ran the US Department of Agriculture press release on May 23, 2019, announcing the second of two multi-billion-dollar bailout packages to compensate farmers for trade-induced losses (USDA, 2019). Rural support for Trump has begun to waver in the face of US-China trade wars, which, though creating both winners and losers, have correlated with an overall decline in farm incomes in Midwestern and Southern states, as well as lower incomes for Western specialty crop farmers (Kleiner, 2019).

So it’s significant that just three years before, farmers were part of the coalition that ushered the ostensibly impossible candidate to victory. Small-town and rural voters went 60 percent for Trump (Balz, 2017). Pundits noted how electoral maps of rural states were painted in Republican red, and rural voters were painted as irredeemable racist

hillbillies not smart enough not to vote against their own best interests (e.g., Rich, 2017; Krugman, 2016). Yet “the farm vote,” we argue, took an outsized chunk of blame for electoral failures that included, among other factors, racialized voter suppression and millions of dollars in free air time for candidate Trump. Subsequent electoral analyses have found that suburban and urban middle-class whites, not the working class or poor, constituted the majority of Trump’s base (e.g., Myerson, 2017). Still, the fact that a majority of rural voters backed an openly racist, misogynistic far-Right candidate merits attention. It turns our gaze, for one, to the long-running structural malaise of capitalist farming – to decades of telling farmers to overproduce cheap commodities for global markets such that growers across the US are now facing unprecedented levels of debt, foreclosures, consolidation, and farmer suicides (Weingarten, 2018; Edelman, 2019). Resentful of D.C. elitism and wary of Clinton’s “too-smart-to-fail” script, rural voters sought relief in an abrupt departure from the status quo. Rhonda Perry, a cattle farmer and

\* Corresponding author. 133 Hunt Hall, University of California, Davis, CA 95616, USA.

E-mail address: [maymontenegro@ucdavis.edu](mailto:maymontenegro@ucdavis.edu) (M. Montenegro de Wit).

<sup>1</sup> These are co-equal senior authors. Alex Liebman, and Siena Chrisman also contributed to the research and writing.

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the program director of Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC), was not at all surprised by the 2016 election. “Nothing happened in November overnight that was not there on October 31,” Perry 2017). The election, she indicates, tuned our ears to an alarm that’s long been clanging – about poverty, dispossession, and alienation of rural people.

In this paper, we interrogate the role of rural places in generating both support for and struggle against right-wing forms of politics, notably that of “authoritarian populism.” Recognizing that populisms exist on both right and left, and that authoritarianism can similarly straddle ideological divides, we maintain that authoritarian populism in the US describes a particular form of reactionary politics: one rooted in settler-colonial racism and refracted through capitalist exigencies of class rule and accumulative power.

As outlined by Scoones et al., 2018, the recent rise of authoritarian populism has seen: the rise of protectionist politics and the embrace of nationalism over regional or global integration, whether in trade blocs or international agreements; highly contested national elections, resonant with broad-brush appeals to “the people,” in which candidates are rewarded for “strong man” talk that pits insiders against outsiders of different colours, religions and origins; growing concern over the “mobile poor,” including refugees and migrants whose presence seems to threaten a shrinking resource base; appeals for security at the expense of civil liberties; a concerted push to increase extractive capitalism at all costs; and, finally, a radical undermining of the state’s ability to support the full range of citizens, while utilising state powers to increase surplus for a minority.

Trump’s record to date fits well within this description: his leveraging of populist rhetoric, economic nationalism, and scapegoating during the campaign season have been closely followed by strongman tactics and reactionary policies in office. Such characteristics have also not gone unrecognized by academics or social movements, whose intrigue can be counted in numerous studies published since 2016 on fascism and authoritarianism (e.g. Borrás, 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2018; Chacko and Jayasuriya, 2017; Gusterson, 2017; Kellner, 2016; Pettigrew, 2017), including key insights on how “rural rage” is stoked in the US by radical decentralized militia and paramilitary groups (Berlet and Sunshine, 2019). Trump has also reignited important debates on the academic Left about “what could be done” to squash authoritarian populism (e.g. Edwards et al., 2017; Faber et al., 2017).

What has been less subject to scrutiny, however, is not the Trump phenomenon, *per se*, but the phenomena that produced Trump. What are the historical roots of authoritarian populism in the US? How has authoritarian populist power been organized, by whom, and to what effect? To what extent has authoritarian populism been centered on rural areas, processes, and peoples? As importantly, how have movements of *non*-elites – especially in rural and agrarian environs – pursued their visions of economic and social justice?

In charting a genealogy of authoritarian populism, we view its historical arc as dialectically related to struggles for emancipation. Shifting manifestations of oppression continually generate counter-strategies, formations, and ideologies of resistance. Such resistances may in turn elicit authoritarian backlash, novel strategies by elites to demobilize movements, splits among non-elite groups, and/or glimmers of emancipation when justice wins the day. We thus assume that authoritarian populism and its opposition are joined at the hip. A second assumption we make is that governments play an ambivalent role in balancing power between authoritarian populists and justice-seeking movements. The State more frequently and efficiently hitches itself to the ruling class than to marginalized communities, and thus operates as a ready apparatus to solidify authoritarian populism. Yet government is also a site in which non-elites advance their goals, with state actions at times providing space for movements to coordinate, enact, and achieve gains based on long-running organization. A third assumption is that social movements are internally contradictory. Composed of many parts, movements are tactically, strategically, and ideologically inconsistent. At times they are riven with class- and identity-based

contradictions; they may even participate in the “Othering” that underpins authoritarian populist power.

Canonical theories of the Other contrast the “self” to the “non-self,” with the practice of Othering serving to exclude and displace other persons from one’s social group to the margins of society, where mainstream social norms do not apply to them, for being the Other (Mountz, 2009). For this paper, we use Othering in this alienating sense, where Othering consists of ‘the objectification of another person or group,’ of practices that ‘create the other,’ and which ignore the complexity and subjectivity of the individual (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2003) – and more importantly, their larger social group. This paper locates Othering within the development of rural politics over the previous century in the Midwest and California. We chose these sites as they represent the two most productive agricultural regions in the US – indeed some of the most productive on Earth. Moreover, both share racialized and gendered dynamics that inhere in this country’s long march of settler-colonialism. Their differences are also important. As we show, the peculiar history of agrarian capitalism in California provides insights into how the discourses and practices of consolidating right-wing power prefigured and laid the groundwork for the success of today’s authoritarian populism. Turning to the Midwest, we examine its relatively unknown history of Leftist organizing. In looking at farmer struggles there from the 1920s through the 1980s, we explore how such efforts successfully linked local rural discontent to broader narratives regarding class conflict and capitalist dynamics. Across cases, we demonstrate how liberal policies and programs have undermined more-progressive organizing at critical junctures, enervating the agrarian movements that have been essential in keeping authoritarian populism at bay.

Our objective is not to explain how specifically Donald Trump ascended to the presidency, but how the lineage of authoritarian populism – of which Trump is merely the current, visible example – informs political possibilities in the present. We begin with an outline of shared history for our cases, then detail each case, describing their theoretical and strategic relevance to the dialectic of emancipatory and authoritarian populist politics. We then offer some case lessons, and conclude by reflecting on the current moment via the dynamics we uncovered historically, addressing national policy proposals for a “Green New Deal.” We conclude with a cautiously optimistic approach for responding to and moving beyond today’s authoritarian populist moment.

## 2. A brief sketch of California and the Midwest

The US Midwest region and the state of California together produce the vast majority of the country’s agricultural value in food and fiber (USDA/ERS, 2019). Separated by a third a continent, the regions feature starkly different climates, farm products, demographics, and histories. But their settlements share the common thread of “manifest destiny.”

In the nineteenth century, as US government edicts drove Native Americans from territories west of the Mississippi, the Homestead Act and other legislation encouraged European immigrants to “settle” these areas. Settlers received legal title to agricultural lands, giving them twin roles as shock troops for territorial expansion and pioneers of a new agrarian capitalist class. Euro-descended settlers “became white” as they vanquished darker skinned peoples (see, e.g. Shoemaker, 1997; Roediger, 1999), garnering racial currency in their new land. A Christian moral ethic also became enshrined in early settler agriculture; lauding perseverance through hardship and reifying man’s dominion over nature (and women), religion helped graft “God and country” onto the homesteading agrarian imaginary.

Underlying these original dispossessions were, paradoxically, Western liberal credos of emancipation. The advance of US agrarians relied upon expanding the enclosures introduced by private property rights across the North American continent, implying not only material dispossession but also an aspirational proprietary ideal: in which

individuals were “liberated” by excluding others from previously common resources. Such freedoms were, of course, epistemologically alien to local Native peoples and premised on the alienation of their own sovereignty (Losurdo, 2014). Through this contradictory project, the US white population west of the Appalachian/Allegheny mountains grew from 1.8 million in 1820 to 15 million by 1860 (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2011). By the time settlers arrived in California, manifest destiny had shifted. In the post-Gold Rush era, vast tracts of arable land, once controlled by Native California tribes, Mexican rancheros, and the US government, were divided up into new private holdings. To meet the scarcity of workers “amber waves of labor” – one immigrant group after another – were pulled through the farmgate “in repetitive cycles of recruitment, employment, exploitation, and expulsion” (Walker, 2004: 66). Some of these groups were white (e.g. the ‘Okies’ of the 1930s), but most were not (e.g. Chinese, Mexicans, Filipinos).

In both California and the Midwest, then, racialized entitlements have deep roots in their land histories. Race has also long been used to divide the working class and undermine emancipatory political change. While prejudices appear to map onto social realities – allowing non-elites to find comfort in narratives of blame – they maintain hegemony by obscuring structural causes of rural depredation. Wage loss, farm debt, rural outmigration, and psychological stress cannot easily be traced to drivers like surplus production and liberalized trade when near-hand human culprits are blamed instead. Powerful agribusiness elite have often promulgated tropes of racial inferiority and undeservedness, stoking anger and resentment among the white working poor and rapidly shrinking middle class. White workers may feel temporarily vindicated, but the precarity of *all workers*, including many whites, in capitalist economies persists.

### 2.1. California: Testing-grounds for authoritarian populist tactics

“A handful of land barons seized the arable lands,” Craig Jenkins wrote of California’s history in (1985: 29).

[They] mobilized an army of farm workers to operate the vast estates, secured governmental programs to tame the arid environment and chaotic markets, and freely used repression to block challenges.

Within the US, California is a rare case of an agricultural economy that was born capitalist (Walker, 2004; Guthman, 2014). Unlike the Midwest, it has no yeoman history – no idealized “family farm” to which to return. California alone accounts for 11 percent of US agricultural output, virtually all of which comes from three areas: the Central Valley, the Central Coast, and the Imperial Valley. The Central Valley — 18,000 square-miles — supports production of dairy products, cattle, vegetables, fruits, and nuts. California’s agri-food economy since the mid-1800s has been structured around “growers” – i.e., agribusiness bosses – and an Otherized laboring class, comprised, with some exceptions, of people of color. Today, the state is 40 percent Latino, and Mexican, Central and South American immigrants – whether permanent residents, guest workers, or undocumented – comprise most of the farm labor force. The growers have historically been diverse, representing numerous ethnicities, cultures, and national origins. Politically they have tended to unite around issues that threaten their continued power. Using the parlance of contemporary politics, the grower class in California is solidly “conservative” or “right-wing.”

In the 19th century, before becoming the nation’s fruit and vegetable basket, California was sown in large-scale wheat monocultures. Since then, the region has seen periods in which smaller-scale enterprises were economically viable and the imaginary of family farming was culturally relevant. For the most part, however, the “family farm” structure – with labor and land connected to family – has been more mythology than real in this state. The actual contours of “California Ag” developed through networks of private sector interests and state enabling mechanisms – from subsidies to support land commodification, distribution, and improvement to public assistance via research and

“management of labor flow” (Brown and Getz, 2008: 1185). Race and racism have always been central to the uneven sweep of California agricultural development, and thus, the state’s broader political-economic history (Almaguer, 2008; Street, 2004). For example, early state policy supported vigilante murder of Indigenous peoples, setting the stage for all later rural growth (see Lindsay, 2015). Anti-Chinese populism, with origins in 19th century San Francisco, introduced the notion that white workers as ‘the people’ were being undermined by the Chinese ‘Other’ (Saxton, 1971). The “Valley of Heart’s Delight,” also known as the Santa Clara Valley, became a fruit production bonanza only because of labor by Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and other (mainly Asian) immigrants; when these workers organized themselves, as they often did, race-based reactionary movements emerged (Tsu, 2013). In this context, grower and political elite handling of farm-centered crises have been laden with racism, xenophobia, and violence.

Since the early 20th century, authoritarian populism as a specific form of hegemonic power developed out of these conflicts, as conservative elites (particularly, the growers) sought new methods of containing working-class struggle. Organizing agrarian labor in the 1930s provoked reaction and organization by the business class, which began developing tools of authoritarian populism that became ever more pivotal to right-wing success through the latter half of the 20th century. As we will see, they proved especially effective at stoking working-class and middle-class resentments.

### 2.2. 1930s: The rise of right-wing power through agrarian struggles

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, was an early effort to bring Californian workers together around an emancipatory program (Hall, 2001). As an anarcho-syndicalist pan-international labor union, the IWW sought to organize workers across industries, including farming, for immediate material gains and to foster a post-capitalist future. The IWW gathered momentum in the early 20th century before largely disappearing by the 1920s due to harsh repression by state and private forces.

A decade after the IWW’s retreat, strikes and workplace resistance in both rural and urban industries prompted action from the liberal political elite. Codified in the 1930s New Deal, the government’s answer to radical restiveness was federal legislation developed and implemented partly in favor of worker interests, rather than narrowly on behalf of capital (Piven and Cloward, 1978; Klare, 1978; Goldfield, 1989).<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of politicians like President Roosevelt and the handful of supportive business elites, the New Deal ameliorated worker anxieties while also buffering their own: the possibility of socialist rebellion. Give workers a welfare net, the logic went, and they are less likely to foment revolution. For many workers – offered access to pensions through work, affordable state medical insurance, and increased ability to unionize – communist insurgency rapidly lost its appeal. Yet ironically some of the labor groups whose agitations prompted the New Deal reforms were later blocked from its benefits: domestic workers and farmworkers were excluded to placate Southern congressmen who defended the imperative to keep these largely black labor forces subjugated and marginal. The New Deal’s support for workers was thus contradictory and uneven. It reinforced existing divisions among the working class along various axes, most notably race and gender. It also strengthened collective bargaining and labor’s position in routinized class struggle, while undermining labor’s longer-term struggle against the inviolability of capital-wage relations.

At the same time, the New Deal had an unintended mobilizing effect on farmworkers in California. Though they were left out of the New

<sup>2</sup> Central to the New Deal’s agriculture policy was “supply management”, which included price floors, grain reserves, land set-asides and other measures to keep prices in check through constraining overproduction. See also the Midwest case study below.

Deal's labor protections, farmworkers began to assert themselves in the fields. They were emboldened, argues historian Kathryn Olmsted, by increasing social acceptance of workplace organization, unions, and workers' rights. A strike wave even began "spontaneously" in California's fields in 1933. As Olmsted describes in *Right Out of California* (2015: 41–42): "In all, thirty-seven strikes involving almost fifty thousand workers delayed or destroyed the harvests of about two-thirds of the state's fruits, vegetables, and cotton." The cotton strike — "the largest farmworkers' strike in US history" (ibid, 40) — ended with government mediation.

While the New Deal bolstered labor's overall position relative to capital, its programs also served grower elites in California. The Central Valley Water Project, for example, was constructed with federal funds during this period, providing cheap water to agribusinesses across the Valley. The grower class, however, soon felt stymied by the pro-labor policies of the New Deal. Already used to squashing the rights of rural workers — tactics honed against the IWW, for instance — the illiberal grower class of California clashed with liberal politics at US federal levels. This antagonism became a breeding ground for authoritarian populist strategies that proved essential to future Californian, and national, politics.

In the 1930s several of these new strategies for the Right emerged. Growers moved beyond ad hoc violence and repression, especially in the context of Communist labor organizing in California's Central and Imperial Valleys. Brute force no longer worked, they realized, due to the critical gaze of New Dealers and increasing public support for labor. In contrast to responses to the IWW, when growers and state actors effectively squashed the movement by brute force and legal action against organizers and their "sedition," in the 1930s growers started to leverage internal working-class divisions and populist rhetoric more consistently. Growers effectively spread these divisive tactics through institutions that linked grassroots conservative activists with corporate elites. One example was the "Associated Farmers" organization, which allied growers and business tycoons and provided a space for nurturing practical and ideological ties between conservatism and populism. Such tactics worked to de-legitimize the emancipatory Left, and remained effective more than 80 years later, during the ascendancy of Trump.

### 2.3. Culture Wars: the holy alliance of social conservatism

The resilience of California's grower class was not primarily based on gaining working-class support through class-driven narratives or economic appeals. Instead, it relied on forging political alliances around socially conservative values. Tying communism to nefarious cultural forces undermining Christianity, "the growers exploited anxieties about challenges to racial, gender, and sexual norms" (Olmsted, 2015: 128). This strategy succeeded in getting white workers — especially the middle class — to oppose multi-ethnic Central Valley workers' struggles, on the premise that these would destroy the white social fabric. Protecting family, community, and nation became tantamount to supporting growers' interests. At the same time, growers benefited from the specter of "outside agitators" who interfered in local issues. Those intruders included Jewish labor organizers arriving from New York City (Jews at the time being considered an inferior "race" to whites) and Mexicans who formed much of the striking agricultural workforce (Mexicans being described as "childish foreigners who needed a firm hand and little pay" [ibid: 111]).

Populist sentiment based on white identity was of course not new to this era. But the Associated Farmers' socially conservative line used longstanding divisions and tensions to engender a reactionary opposition to anything that could be associated with "communism," including even liberal reforms to the labor system pushed by New Dealers. Phillips-Fein (2009, xii) argues against common understandings of conservatism's rise as a popular reaction to cultural-political upheavals of the 1960s. Instead, she suggests:

If we shift focus from cultural to economic issues, it becomes clear that the origin of modern conservative politics and ideology predates the 1960s. ... the roots of the movement's triumph can be found in the disaffection of people very different from the white working class conservatives who are so often seen as central to its rise. It begins instead in the [businessmen] reaction against the New Deal.

Phillips-Fein depicts the essential role of businessmen in US conservatism's success. Other studies complement hers, describing elements of the transition from corporate-driven reaction to the New Deal to modern conservatism steeped in nationalist, populist rhetoric and white supremacy. These include McGirr's (2001) emphasis on the grassroots movements of suburban, well-off whites mobilized by prominent businessmen in the early 1960s; Conner's (2013) "personal history" of the infamous John Birch Society, which effectively mobilized that grassroots and pushed the Right rightward; and Schuparra's (1998) study of how reactionaries won out over moderates in conservative California after WWII. Each of these show California as a key location for the emergence of contemporary conservatism, through the founding of institutions like pro-"free market" think tanks, innovating tactics like propaganda via church-based radio networks, and increasing attention by right-wing leaders to articulating their political-economic agenda to resentments among white voters in order to achieve political success. Individuals and family lines show continuity between generations in this process: today's politically influential Koch brothers learned political values and strategies from their father Fred Koch, a wealthy and powerful founder of the John Birch Society. Such lineages can be traced, but equally relevant are the tactical innovations that link conservative reaction from the 1930s to today.

### 2.4. Spinning stories: mass media and manufacturing populist commonsense

Social conservatism in California relied on new discursive strategies that propagated a populist "commonsense" aligned with business interests. The Associated Farmers, for example, depended heavily on radio, leaflets, newspapers, and civic groups of women and men to disseminate their message. By the 1930s, the professional mass media and the emergent industry of PR — consultants, campaign advisors, and advertisers — also helped to equate labor organizing with communism and civic disorder. The very first purely political campaign consultants, "Campaigns, Inc." started in California, pioneering these anti-communist messaging techniques while serving the state's conservative leaders from Frank Merriam<sup>3</sup> to Richard Nixon. At the time, local prosecutors had begun acting in concert with growers, informants, and anti-communist military intelligence operatives to bring charges against known labor organizers, accusing them of "criminal syndicalism" under California anti-sedition law (Olmsted, 2015: 198). Aside from outcomes that largely favored the growers, these court cases fomented political fear of Communists and radicals in general. Many of the trials were in fact show trials, based upon dubious accusations, designed by experts, and paid for by growers. Along with similarly bankrolled election campaigns against liberals such as gubernatorial candidate and author Upton Sinclair, the trials helped turn public sentiment against workers'

<sup>3</sup> Olmsted recounts how the Associated Farmers took credit for convincing Governor Merriam to oppose an apricot strike effort in Contra Costa County. After the governor's aides were given a tour of the region by Farmers' publicists, Merriam publicly painted the strikers as "alien agitators." Growers, shippers, and businessmen launched their own counter-campaign and, backed by Merriam, solicited telegrams hailing the governor's support and provided press coverage of the whole affair. This strike, according to Olmsted (2015: 160), gave the business class "the opportunity to improve the tactics they would use in future strikes: shaping media coverage and public opinion, working with allies in law enforcement and Sacramento, and deploying vigilantes when necessary."



concerns. Many of the state's leading newspapers – including the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and *Fresno Bee* – ran frequent editorials lambasting both communism and labor, often conflating the two. Majority-owned and published by economic elites, major landlords, and capitalists, these media were directly invested in status-quo agriculture.

The Right, in California and nationally, also began to depict New Deal liberalism as a slippery slope into communism. If all New Deal policy was characterized as “pro-labor” and pro-labor was framed as communism, then anything but an anti-labor position was inimical to commonsense. As Olmsted (2015: 105) points out, author John Steinbeck and other liberal cultural icons inadvertently abetted this right-wing project. While Steinbeck brought rural labor struggles to public attention, he also vilified Communist organizers and overlooked non-whites and women in his depictions of the era's justice-seeking leadership. Reinforcing an assumption that achieving rights for native-born white working-class men was the vanguard of political possibilities, the work of many a New Deal-era writer and artist indicated that inclusion of women, people of color, or immigrants in political vision was at best foolhardy, and at worst “un-American.”

To be sure, many elements of California's early 20th century history depart from Scoones et al.'s definition of authoritarian populism in a strict sense. “Highly contested national elections” did not characterize the landslide victories of FDR in the 1930s. Nor was there a radical undermining of the state's ability to support a social safety net, which applies more clearly to contemporary neoliberal regimes. A reactionary strongman was not yet in the Oval office. Yet strategies were being honed that leveraged longstanding Othering into powerful new cross-class political coalitions, a discriminatory politics that would later suture populist tactics to authoritarian rule.

Authoritarian populism, at its base, has thrived on the creation of one or multiple “Others” (Said, 1979). In a textbook case of appealing to “the people” versus “the others,” pre-World War II populist narratives told ordinary Californians that they would be protected – against outside agitators interfering in local issues, against the breakdown of socially conservative values, and against the threat of Communist rule. Liberal New Dealers who validated farmworker struggles all too easily became spun as communist enablers. Meanwhile, liberals' own narrow visions of race and gender in forming an alternative hegemony were inadequate to cope with ascendant authoritarian power – especially when the Left-baiting narratives were paid for and crafted by California's grower elites.

### 2.5. 1960s–80s: new labor movements, urban/rural interactions, and consolidation of the right

The United Farm Workers (UFW) emerged in the 1960s following decades of failed attempts by other groups to organize farmworkers. Much has been written about the UFW (*inter alia* Bardacke, 2012; Ganz, 2009; Jenkins, 1985), but we focus here on how these rebellions differed from the Communist-influenced efforts of the 1930s. UFW struggles developed alongside the Bracero Program of the US government, which from the 1940s–1960s brought Mexican workers into the country for temporary work (Mitchell, 2010). Promised but never delivered pay equal to native US workers, the *braceros* were harshly treated by employers and disliked by factions of the farm labor movement, including parts of the UFW, which saw them undermining local labor power. The *braceros* were also demonized by conservative politicians who saw in them fearsome dirty foreigners, tainting white America. Under assault from many sides – including critics of *braceros*' presence in California and movements concerned with their dignity and rights – the program was terminated in 1963.

The UFW was not an internationalist workers' movement like the IWW (see Cole et al., 2017). It was a unionization movement to achieve better wages and working conditions for certain parts of the agricultural labor force. Because Mexican-Americans (or “Chicanos”) dominated the

UFW, the movement found traction in ethnic struggles for recognition and representation (particularly citizenship rights) more so than it mobilized a larger anti-systemic vision. Justifiably described as paralleling the civil rights movements for African Americans, the UFW is lauded for achieving more gains than farmworker movements before or since. Still, those gains have been limited and tentative. A half-century after its founding, UFW membership is small, few UFW union contracts remain, and workers remain notoriously exploited (Brown and Getz, 2008: 1186). Paradoxically, the Bracero Program led into a distinctly anti-immigrant positioning of the union: supporting immigration and immigrants was considered antithetical to achieving farmworker rights, even if most of the Mexican-American and Filipino UFW members were themselves from immigrant families.

Though the UFW effort was solidly domestic and sought rights for only a narrow sector of workers, it did create new social connections that had not existed in previous rounds of California farmworker organizing. By partnering with progressive churches, students, and concerned consumers – groups generally more urban than rural – the UFW built broader-based opposition to the grower class. Without the economic pressure that these partnerships enabled, it is unlikely that the UFW's boycotts, particularly on the fresh-grape industry, would have succeeded to the extent that they did. Cross-race alliances were also key: the UFW and the Black Panther Party (BPP) provided mutual support for one another, despite their many contrasts. Although the BPP “was African American, militant, urban, and socialist and therefore differed in nearly every way from the largely Mexican American, non-violent, rural, and Catholic UFW ... [the two groups'] willingness and ability to find class-based commonalities across racial lines ... enabled the UFW and the BPP to form a successful, mutually beneficial alliance” (Araiza, 2009: 200).

### 2.6. The Reagan lens

The rise of Ronald Reagan provides insights into how authoritarian populism matured as a strategy in and through the elaboration of neoliberal capitalism. Vocally anti-communist during the McCarthy era, Reagan made his mark in a 1964 speech, “A Time for Choosing,” delivered in support of far-right Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. In this speech, Reagan spoke to a vision of politics where government was “the problem” and where unbridled market freedoms coupled with individual responsibility were solutions (Reagan, 1964). This retort to both Keynesianism and Communism became a signature of Reagan's later campaign for the California governorship, where he effectively whipped up anti-Soviet zeal, US patriotism, and white supremacy into a glide towards Chicago School ideology. In his governor's run in 1966, Reagan sounded some now-familiar tropes: he promised to “clean up the mess at Berkeley,” while deploying racially coded terms for blacks in “sending the welfare bums back to work.” During the 1969 UFW grape boycott, he ate grapes live on television, directly antagonizing the union and its supporters, but appeasing and energizing his resentment-filled, mostly white base.

As Governor, Reagan cracked down on popular insurgencies of the late 1960s. Student movements against racism and the Vietnam War and for “free speech” (particularly at University of California, Berkeley) were causing such disruption, in Reagan's view, that “law and order” was the necessary response. Liberals like University of California President Clark Kerr, Reagan suggested, were only enabling the rabble. Whether critiquing Washington D.C. or the UC, Reagan continued to argue, as he had in his '64 Goldwater speech, that “a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol” was using government to run roughshod over “our rights” to “plan for ourselves” (Reagan, 1964).

Reagan took these populist tactics to the 1980 presidential election campaign. Entering the political limelight through a career in television and film and a brief US-based military detour, he was best known for his “avuncular style, optimism, and plain-folks demeanor” (Dreier, 2011). As he pivoted from a Roosevelt-supporting actor to a Goldwater-

conservative, Reagan quickly settled into the laissez-faire, free-market logics that would define his legacy. Together with UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Reagan helped neutralize the political ferment of a generation – anti-Vietnam unrest, the civil rights movement, the free speech movement, the environmental movement – by splitting their critique of capitalist corporations away from their indictments of an interventionist state (Harvey, 2005).

The hitch, of course, is that neoliberalism has always needed government (and arguably big government) in order to function (Busch, 2010; Barandiarán and Gottlieb, 2018). While the utopian economic design posits an invisible hand with little state intervention, the political project knows better – and so did Reagan. As president, he refined the notion that a neoliberal state performs essential functions. It must provide the legal and institutional apparatus to ensure private property rights. It must bolster industry through investment, research and infrastructure, and tax alleviation policy. Importantly, it must use the coercive powers of intelligence, military, and police to surveil, make war, and keep restive populations in line.

Reagan and his circles thus ushered in contemporary global capitalism through strategies developed starting in the 1930s, deepened through subsequent decades of conservative organizing, and honed under his governorship of California. Across a career that had him send in the National Guard to suppress university uprisings (resulting in one death and many injuries), support a repeal of Second Amendment protections (specifically to take away Black Panthers' ability to protect themselves from police), and continually squash the rights of non-white immigrants, he continued to project avuncular likeability, and indeed is often remembered as the country's most popular leader. This potent mix of authoritarianism, populism, and charisma, we suggest, helped to unleash neoliberalism, the dysfunction of which produces the very conditions under which reactionary politics grow.

### 2.7. The US Midwest: blocking highways, badgering politicians, and penny-auctioning in corn country

In contrast to California, where a powerful “grower class” of farmers honed authoritarian populist tactics against organized farm labor, in the Midwest, farmers have often been the underdogs. The region's history also created a finer crosshatch of antagonistic lines. Farmers have frequently been divided by scale, with larger-scale farmers<sup>4</sup> and industrialists allied not only against smaller farmers but also against rural labor and the rural poor.

The Midwestern Corn Belt spans Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin; some analyses also include North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas (Green et al., 2017). Those first eight states have over 127 million acres of agricultural land, 75 percent of which is now in corn and soybeans (USDA, 2017a). Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) account for much of the output as well. Despite an expanding population of Latino, African, Southeast Asian, and other migrants lured by jobs in meatpacking plants and dairies, the region is overwhelmingly white. Most farms are still family-run, but changes in federal agriculture and trade policy – which dismantled supply management and price supports while entrenching corporate and transnational export markets – have caused farms to grow in recent decades, concentrating wealth in fewer hands and increasing inequality (FWW, 2012). In Iowa, for example, the number of hog farms dropped from 49,000 in 1982–8800 in 2007, while the total number of hogs raised in the state nearly doubled; the size of the remaining hog farms grew nearly 11-fold. Similar patterns of corporate concentration are evident across all farming sectors and related industries (Howard, 2016; MacDonald et al., 2018).

Midwestern farming, built on family-owned and -run operations,

<sup>4</sup> Here, we define larger scale primarily in terms of land under production, though the acreage considered “large” has changed significantly over time.

generated markedly different cultural and political precedents than those in California. In the Midwest, agriculture pre-dated capitalist agribusiness by a long shot: farms functioned both as homesteads and as systems of production, providing a stronger sense of re-productive relationships surpassing exchange value. Roy Robbins (1942: 268) argued that the erosion of these ties goes all the way back to the Homestead Act, which besides dispossessing Native Americans, subordinated the interests of the farmers it purported to help to corporations and speculators.

Today, the industrial model of agriculture is firmly entrenched in the Midwest, both culturally and economically, as groups like the American Farm Bureau Federation and commodity trade associations have laced their own interests into the imperatives placed upon the ever-declining numbers of rural residents who remain. Industrial agriculture is “patriotic” and required to “feed the world.” To question this logic smacks of fringe attitudes spanning New Age hocus pocus to hyper-educated elitism. But all are anathema to the dominant educational, business, and religious institutions in the rural Midwest, which have collectively provided fertile ground for authoritarian populism in the last decade. With the exceptions of Illinois and Minnesota, all Midwestern states' electoral votes went for Donald Trump.

Yet, time and again, farmers across the region have risen to contest dominant trends. Forging cross-sector alliances, they have sought to re-establish farmer control over land, community, and institutions for transformative social and political change. We focus here on two periods of radical farmer organizing in the upper Midwest: (1) Left agrarian populist movements between 1910 and 1930 in response to diminishing farm profitability and low farmgate prices, and (2) rural reactions to the 1980s farm crisis. The ways in which these farmers and organizers combined grassroots protest tactics and Left populist ideologies link these case studies across time.

### 2.8. Left agrarian populism: The Non-Partisan League and the Farm Holiday Association

Left agrarian movements trace their roots to the late 19th-century Populists who, in opposition to the rise of monopoly corporations in the 1870s, united the “producing classes” against “organized capital” across the Midwest (Goodwyn, 1978: 118, 115). Although philosophical and strategic rifts eventually led to the Populists' demise, the construction of a multisectoral movement to combat class rule had a profound and lasting impact on US rural politics, and was reflected in later efforts like the Non-Partisan League (NPL). As Hannan (2004: 15) notes, the NPL successfully fueled resentment toward existing elites by “condemning them as the oppressors who used patronage and controlled railways, banking, and grain elevators in order to ensure the continuance of their economic dominance.” Significant to the architecture of rural emancipatory political formations, the NPL, like its Populist predecessors, built alliances between farmers and workers. For example, Minnesota NPL agrarians and state labor federations supporting a transit workers' strike combined forces to found the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party in 1920 (Brody, 1983: 145).

By the 1930s, the Farm Holiday Association (FHA) emerged in Iowa and Minnesota to become the most successful Depression-era agrarian social movement. While never constituting a majority of rural farmers, the core initiatives focused on raising commodity prices above the cost of production (Vollan, 2011). The FHA gained power and momentum through radical tactics such as blocking highways, badgering congressional representatives, and using “penny auction” techniques to cushion the disastrous effects of farm foreclosure. As farmer Harry Terrell recalled in an interview with Studs Terkel (1971), solidarity among farmers during the Great Depression included “10-cent sales,” in which neighboring farmers would show up at bank auctions, buy items at negligible costs, and return them to the farmers. FHA actions also involved holding items off the market, as farmers sought to increase the prices they received.

FDR's New Deal included measures for farmers suffering from the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl – a massive loss of soil from the central and southern Plains caused by conversion of prairie into annual agriculture (Worster, 1979). Just as FHA had advocated, New Deal “parity pricing” set a floor price for commodities based on their cost of production. This guaranteed farmers a fair price and the ability to make a living from the farm. Parity worked alongside and through a larger supply management system, wherein the government bought surplus commodities to maintain floor prices and stored them in reserves to be brought back on the market at times of scarcity, speculation, or hoarding. Mandated conservation programs also limited supply by keeping land out of production.

New Deal supply control policies provided much needed relief for indebted farmers. In the “parity years,” from 1941 to 1953, the floor price was set at 90 percent of parity (i.e., purchasers were mandated to pay 90 percent of the cost of production) and the prices farmers received averaged 100 percent of parity (Naylor, 2011).<sup>5</sup> The program meant that purchasers of commodities paid the actual price of their production, while the cost to government, responsible only for purchasing the surplus, was much lower than it has been in the decades since parity was eliminated (Ray et al., 2012). Some late New Deal programs also organized social services and conservation, with significant farmer control and autonomy at local and regional levels.

However, several of these more progressive New Deal elements faltered as war-time policy focused on maximizing production (Gilbert, 2015). One reason was that, as in California, organizations like the FHA lost their ability to influence farmers mollified by New Deal government checks (Vollan, 2011). Another reason was that the rise of the American Farm Bureau Federation in the 1930s had revolved around its successful lobbying for FDR's Agricultural Adjustment Act, ensuring price floors for a large variety of crops. Yet, the Farm Bureau prioritized membership of commercial farmers, with 6 percent of low-income farmers belonging to the Bureau in 1942 compared to 30 percent of high-income growers (Brody, 1983: 160). While the FHA had long advocated for policy measures finally established under the New Deal, the mainstream agrarian organizations the New Deal enrolled effectively limited solidarity by first exacerbating wealth inequality among farmers and then erasing the institutional memory developed within these radical movements to begin with. The power of the FHA thus declined by 1937, as the movement which had helped usher in New Deal farm relief legislation never again achieved its earlier levels of success (Vollan, 2011).

## 2.9. 1940–1970s: Pacifying radicalism and fostering agribusiness

Following World War II, key agribusiness interests began advocating removal of the agricultural production controls and price supports that had kept rural areas solvent – and relatively passive – for decades. Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight Eisenhower, pushed for these reforms during his eight-year tenure, famously telling farmers to “get big or get out”, while business groups advanced policies to address what they saw as the inefficiencies of farming in an age of increasing technological advances. One of these, the Committee for Economic Development (CED), described the chief “farm problem” as a “persistent excess of resources, particularly labor” – that is, too many farmers.

<sup>5</sup> Price floors and production controls were eliminated in the 1996 farm bill, the “Freedom to Farm” Act – and dubbed “Freedom to Fail” by some farm activists in the years since. Indeed, in the last decade, the commodity prices farmers have received on the open market have hovered around 37 percent of the cost of production (USDA, 2015). Yet while critics malign farm subsidies, crop insurance, and other supports, these are efforts to solve the structural problem of overproduction, filling for farmers the gap between prices received and prices paid.

The CED plan detailed how to eliminate one-third of farm families, moving them off the land and into towns and cities, where their labor was more in demand (CED, 1962). Federal and state policy soon followed these recommendations, telling farmers to plant “fencerow to fencerow” – and to “adapt or die” (Risser, 1976). For urban industries seeking employees, the newly freed labor force was advertised as docile: an Iowa Development Commission bulletin luring industry to the state promised, “These Iowa ex-farm boys are just plain God-fearing Sons of Toil. ... They aren't radicals. Farm boys don't believe in radicals” (Iowa Development Commission, 1950). Rural industries, meanwhile, turned their attention to dismantling New Deal supply management. Corporations such as Archer Daniels Midland and Cargill were instrumental in replacing New Deal-era loan programs and land-idling arrangements with direct subsidies that supported low prices for commodity purchasers. If previously supply control had propped farm prices up through limiting over-production, under the new rationale, supply could balloon, prices could plummet and the federal government could be responsible for payments to keep farmers (barely) afloat. As Ayazi and Elsheikh (2015: 24) put it: “The winners and losers were clear under such policies: corporate buyers could acquire commodity crops for record low prices that were subsidized by the federal government while farmers continued to lose their lands and their income.”

As productivism<sup>6</sup> deepened its hold on postwar US agriculture, the US State and Agriculture Departments offered their logic and technologies globally through the so-called “Green Revolution”. New markets for seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides were on the US radar, as was containment of restive peasantries and Soviet geopolitical influence. Back at home, of course, not all farmers supported the technical and structural revolution underway. US movements like the FHA proudly thwarted agribusiness through grain dumping and withholding production; their penny auctions and highway blockades trouble what is often cast as monolithic bloc of productivist American growers enrolled in a patriotic mission to “feed the world.”

These alter-voices, however, were being pushed out of agriculture. The CED plan and its “get big” imperatives underlay large-scale structural transformations of the Midwest from smaller diversified farms to large grain enterprises. The coining of “agribusiness” in 1955 by USDA Assistant Secretary of Agriculture John Davis further pushed discourse away from Left populist and centrist New Deal ideas and toward commodity-oriented corporate capitalism (Cullather, 2010: 105). Reflecting shifting political alignments, agribusiness eroded the vitality of rural movements not, as is often suggested, by unleashing free-market capitalism, but rather via what Hamilton (2014: 564) describes as “technological determinism to justify a combination of minimal government oversight and maximum state subsidization to help vertically integrated corporations consolidate their market power”.

The Cold War specter of Soviet-influence further bolstered agribusiness power in the late 50s through the 70s. By inciting backlash against the remnants of New Deal-era farm programs, Red scares shrouded the advancement of agribusiness and agribusiness-friendly policy in red-white-and-blue. Mainstream farm and labor organizations cunningly eroded alliances between farmers and farmworkers – previously a central bloc of solidarity in radical rural politics. The American Federation of Labor, for example, advocated against farmer-labor coalitions because farmers were “middle-class, propertied, often employers of labor.” The Farm Bureau and National Grange similarly sought to distance themselves from labor concerns, arguing that industrial-worker wage increases “influence farm wages and farm hours in the same way, and still further decreased farm production and increase farm costs” (Brody, 1983: 148).

<sup>6</sup> Productivism is the “doctrine that increased production is intrinsically desirable and that all parties benefit from increased output” (Buttel, 2005: 276).



## 2.10. 1980s: return of radical agrarianism

High grain prices and land values meant that many farmers lived large through the 1970s buying new equipment and taking care of long-neglected repairs. A few, though, saw how the gutting of federal supply management programs would raise their costs and lower their prices. Some of these formed the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) in Colorado in 1977, pledging not to buy, sell, or produce farm supplies or commodities until Congress addressed farm prices through a return to parity pricing. With an understanding of their powerlessness in a marketplace dominated by agribusiness, AAM farmers looked for new allies to build their political leverage, including building relationships with striking unions and adopting “the confrontational approach of groups they once reviled as ‘radical’” (Levitas, 2002: 168).

AAM tactics included “tractorcades” in which tens of thousands of tractors would descend on the capitol, marches accompanied by farm animals, and many other forms of protest. After a violent standoff with police on a bridge protesting Mexican produce imports, one Georgia farmer who was arrested said, “I used to think only Nazis and blacks were jailed like that. I felt like going to Martin Luther King, digging up his grave, dusting him off, and shaking his hand to apologize” (ibid: 174). However, the conservatism of many AAM members, its ideology of agrarian fundamentalism, and its frustration with policy reforms made members easy targets for racist enculturation and recruitment by groups such as the Posse Comitatus, John Birch Society, and Ku Klux Klan. Many members got caught up in conspiracy theories about the Jewish-backed “One World Government” and followed right-wing propaganda. AAM eventually split, with one side, AAM, Inc., focused on Washington strategy and repudiating violence, while the grassroots AAM became increasingly and openly anti-Semitic (ibid.).

AAM founders’ fears about a future without supply management were proven correct as the decade turned. The 1980s farm crisis hit, a perfect storm of falling land values, skyrocketing inflation and interest rates, and glutted grain markets after the US suspended sales to the USSR following the invasion of Afghanistan (Edelman, 2003). These factors were exacerbated by increased and sometimes illegal farm foreclosure activity by USDA lenders. Without a floor price to stabilize the market, farmers who had leveraged their land assets to make new purchases, often at the encouragement of lenders (Schwab, 1988), suddenly found themselves with nothing as land values plummeted nearly overnight. By 1990, there were nearly a quarter million fewer farms than a decade earlier (USDA/NASS, 1991) – an average loss of more than 500 farms per week. The farms took the communities with them: factories, small businesses, schools, and churches closed and eventually whole towns dried up. The loss scarred those who remained, as mental health advocates at the time suggested it was so emotionally and financially significant that it traumatized not only families, but entire rural communities, leaving swathes of the country with chronic long-term stress and depression. Suicides, spousal abuse, and other violence spiked (Heffernan and Heffernan, 1986).

The same right-wing, “anti-government” militia groups that had infiltrated AAM again recruited farmers in distress. They were not without success (see Dyer, 1997) but ultimately, they were out-organized in the 1980s by the Left. One of these organizers, Rhonda Perry of the Missouri Rural Crisis Center, says,

Missouri was one of the core states where we were able to create the alternative – and that was that the fight back was going to be about hope, coming together, fairness, and the realization that we couldn’t win justice in isolation from the rest of people in society. (personal comm. 2017).

Organizing began locally and organically, around kitchen tables and in church basements, as people tried to figure out what was happening and how to stem the tide of foreclosures, or at least help each other. They identified needs, from food pantries to raising awareness to political engagement, and founded local and state organizations to address

them. These regional efforts joined together through national networks, including the National Council of Churches, National Catholic Rural Life and Rural America, a Washington, DC-based non-profit with field offices around the country, which was founded by and had been training younger and college-educated activists since the mid-1970s (Mooney and Majka, 1995). Organizers looked to their history, holding an “old-timer’s conference” to learn from Farm Holiday Movement veterans, and reviving protest tactics like penny auctions.

Echoing a key civil rights-era strategy, the immediate help drew people in, where they could be educated and mobilized to action. Bob Zellner, discussing organizing in poor white regions of the Mississippi Delta with civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, puts it this way: “racism is very high up on the value system of a lot of white Southerners, but it’s not always at the top. Maybe a strong union or a good education or better income might trump their racism” (Barnes n.d.) making them willing to work with black neighbors to achieve material ends. In the rural white Midwest, this meant establishing an analysis of the farm crisis that presented solutions as only winnable through broad-based and multiracial coalitions. Movement narratives, disseminated personally and through publications, focused not on the proximate causes of inflation, contracting export markets, and plummeting land values, but on the pro-corporate changes to government farm policy since the parity years, linking the plan to move farmers off the land to anti-worker policies and disinvestment in majority-black cities. Movement allies included black-led farm groups such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Democratic Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson, the Black Congressional Caucus, the United Auto Workers and International Machinists, environmentalists who had long been pitted against farmers, urban churches as far away as New York City, and musicians like Willie Nelson – whose Farm Aid concerts provided emergency living expenses for farmers, start-up funds for rural organizations, and hope to farm country that someone was paying attention (George-Warren, 2005).

In terms of policy, the farm movement sought to re-link farm prices to parity. In the deregulatory and free market haze of the Reagan years, supply management was an unlikely goal to advance, when even “most Democratic politicians were busily disassociating themselves from ‘the old new deal liberalism’ much less economic planning and production controls” (Summers, 2001: 309). And yet, as testament to the political power the farm movement built, nearly all the Democratic candidates in the 1984 and 1988 presidential election cycles pledged to support the basic tenets of supply management. The “Save the Family Farm” Act, a 1987 farm bill proposal that included price supports, conservation provisions, and production controls, very nearly became law, with support from farm movement’s allies in the Congressional Black Caucus and some farm state legislators who, because of the protests, “found it personally unpalatable but politically impossible” (Browne, 1988: 222) not to vote for the legislation.

The National Save the Family Farm Coalition,<sup>7</sup> established in Washington as a policy voice for three dozen rural organizations, advanced credit legislation to halt the most egregious foreclosure actions and give struggling farmers opportunities to restructure their debt. Reagan, champion of free market logics, signed the 1987 Agricultural Credit Act, saving an estimated 70,000 additional farms from foreclosure (NFFC n.d.). The approval of the Credit Act rescued many farms immediately and removed some of the urgency of the moment.

Further mollifying farmer discontent were a string of profitable years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, buoyed by federal corn ethanol mandates. These policies, in combination with ever-decreasing farmer numbers, meant that the active agrarian movement dwindled, despite farm consolidation and all its economic impacts continuing at a rapid clip. Republican Party base-building, including giving increased importance to “cultural issues” such as abortion and gun rights, focused in

<sup>7</sup> Now known as the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC).



large part on rural areas like the Midwest. The national imaginary of the Heartland shifted accordingly, erasing its progressive moments and allowing the Right to use rural myths to construct its own authenticity.

Such historical distortions —taken up in other contexts by Carney (2002) and Patel (2013) — are designed to make convenient fictions real. Just as Carney unseated dominant narratives of white plantation-owner agricultural expertise and Patel illuminated how “Green Revolution success” stories enable the continued marshaling of consent for “feeding the world,” so too does the Midwest have its own myth-makers. It's vital that we reclaim the richer stories – tractorcades, parity pricing, radical agrarians, and all – because without such reminders, emancipation becomes impossible. New futures require histories that rationalize their alternate trajectories.

### 3. Lessons learned

Looking at California and the Midwest together offers the following lessons:

First, *far from evincing a wholly unique political phenomenon, authoritarian populism in the US is best seen as an extension of settler-colonial white supremacy, whose protagonists continuously refined their strategies for sustaining political power.* Importantly, these innovations increasingly relied upon mobilizing whites' resentments against non-white ‘Others’ in order to generate cross-class alliances that protected grower-capitalist interests and deflected energy/attention from mobilizing against the dominant social order. In California, these tactics evolved and took hold among the grower class in the 1930s, underpinning the rise of Republican Party conservatism and, later, the entry of neoliberalism. In the Midwest, the ascendancy of agribusiness dovetailed with extant religious and social conservatism, cementing a right-wing bloc that gained power throughout the 20th century. In both regions, productivist ideology has contributed to validating authoritarian agendas. Whether in California, where surplus was a constitutive feature of its commodity farm origins, or in the Midwest, where a “productivist coalition” (Buttel, 2005: 276) included larger-scale farmers, agribusiness firms, state agencies, and land-grant institutions, authoritarian populism has long fed off agreement among elites that the underlying goal of agriculture is increased productivity: to “enable progressive farmers to modernize their way out of their problems (as opposed to seeing populism and socialism as attractive alternatives).” (ibid)

White rural identity has also been important in reifying authoritarian populism in both regions. In the Midwest, Scandinavian and German immigrants homesteaded a landscape recently populated by Indigenous peoples. Europeans' ‘productive’ improvement of the land through agriculture legitimized white settlement, in contrast to Indigenous bison management, foraging, and subsistence land uses widely viewed as ‘natural.’ Yet, the opening of the prairies also served as a release valve for class conflict on the East Coast, with relatively poor homesteaders acting more as the foot soldiers of imperial expansion than its architects. While Populist-era farm owners tended to obscure the violent, dispossessive histories beneath their landed status, they often maintained an astute analysis of capitalist development and exploitation. In this milieu, deeply racialized pasts of land settlement and landholding combined with homesteading individualism and shifting class consciousness to shape white farmer identity through the 20th century. California's more recent experience, glimpsed through the revolving door of immigrant, poor, and non-white labor, is one in which an ascendant class of growers and business allies helped couple conservatism and populism while discrediting the Left. Jewish labor organizers and Latino farmworker leaders, for example, who could be depicted as ‘outside agitators’ arriving to destabilize (*de facto* white-dominated) local politics.

Together, productivism and white rural identities helped wedge Reaganism's pioneering neoliberalism into place nationally. Ironically, if not unexpectedly, forty years onward, it is the ramifications of neoliberal policy that has propelled new authoritarian populists to power.

As Wall Street elites rack up extravagant profits while Washington remains deaf to the needs of rural non-elites, as farm debt balloons and rural outmigration increases, and as ‘free trade’ pits farmers worldwide against each other in wars of surplus dumping, contemporary authoritarian populism manifests as a vitriolic backlash to the crises of neoliberalism. Farmers turned, with anger, hope, and/or frustration, to the candidate promising a new nationalist agenda, who made appeals to the rural and working classes, and who (unlike reigning plutocrats) did not overtly treat farmers as if they lacked intelligence. In previous periods, groups like the FHA and, later, National Save the Family Farm Coalition had provided an ideological and organizational counter-weight useful to those rural people facing loss of dignity and life prospects. The significant decline in influence of these rural movements, we argue, has left a gap that white nationalism has filled, building a populist base for the Right, and eventually Trump's ascendance to power.

Second, *socially conservative cultural norms and alliances have been central to organizing authoritarian populist hegemony.* Religious piety, patriarchal family values, anti-gay sentiment, opposition to abortion, and other social conservative issues have long aligned rural voters with candidates whose policies continued to serve the political-economic elite. Yet socially conservative values do not appear or travel by themselves. It took keen politicians, an active media apparatus, farmer organizations, churches, industry lobbyists, and grassroots groups acting in collaboration with industry front groups (such as women's clubs) to generate popular identification with these values, which remain a potent political force across the country, especially in the Midwest and South.<sup>8</sup> In the Midwest, egalitarianism, meritocratic ideals, and shared religiosity have subdued triggers of social unrest: well-to-do farmers rarely flaunt their wealth, while gathering spaces such as local churches and school sporting events maintain community bonds despite widening wealth inequality. As a corn-soybean farmer told one of our authors, overlooking a crowd of greasy, sweaty farmers at a mid-summer equipment auction in southwest Minnesota: “You do realize that everyone here has a net worth of at least a few million, right?”

Back in the 1980s, British scholar Stuart Hall explained Margaret Thatcher's rise to power as the successful articulation of capitalist interests to the fears and “commonsense” of British working classes (Hall, 1979 1985). Bob Jessop and colleagues found Hall's analysis to be overly “ideologistic” (Jessop et al., 1985), downplaying Thatcherism's structural underpinnings and setting a dangerous precedent for future failures on the Left. Looking today at the wealth of evidence that right-wing forces have built their hegemonic bloc via think tanks, church groups, media organizations, PR firms, and political party formations (Diamond, 1995; Berlet and Lyons, 2000; Klein, 2014; Leonard, 2019), it seems that Hall's analysis better explains key features of US authoritarian populism, and is perhaps useful for Left movements worldwide. How do we begin to develop a coherent account of right-wing and authoritarian populist power? Trump's ascendancy, the histories above indicate, had roots in political traditions much deeper and older than suggested by his “outsider candidate” status. Leveraging common sensibilities around free market ideology, Christian conservatism, American exceptionalism, and racialized and xenophobic scapegoating of “Others,” Trump managed to defy the expectation of media pundits and pollsters, eking out electoral victory based on the strategic targeting of rustbelt voters in a few key states. Ideological projects matter.

Structure matters too, of course, as has been apparent throughout the organization of property rights, commodity markets, finance capital, and international trade regimes that connect the landed classes of

<sup>8</sup> While California rarely lands in media portrayals as a center for conservative politics, the state remains no stranger to racism or authoritarianism. Outward white supremacist organizing has gone on for decades in the state, and remains alive in the present (SPLC, 2018). In 2016, Trump captured majorities in almost all the state's rural counties.

the early 20th century rural US to real estate tycoons of today. In fact, the recent US-China trade spat has revealed that ideological fealty rests partly upon structural provisions. With offshore markets for their crops at risk, some US farmers' faith in President Trump has been shaken to its core. "Between burning bridges with all of our biggest trading partners and undermining our domestic biofuels industry, Trump is making things worse, not better," said president of the National Farmers Union, Robert Johnson in a press statement in August 2019 (NFU 2019). Still, NFU is a political outlier, and despite their and other farm lobby critiques of administration policies, many farmers continue to back Trump.

Third, *liberalism and liberal policy changes have often fueled the rise of conservative populisms*. Social conservative forces combined synergistically, though unintentionally, with the efforts of liberals, like Roosevelt in the 1930s, Clinton in the 1990s, and Obama in the 2010s. Liberalism has fostered authoritarian populism in four key ways: (1) by delegitimizing and undermining radicalism (especially apparent in the way New Dealers highlighted the threat of communism and undermined Communists' organizing work); (2) by acting as a bulwark against further-Left change through mollifying social policies (as seen when higher farm prices, however temporary, quieted unrest in the countryside); (3) by exacerbating wealth inequality among farmers (when omnibus programs like the Farm Bill favored certain classes and colours); and (4) by cultivating commonsenses that turned US farmers into capitalist subjects, limiting the horizons of emancipatory thought.

While storybook histories of the 1930s inevitably draw attention to Roosevelt bolstering a nation in times of crisis, the seeds of authoritarian populism were firmly planted under New Deal liberalism and nurtured by farmworker struggles, while conservative narratives hitched both to the specter of an always-worse communism. This demonization of radical insurgency relied on both coercion and consent: the former through a spike in vigilante violence, policing, and anti-labor legal actions; the latter through cultural persuasion, mass media and a nascent PR machine. Liberal figures in FDR's administration did not intervene consistently or forcefully enough on labor's behalf to balance the scales against heavy influence of growers and their allies. In the absence of sustained federal pressure, local and regional governments helped entrench authoritarian populist hegemony.

Liberal culture-creators and politicians also contributed – usually inadvertently – to an emerging national commonsense that precluded many forms of emancipatory politics. This commonsense centered on ideals of marketization – heard in the repeated concerns of both parties for efficient and rational government spending – but also includes the "bootstraps" individualism of American meritocracy. These discourses limited the emancipatory horizon to "jobs" for the jobless, citizenship for the undocumented, and CEO-ships for a few lucky minorities. They framed as normal the objective of perpetual economic growth, implicitly squashing imagination of, let alone dialogue about, alternatives to capitalism. From the perspective of liberals, these were simply "realistic" assessments of political possibility. From our analysis, liberal commonsenses provided fertile ideological space into which the Right effectively asserted itself, while simultaneously distracting non-elites from potentially emancipatory proposals.

Fourth, *emancipatory advances among non-elites required working across differences*. Urban-rural, worker-farmer, and racial divisions had to be countered with convincing, alternative explanations for those divides and with visions for overcoming them through solidarity. The Midwest's Non-Partisan League's unification of worker and farmer interests exemplified such collaboration in the early 20th century. In California, some of the UFW's greatest successes came out of its partnerships with urban sectors, including with the more-radical Black Panthers (Araiza, 2014). In the early 20th century, a shared ideology of "Equal Rights" facilitated solidarity between Midwest farmers and workers, both groups self-identifying as "producers" who fought victimization at the hands of exploiters (Brody, 1983). During the 1980s, a primarily white Midwest farm movement also created alliances with

black farmers, urban sectors, and faith organizations. White farmer activists reached beyond their comfort zones to build non-exclusionary power, undermining the Othering of Blacks and urbanites as they developed and spread critical, structurally-based explanations for the farm crisis.

Samir Amin (2011: xvii) notes that for too long, the disenfranchised have remained on the defensive – always facing the "offensive of capital" to dismantle whatever they had conquered in previous decades. What they need, he argues, is to nurture cross-group alliances, building social power through a "convergence in diversity." For the Non-Partisan League, the UFW, and the Black Panther Party, encounters with authoritarian regimes meant embracing ideological differences over a broad spectrum of the Left while facing problems – such as patriarchy and racism – within their own ranks. Doing so subdued authoritarians' ability to pit 'the people' against 'the Other' and strengthened egalitarian practices in typically Othered communities. Both moves provided a bulwark against the social "panicking" from which authoritarian populism grows (Wallerstein, 2010).

#### 4. Conclusions: what does this mean for the current political moment?

The 2018 midterm elections saw the Democratic Party regain the House of Representatives, creating a putative barrier to Trump's and the Republicans' agenda. New Left-leaning members of Congress, notably Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, are avowed democratic socialists who have made waves in part by building a coalition for a "Green New Deal" (GND). Centered on massive federal investments to decarbonize infrastructure and industry, the GND proposes to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in sectors from transportation to agriculture, while creating millions of "good, high-wage jobs" (H.R. Res, 2019). Senator Bernie Sanders has now included the GND in his presidential platform, asserting that the scope of the challenge ahead is similar to that faced by FDR in the 1940s, when "the United States came together, and within three short years restructured the entire economy in order to win the war and defeat fascism" (Sanders, 2019).

Of course, defeating fascism now, as then, will take much more than solar panels and electric cars. Grassroots justice networks have rightly raised concerns about the "green capitalist" trajectories that a GND could take. The Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) and Cooperation Jackson, among others, argue that solutions like carbon markets and eco-technologies controlled by US corporations will do little to counter the expansionary, exploitative logic of capitalist development (Lazare, 2018). A "just transition," CJA (2018) suggests, requires more than job retraining – it must prioritize justice and equity, and be "a tool to build grassroots power."

Our foregoing analysis suggests that the Green New Deal is best approached with cautious optimism. For one, we should be wary of any liberal democratic policymaking cast as an emancipatory strategy. It is hard to see a just transitions pathway, for example, in some GND proposals that emphasize state-private industrial renewal for key transportation sectors, or that pour trillions of dollars into batteries for cars rather than focus on city-planning to discourage driving (Ajl, 2019). More attention is needed as well to the resource inputs for tech-heavy green conversions (Bernes, 2019). Inputs always come from somewhere, be it tribal lands in the US, Western China, or the Amazon, and at the end of their lives, the material stuff of renewables (like solar panels) still produces toxic trash that becomes someone else's dirty water or desecrated land (Mulvaney, 2019). At the same time, we should not expect Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, nor any politician to articulate an anti-imperialist agenda. "That is the job," as sociologist Max Ajl (2019) puts it, "of a functional left." This Left should also recognize that no Green New Deal will emerge perfectly formed from the head of a single individual or organization. "If it works," Patel and Goodman (2019) suggest, "it'll work because the process of articulating it will also be the process of building the alliances it needs to succeed as a counter-

hegemonic policy.” That is, the ideological project will matter.

And so will the structural project. While the GND House Resolution, published on February 2019, contained few details on agriculture, within months, farmer unions, civil society organizations, and academics began filling that gap. Across many of the more progressive proposals, “parity” has resurfaced, with calls for the Green New Deal to incorporate supply management, a key structural component of the ‘old’ New Deal. “We need to dust off and refresh the concept of parity to create a just transition out of our calamitous current conditions,” wrote Elizabeth Henderson, a farmer and board member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (Henderson, 2019). Two presidential candidates, Senators Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, have gone so far as to put parity into their campaign platforms, with pledges to enact parity pricing, revive grain and feed reserves to handle surplus, and transfer land now in commodities into conservation.

The return of parity to policy conversations is encouraging to many progressive farmer organizations – such as the National Family Farm Coalition – who have long called for restoring supply management. As one Wisconsin dairy farmer told us: “In politics until very recently, if you started talking about supply management, you’d be laughed out of the room” (Chrisman, 2019). At the same time, the racialized blindspots and exclusions of old New Deal policy must be addressed. As we have explored in depth above, labor provisions were cast unevenly, creating disparities among those who might otherwise form a counter-hegemonic resistance. So, just as it is important to see the original New Deal as the result of a process of struggle, it’s important to see the Green New Deal as the making of a new hegemonic bloc. Such is the idea behind “Updating Parity for Climate & Justice,” a project which connects family farmer organizations with progressive policy think tanks and university academics to revive but also reimagine parity for the 21st century, recognizing that indigenous, black, and brown communities were excluded from many original New Deal mobilizations. Reinforcing the CJA’s notion of a “just transition,” the priority here is building power through community-led strategies supported and legitimized by scientists.

In his new book, *Counterrevolution: the Rise of the Far-Right*, Walden Bello (2019a) similarly argues that the effective antidote to authoritarian populism – or the term he prefers, “counterrevolution” – is a deep reckoning with social inequality. In southern countries like India and the Philippines as well as in northern regions like the US and Europe, counterrevolutions have arisen in response to two flanks: the depredations of neoliberalism on the one hand, and liberal democratic policies like the New Deal on the other. We are met with a crisis in living standards such that communities that might otherwise provide a locus of resistance to neoliberalism – for example, progressive farmer movements with anti-capitalist analyses – are financially underwater, mentally and physically exhausted. The collapse of living standards in the global North in recent decades has been accompanied by a shift by ostensibly “Left” parties towards neoliberal policy and practice. Because of this, Bello suggests, there was a strong sense amongst working classes that they had been abandoned by the parties they had traditionally relied upon to defend the welfare state and the gains that labor had made. Right-wing politicians, who usually comprise middle-class activists with far-right politics, saw an opening.

That opening, as we have seen throughout this paper, is one that shows authoritarian populism to be reconfiguring social conflicts in extraordinary, often contradictory, ways. Opportunism more so than ideological coherence appears to describe both Reagan and Trump, alongside Le Pen, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Modi, and others of their ilk. In Europe, for example, the Nordic right-wing parties and Le Pen’s group in France have moved away from the classical neoliberal program, saying in effect, ‘we’ll keep the welfare state, but just for the ingroup – those of the right color and the right ethnic stock.’ Trump has similarly departed from neoliberal touchstones such as free trade with his hostility to NAFTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and other globalist agreements. This ideological inconsistency has made it easy for Trump

to throw blame around like angry buckshot, impugning the “fake” media, “nasty” women, and black and brown citizens and immigrants whom he consistently depicts in terms of “infestation” (Blackwell, 2019). As Bello puts it, “He’s a very opportunistic kind of right-wing politician who is going to bring together something that may not have much ideological coherence, but has a lot of emotional coherence that responds to this base that feels threatened” (Bello, 2019b).

There are lessons for the Left, however, in these jostling, reactionary, and often contradictory politics. If “emancipatory” potentials are to catch wind, they must first reclaim democracy, differentiating between elite liberal democracies and deep democratic processes that put justice and equity at the center of all else. They must take a page, too, from the playbook of right-wing networks that have historically excelled in constructing commonsense to their benefit. From media empires and PR machines to churches and trade shows, they hardly need the help of Russians to cultivate and maintain the mass appeal of demagogues. Progressive movements, by contrast, often fight such zeal with a calculator. “They’re so rationalistic,” says Bello. “The [progressive] appeal is sometimes very economic in terms of its appeal to different groups. And they haven’t been able to win people emotionally” (2019b).

Winning people emotionally but not fascistically, then, is a key challenge for emancipatory movements going forward. Lessons from US agrarian history suggest that Othering has typically won emotions through constructing in-groups and out-groups, inspiring fidelity towards one while producing resentments toward the Other. To the extent that this dynamic can be broken, as it has been at times throughout US agrarian history, authoritarian populists will lose the ability to pit white working classes against immigrants who might “steal my job”; they will lose purchase on the fear inculcated amongst middle classes when black, brown, and native people are afforded equal access to land and to higher education, and to all the institutional resources that make such accesses viable. They will not have leverage over white farmers like Jarous Volunec of Wisconsin who told us he is watching the inevitable demise of his six-generation family farm because, as he said, “We are mining our natural and social resources and shipping this wealth out of our communities” (pers. comm.) Shoring up rural livelihoods could, as history suggests, demobilize farmers by taking the sting out of their predicament. But it could also enhance farmers’ survival and therein the possibility of rural resistance to capitalism and authoritarian politics. What will spell the difference? We believe it is the central task of emancipatory organizing: to connect nodes of resistance – their knowledge, history, and experience – to the lives and struggles of others, towards solidarity across difference that starves authoritarian populism of its fertile ground.

#### Declarations of competing interest

None.

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