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Lydia Kearney updated the description.
September 3, 2015

If you were a claimant with the USDA Hispanic and Women Farmer and Rancher Settlement, and had your claim denied, please join us. Together, we will push forward to make the USDA accountable for what they have done. 53,803 people applied. They only approved 2,504 women, and 706 Hispanics. That is less than 6% of the claimants. We need to hear your stories. We need you to join us to fight the apparent mishandling of this settlement.

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FROM NOTIFICATIONS

Rudy Arredondo 2 hrs

Evaggelos Vallianatos (Photo Credit: Homini:))

The plutocratic remaking of America has a parallel in the countryside. In rural America less than 3 percent of farmers make more than 63 percent of the money, including government subsidies.

The results of this emerging feudal economy are everywhere. Large areas of the United States are becoming impoverished farm towns with abandoned farmhouses and deserted land. More and more of the countryside has been devoted to massive factory farms and plantations. The consequences, though worse now than ever, have been there for all to see and feel, for decades.

Abandoned Farmhouse
ABANDONED FARMHOUSE, WASHINGTON, USA
Walter Goldschmidt, an anthropologist with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was already documenting the deleterious effects of agribusiness on small communities in California's Central Valley as long ago as the 1940s (1).

He revealed that a community (he studied the town of Dinuba in northern Tulare County) with small family farmers thrived. Its economy and cultural life were vigorous and democratic. Thus the Dinuba of 1940 was a middle-class town whose residents were not divided in any significant manner by differences in wealth. They had a stable income and strong interest in the life of their community.

However, the town surrounded by industrial farms (he studied Arvin in southeastern Kern County) did not share in the prosperity of agribusiness. Its schools, churches, economic and cultural life were impoverished. Its residents were sharply divided in terms of wealth. Only a few of them had a stable income. The rest barely made it. Even the managers of Arvin's large farms did not live in Arvin. The town had become a rural slum and a colony of the plantations.

For Goldschmidt the family farm was "the classic example" of American small business. He became convinced that its spread over the land "has

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laid the economic base for the liberties and the democratic institutions which this Nation counts as its greatest asset.”

Goldschmidt, who was well read in the Greek and American democratic traditions, knew that in concluding this he was not alone. He was aware that in 1862, Isaac Newton, the first commissioner of US agriculture, reported to his president, Abraham Lincoln, that haciendas brought down Rome. The message to the country was pretty clear: small family farmers were the foundations of the American Republic (2).

Goldschmidt's employers did not care for history, however. By the early 1940s, USDA no longer saw the family farm as a national asset. It fired Goldschmidt and almost suppressed his work.

The Carter Administration's Rethink

In the late 1970s, the Carter administration tried to postpone the decline of rural America. The Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, was a farmer from Minnesota who thought the family farm had served America well and needed protection. He admitted that all the USDA programs, as well as federal policies on taxation, economic concentration, and corporate power favored large farmers becoming super-large. He also admitted that he too had adhered to the dogma that assisting the “major commercial farmers” would eventually “filter down to the intermediate-sized and then the smallest producers.” However, he became doubtful of such a prospect. “I was never convinced,” he said, “we were anywhere near the right track. We had symbols, slogans, and superficialities. We seldom had substance.” (3)

Bergland, with family farming disappearing in front of his eyes, decided to find out how and why American agriculture had become almost synonymous with large farms. He ordered his scientific staff to study the situation and the result was scholarly research and a series of meetings all over rural America. In one of those public meetings, a family farmer named William C. Beach from Oak City, North Carolina, defended the idea of the family farm and explained who is a family farmer and who is not:

“The family farm is democracy and free enterprise at its best, a family running and working a business together, working together to produce food and fiber.... The family farm is not the agribusinessman in town, the lawyer at the courthouse, the doctor at the hospital, the professional man in his office. He is not people looking for a farm to buy as a hedge against inflation, nor the person looking for ways to reduce his income tax while making a safe investment. This group also includes the multinational corporations, food-processing industries and vertical integrators.” (4)

Bergland also received a 1979 report from Louis Harris and Associates. The pollsters had surveyed Americans about the role of agriculture in American life. The report confirmed Americans loved the family farm:

“Some Americans see the small family farm as an economically insignificant reminder of an outdated, romanticized way of life. But the public's preference is for ‘a country which has a relatively large number of small farms’.... Significantly, there is a broad-based consensus on this issue, with strong support for the small family farm in evidence in every region of the country and in every significant demographic subgroup of the population.” (5)

Bergland also heard from his own scientists. One of them was Don Paarlberg who was an expert on the country's agricultural universities. These were known as land grant universities from the land the federal government donated to states for the founding of these public schools. In a draft report dated May 23, 1980, Paarlberg said:

“[E]vidence has come before us that the land-grant college system... has served to speed the trend toward an industrialized agriculture. It simply has not been possible to make such great advances in efficiency as have occurred without having profound effect on the structure of agriculture.... The Extension Service, with its advice that a farmer should have a business ‘big enough to be efficient,’ undoubtedly speeded up the process of farm consolidation and reduced the number of farms. In the classroom, emphasis on modern management helped put the traditional family farm into a state of total eclipse.” (6)

This and other damning evidence convinced Bergland to “modify” the programs and policies of USDA, to slow down or prevent large farmers from becoming even larger. He recommended changes to federal policies on taxation, technological development, commodity, credit and marketing. Bergland wanted federal policies to touch and favor the small and medium sized family farmers. Even so, he knew his dream for the survival of the family farm was being dashed by the reality that agribusiness owned rural America.

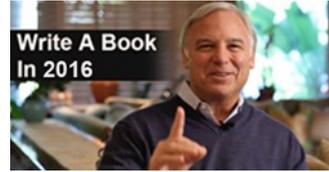
Despite Bergland's noble sentiments, Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan in 1980. Indeed, the Bergland USDA issued its painful report, “A Time to Choose,” in January 1981 under the shadow of Reagan. The Reagan



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USDA chose to return to cannibalism as usual and the family farm was indeed brought to the verge of extinction (7).

By 2005, from a farm population of 30.5 million in 1940, rural America had a much-diminished number of people who made a living directly out of farming. There are no statistics but I would guess that probably 100,000 small family farmers and their families make up this alternative rural America. Most of these family farmers practice organic farming.

In 1983, another researcher, Dean MacCannell, professor of rural sociology at the University of California-Davis, issued a severe warning that repeated those of Walter Goldschmidt and Bob Bergland: Size of farms matters in agriculture. Large farms destroy rural America.

MacCannell, like Goldschmidt, said pro-agribusiness policies "cut against the grain of traditional American values." His studies showed that giant farmers were becoming "neo-feudal" lords who, with government assistance, were propelling rural America into a Third World of poverty, injustice, exploitation and oppression. When large farms are in or near small rural communities they suck all life out of them:

"In the place of towns which could accurately be characterized as providing their residents with [a] clean and healthy environment, a great deal of social equality and local autonomy, we find agricultural pollution, labor practices that lead to increasing social inequality, restricted opportunity to obtain land and start new enterprise, and the suppression of the development of [a] local middle class and the business and services demanded by such a class." (8)

MacCannell could also have said that black farmers suffered the worst fate of any in the emerging empire of large farms.

Black farmers

In 1900, there were 746,717 black farmers in the United States. In the next ten years black farmers increased by 19.6 percent, becoming 893,377. By 1920, black farmers had reached their highest number ever: 925,710. Then followed a precipitous decline, with most black farmers abandoning farming.

The explanation for this decline lay with white society in the form of government and large farmers, which hit the landed blacks with the force of a cataclysm. They waged an invisible and unreported war of cheating former slaves of their promised forty acres and a mule. Large white farmers, agribusiness, and government agencies at the county, state, and federal level intimidated black farmers, giving them faulty information, denying them loans, and harassing them from their land (9).

When black Americans started demanding civil rights in the 1950s, the wrath of the large white farmers boiled over. Black farmers fled to the northern cities as fast as they could. The legacy of slavery and the failure to distribute land to black Americans after the Civil War, which continued with the racism of the land grant universities and the federal extension service, took their toll. By the year 2000, fewer than 18,000 black farmers were still farming, a catastrophic decline of 98 percent in the twentieth century.

On September 28, 2004, the Constitutional Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee had a hearing about the legal problems of the black farmers who were suing USDA. The Congressman who chaired the hearing, Steve Chabot, captured the tragedy of the black farmers, saying:

"When slavery was ended in the United States, our government made a promise – a restitution of sorts – to the former slaves that they would be given 40 acres and a mule...what is clear is that promise was intended to help freed slaves be independent economically and psychologically, as holders of private property rights. What also is clear is that the very government that made this promise, the "People's Agency" [US Department of Agriculture] established in 1862 under President Abraham Lincoln, has sabotaged it by creating conditions that make sovereign and economically-viable farm ownership extremely difficult."

On December 8, 2010, the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama, signed into law a bill for the compensation of black farmers who had been discriminated against by USDA. However, for at least some black farmers this late policy did not heal the wounds of decades-long agrarian racism. For example, it did not please Gary Grant, president of the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association. Grant's parents had filed a discrimination suit against USDA in the early 1970s, but died in 2001, long before it was settled.

In 1998, I met both Grant and his parents. They were hospitable and gentle people who had suffered greatly. Farming and the ownership of land were their passion.

In a press release dated December 10, 2010, Gary Grant said he was present when Obama signed the 2010 act to bring a closure to the drama of black farmers in the United States. Grant, however, was unhappy with the law, especially the government officials who had harmed black farmers. He

called them "evil and recalcitrant agents of the government" who "never lost their employment, and are now preparing for rich retirement with many benefits from having stolen the land, the livelihood, the health and for causing all manner of family destruction in the lives of so many black farmers."

USDA's rural America: get big or get out

The tragedy of black farmers, including small white family farmers, does not exist in official statistics. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture the picture of rural America has not changed much in the last quarter of the twenty century: In 1974 the United States had 2,314,013 farms and in 2002 there were still more than two million farms in America. Exactly: 2,128,892 farms.

The other finding of the USDA census was that the average farm hardly changed in size. In 1974 the average was 440 acres. That size became 491 acres in 1992 and then 441 in 2002. Even the number of the largest farms did not change that much. In 1974 there were 62,225 farms of 2,000 acres or more and in 2002 those giant farms numbered 77,970.

This apparent stasis, however, conceals a dramatic increase in the number of very wealthy farmers. In 1974, for example, there were 11,412 farms, which earned \$500,000 or more. But, by 2002, the number of super-farms making \$500,000 or more was 70,642. Three percent of the farms making \$500,000 or more shared 62 percent of total sales and government payments. Wealthier even than these were 29,862 farms making one million dollars or more from sales and government subsidies.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, thirty-five percent of America's farmers in 2002 were completely impoverished. These farmers earned less than \$2,500, which, in 2002, represented one percent of sales and government payments. Like the increase of billionaire Americans, this divergence in incomes is the outcome of decades-long agricultural policies.

Will the United States become a Brazil or an Argentina?

If the United States does nothing to abolish its oppressive system of giant agriculture, the remaining white family farmers – who declined by about 66 percent in the twentieth century – will "get out" like their black brothers and sisters before them. Rural America will increasingly resemble the routine horror of an animal factory or a plantation.

Such an agricultural system was described by Nancy Scheper-Hughes in her book *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Agriculture in the United States is slowly becoming more and more like the death-without-weeping haciendas of Northeast Brazil, but such a system is not a hospitable place for ecology, democracy, family farming or even for simple economic development.

Another cruel colony of agribusiness is Argentina. Nearly the entire country is one vast field of bioengineered soybeans. Brewster Kneen, a Canadian researcher studying Argentina's conversion to agribusiness, reports:

"Argentineans, who used to be among the best fed people anywhere, are now, [in 2005], being, quite literally, forced to consume soy in place of milk, meat, vegetables and pulses such as lentils which were once produced in abundance on the small farms that have been overrun by large landowners growing soy. Lentils are now imported from Canada... One does not even want to wonder how many of the ubiquitous garbage pickers on the streets of Buenos Aires were once small farmers." (10)

The agribusiness developments in Argentina meanwhile, also destroy millions of small family farmers in America and Europe, and take the land of countless millions of peasants in the tropics. And what about the loss of wildlife following the mass application of machinery and toxins to agriculture? Brewster Kneen did not exaggerate when he said, "Industrial agriculture is bad, from beginning to end." It is. Another researcher, Bill Mollison, an Australian promoter of intensive small-scale farming known as "permaculture," says, "Most things in [modern industrialized] agriculture today [1992] are really death systems."

The international peasant and family farmer civil society organization, Via Campesina, says that it is this monstrous giant agriculture that is pushing family farmers and peasants throughout the world to the brink of "irredeemable extinction."

Which is why I hope Americans will not allow this project, however flashy it looks in its science garb, to complete its evil trajectory.

Evil project? Yes, indeed. Platon said that doing wrong is bad, nasty, evil. But doing wrong without making amends is the worst of all evils.

One would be hard pressed to find anything better fitting that description than the work of giant agriculture as it slices land and rural communities in its imperial conquest of nature and society.

ENDNOTE: Josef Hoppichler of the Austrian Federal Institute for less Favoured Regions and Mountainous Areas sent us this report he wrote for

the UN FAO in 2007. It is a very insightful examination of the relationship of traditional farming to agribusiness from a non-US perspective. The FAO declined to publish it. Read the Report: Disappearance of peasant farmers_EN_FAO_2007

Footnotes

- (1) Walter Goldschmidt, As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness (Originally published in 1947, Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1978).
- (2) US Congress, House of Representatives, Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1862 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1863).
- (3) US Department of Agriculture, A Time to Choose (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 1981) 4.
- (4) USDA, A time to Choose, 16.
- (5) USDA, Ibid.
- (6) USDA, A Time to Choose, 129.
- (7) The 2007 and 2012 farm bills only perpetuate this tradition.
- (8) Dean MacCannell, "Agribusiness and the Small Community" (University of California at Davis, 1983).
- (9) US Commission on Civil Rights, The Decline of Black Farming in America (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, February 1982); Gary R. Grant, Spencer D. Wood, and Willie J. Wright, "Black Farmers United: The Struggle Against Power and Principalities," The Journal of Pan African Studies, vol. 5, no. 1, March 2012, 3-22.
- (10) Brewster Kneen, "The Giant Made Visible," The Ram's Horn, October 2005, 3.

Evaggelos Vallianatos, former EPA analyst, teaches at Pitzer College. He is the author of several books, including "Poison Spring" (forthcoming from Bloomsbury Press).



America: Becoming a Land Without Farmers

Evaggelos Vallianatos (Photo Credit: Homini:) The plutocratic remaking of America has a parallel in the countryside. In rural America less than 3 percent of

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