

## From the editor

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Recently I was contacted by a reporter from Harvest Public Media, a US-based news organization specializing in agriculture, to comment on a story she was working on about corporate farms. The reporter was interested in cases in which corporate farms were also family farms—that is, farms that seemed to straddle the two worlds of corporate agriculture and family farming. Her report, “Who are you calling a corporate farmer?” was published online on May 17, 2012, and it aired on the radio a short time later.<sup>1</sup>

A week after the story aired I received a phone call from a reporter from the Associated Press who was interested in a similar story, this time about farmers who try to be both big and small—that is, they have large farms but sell produce regularly in local farmers’ markets. In this reporter’s words, he wanted to learn more about farmers who “straddle both sides of the fence.”

Is it ethical to play both sides of the fence?

There are clearly some cases that are not, such as the farmer who uses synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers but markets his crops as organic. But what about the large-scale farmer who markets agricultural products in a local farmers’ market, or a corporate farm that has been owned and operated by a family for generations? Is there anything inherently unethical about these cases? What, if any, implications are there for efforts to promote a viable and sustainable agricultural production system if farmers straddle both sides of the fence?

This last question is related to the conventionalization hypothesis, which is the idea that organic agriculture is evolving to look increasingly like conventional agriculture.

*Agriculture and Human Values* has published on this topic (e.g., Best 2008; Guptil 2009). While the conventionalization hypothesis is a bottom-up story (local or small-scale farming acting like large-scale industrial farming), the cases of corporate farms playing like they are local and small is an anti-conventionalization or top-down story. (With apologies to readers of this journal, I recognize that I am lumping local, small-scale and organic farming together on one end of the scale, and large-scale, corporate and industrialized agriculture on the other.) If there are concerns about conventionalization, should we cheer anti-conventionalization?

A good case to study here is Wal-Mart, currently the largest grocery retailer in the US. In 2006 the *New York Times* reported that Wal-Mart began offering organic food in its supercenter stores, with the reporter opining that “Wal-Mart’s interest is expected to change organic food production in substantial ways” (Warner 2006). There is debate about whether this example of anti-conventionalization will be good or bad for agriculture generally. But I want to know more about the ethics of playing both sides of the fence. I can understand why there might be concerns about farmers marketing their products as organic when they have used synthetic chemicals, since there is an element of potential harm here. But absent the potential for harm, is straddling both sides of the fence ethically problematic?

The ethical issue notwithstanding, I am also curious to know if conventionalization and anti-conventionalization together might actually be a solution to another problem in agriculture. There is a growing concern in the US (and elsewhere) about the disappearing middle—that is, that

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<sup>1</sup> A link to the story is here: <http://harvestpublicmedia.org/article/1198/who-are-you-calling-corporate-farmer/5> (Accessed 6 June 2012).

there is a decline in the number of medium-sized family farms. For instance, my colleague Mary Hendrickson and I (2010) reported that between 1997 and 2007, the number of medium-sized farms in the US, or farms with sales between \$100,000 and \$250,000, declined by 21 %. The US saw an increase in the number of very small and very large farms during the same period. Some scholars believe that these trends are a cause for concern because there is something unique that middle scale farms bring to agriculture and rural livelihoods, although in our study we question this assumption. But suppose we want to preserve “farming in the middle” (regardless of the reason). I wonder if dual trends toward conventionalization and anti-conventionalization might be the trick. If conventionalization is a trend in one direction and anti-conventionalization is a trend in the other, then could we expect a happy meeting somewhere in the middle? Or, like matter meeting anti-matter, will the result be catastrophic for agriculture?

This is good fodder for academic debate, which I hope to see further developed in the literature. We can also rely on the adage “time will tell.”

That said, time has repeatedly shown that articles published in *Agriculture and Human Values* continue to advance academic debates about the food and agricultural system. This issue of the journal, which contains 10 research articles, is no exception. Stuart and Worosz examine cases of foodborne illness linked to ground beef and bagged salad greens to show how an emphasis on technological fixes can impede efforts to improve the agrifood system and to protect food consumers. Parker et al. contrast the perspectives of experts and growers in order to show how scale of production relates to perceptions of food safety risk. Conner et al. survey Vermont farmers to assess their motivations for participating in farm-to-school partnerships and the specific distribution practices they adopt. Beckie, Kennedy, and Wittman examine how clusters of Canadian farmers markets can inform on the feasibility of “scaling up” alternative food networks. Alkon and Mares study farmers markets in Oakland, California, and Seattle,

Washington, and find that community food security, food justice and food sovereignty goals do not always align with each other. Silva-Castañeda identifies conflicts between third-party certification experts and local stakeholders over what constitutes evidence of compliance with production standards. Stahlman and McCann examine how environmental regulations, who makes adoption decisions, and how adoption choices are presented, can promote the adoption of profitable and environmentally beneficial agricultural technologies even in the absence of farmer knowledge of the technology benefits (and costs). Minkoff-Zern uses a case study of a community garden in California to describe how social relations, agro-ecological discourses and perceptions of place affect how migrants form and transform their notions of indigenous identity. McGreevy studies factors affecting the transfer of production knowledge between local agricultural producers in Japan and incoming (new) organic farmers. Finally, Faysse et al. examine how public–private narratives affect the viability of farmer-led collective action projects. Book reviews and the list of books received round out this issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*.

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