



CULTURE AND AGRICULTURE: THE MYTHOLOGY OF FARMING AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The endeavor of this essay is to connect the system of mass-production agriculture (what is often called “Big Ag”) with political, social, and economic systems. Hence, the environmental problems produced by mass-production agriculture can be comprehended as cultural problems. I further connect the environmental problems with myths that fund cultural identity. “Myth” is not simply conflated with “fiction” but is understood as how cultures create meaning from social and material circumstance. I go on to argue that myths can become damaging and regressive as they outlive their context. Specifically, the myths of farming created a cultural meaning that has done significant damage to ecological progress (progress across systems). Myths concerning the meaning of a farming community have been strongly supported by closely related “traditional values” which are no longer precisely relevant to actual cultural circumstance. I then argue that the stale myths lead away from a democratic process to an authoritarian process. The essay strongly suggests solutions to these problems with what I call “ecological literacy.” The state of Iowa USA is used as a paradigm of mass-production agriculture, but Iowa is then connected to national and global environmental problems. Finally, the argument goes, the humanities must support the sciences in addressing systemic environmental problems.

Keywords

Agriculture, Culture, Democracy, Ecological, Farming, Myth

I: Introduction

In the state of Iowa, and several other states in the US, there is an apparent urgency to rediscover “traditional values.” According to many citizens, the country has lost its bearings at the deepest levels. Individual liberty, private property, nationalism, and economic sustainability are not just in trouble, they are under attack.¹

We are, of course, on the edge of the “culture wars” and entering this fray is more than hazardous. Assertion and counter-assertion await us. Worse yet, by entering the fray we just perpetuate it; we seem to be facing a polarity of public sensibility that is self-sustaining within the endeavor to resolve it. Such a situation stops a democratic process before it can really start. One might say, this is the transitional moment from a democratic process to an authoritarian regime.

What is most important to me, in this apparent crisis, are the roots of Iowan discontent. Iowa is a paradigm of causal features which lead to the victory of authority over rational consensus. And, as I will soon argue, the intensity to rediscover “traditional values” is- in essence- an attempt to move backwards in time using a cultural mythology. Any attempt like this finds its procedural force in authority.

II: The Agricultural Context and Mass-Production

In his book “The Left Behind,” Robert Wuthnow, chronicles and details the holistic decline of small-town rural America.² In doing agricultural research, I have spent days touring small towns in the rural landscape and one can plainly observe desperation. Severely restricted access to medical services, nutritious food, and poor educational

¹ Wuthnow, Robert., *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*. 2018. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ.

² Ibid.

opportunity are clear examples of ongoing decline. Many citizens see this as a tragic loss of a very important form of life which urban reality cannot duplicate. Wuthnow's diligent research, along with other studies, confirmed my anecdotal inferences.³

The agricultural context connects to what many people call "traditional agriculture," but we need to be very careful here else we slide into cultural mythology. In a well-known essay, "The Landscape of Capitalism," Robert Sayre details how the three main ecologies of Iowa were annihilated by agriculture in the early 20th century.⁴ Wetland drainage, tillage, and timber cuts made way for a diverse range of livestock and crops. In short, the rise of what are called "family farms," but we must remember that the Iowa landscape was now forever altered. Beginnings of Iowa agriculture were made possible by the genocide of Indigenous Peoples: hence, private property claims cannot be justified in their origins and so *cannot be justified*.

The essence of what I am calling "the agricultural context" [AC] is the close relationship between human beings and the land for immediate and prolonged survival: a communal, self-reflective, recognition and then effort to tend to the land as central to human well-being over time. As we look carefully at the causes of the agricultural context one might conclude that this form of life was forced upon what are often called "settlers." Farming was survival. The land in Iowa deserves its reputation. From Des Moines northward to the Minnesota border and a bit beyond, is some of the most fertile land in the world.

Various well-known rituals and practices stem from the agricultural context. For example, "summer school vacation" is still with us, and its origin is in the need for family based agricultural work on what we now call "small and diverse" farms. Summer school vacation is a ritual with enormous reach as it connects forcefully to family life, schedules, and economics. The residuals of the agricultural context can also be found in the ways journalists, politicians, and other public figures gather around the aura of the agricultural context.⁵ The farm is often referred to as the paradigm of healthy countryside and wholesome values such as hard work, dedication, and service to the community. Indeed, these ideas and values surround the current industrial agriculture through slogans such as "Iowa feeds the world."⁶ The fecundity of the Iowa land and the hard work of the Iowa farmer now have an international scope but, according to many, the intrinsic quality of the production process has not changed.

Much of the Iowa identity is founded in the agricultural context and many do believe that the essence of this identity has not changed. It is *as if the changes in agricultural practices have not changed the relations between citizens and between citizens and the environment. It is as if there is a permanence to a reality accomplished over 100 years ago*. Virtually none of what the politicians, journalists, and citizens articulate about this *as if permanence* is true: it is instead the aura of the agricultural context, a now mythical state that continues to fund identity.⁷ Perhaps the most difficult question within the myth concerns which "values" survived the changes in agricultural practices over time. The assumption here is that values do not survive or even emerge without substantial cultural practices and if the values embedded in practice x are going to survive then practice x cannot be literally destroyed.

In my view, agriculture in Iowa is divided into two categorically distinct kinds: what I have already identified as family farms (the agricultural context) and mass-production. One can see the distinction in the way mass-production destroyed the family farm and the agricultural context. The center of this is what Chris Jones, the foremost water quality expert in the state of Iowa, calls "a problem of scale."⁸ Advances in technology, an essential subject in its own right, helped create a vast monoculture of corn and soybeans with a livestock (mostly swine) industry which feeds an ethanol industry (and back again). The scale for competitive farms is inconceivable from the standpoint of the AC. Iowa harvested 2.5 billion bushels of corn in 2023⁹ and sent 50 million hogs to market,¹⁰

³ Duncan, Cynthia M. *World Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America*. 2nd Edition. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press. 2014.

⁴ Sayre, R., (2000) "The Landscape of Capitalism", *The Iowa Review* 30(3), 114–131, <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5344>

⁵ Simon, Roger. "Iowa: Come for the Bucolic Setting, Stay for the Non-binding Vote." Politico. 2015. <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/in-iowa-giving-meaning-to-the-meaningless-116127>

⁶ Styron, Emery. "Iowa Agriculture Feeds the World," *Iowa Association of Business and Industry*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.iowaabi.org/news/business-monthly/story/iowa-agriculture-feeds-the-world/>.

⁷ Hoffman, Beth. *Bet Farm: The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America*. Island Press Books. Washington D.C. 2021.

⁸ C. D. Ikenberry, M. L. Soupir, K. E. Schilling, C. S. Jones, and A. Seeman, "Nitrate-Nitrogen Export: Magnitude and Patterns from Drainage Districts to Downstream River Basins," *Journal of Environmental Quality* 43, no. 6 (2014): 2024–2033.

⁹ "Facts About Iowa Pork Production," *Iowa Pork Producers Association*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.iowapork.org/newsroom/facts-about-iowa-pork-production>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, "Iowa State Agriculture Overview," accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=IOWA.

approximately 65 percent of the land mass in Iowa is in row-crops.¹¹ This scale of production has created a thoroughly humanized landscape that many citizens simply do not comprehend. Very few farmers, by comparison with the AC, “work the land” in any traditional sense, and very few require additional agricultural workers. The rural towns and communities mentioned in the above now have almost nothing to do with agricultural work. In short, mass production agriculture wiped out the AC and with it the normative relations between people, land, and community. *Agriculture destroyed agriculture.*¹²

III: Ecological Literacy

There is a straightforward sense of ecological literacy [EL] and another sense that is far broader. Both are important for understanding the connections between agriculture and culture in Iowa and beyond, but the latter and broader sense of ecological literacy is essential to understanding the crisis of democracy.

The straightforward sense of EL is citizen comprehension of the “natural” landscape: that is, what citizens see as the “countryside.” Simplified, this boils down to biological and geological comprehension. As an epistemic concept, I see “comprehension” as the ability to link aspects of the environment into a coherent schema that is grounded in basic natural science. Unfortunately for everyone involved, there is a lot of evidence that many citizens fail to comprehend the environment.¹³

First, in testing ecological literacy, we can ask whether citizens understand basic concepts such as “biodiversity” and how it connects to corn and soybean monoculture. This is difficult to measure. There are no requirements in K-12 schools that focus on the dominant agricultural landscape and there is *no serious political or social pressure* to examine the profound lack of biodiversity. In fact, Iowa politics pushes the other way.¹⁴ Worse yet, and far the most disturbing for the future of Iowa, is the apparent lack of comprehension of how grossly limited biodiversity causally connects to the scale of mass-production agriculture. Failure to make the connections overt, so they might provide some urgency for ongoing comprehension, conceals the causal relations between the scale of row-cropping and catastrophic water quality problems. Finally, there are no regulations or plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from mass-production agriculture and the political tendency in Iowa is to dismiss or deny the reality of climate change.¹⁵

What I am arguing here is that grasping the concept of biodiversity and how it applies to the “countryside” in basic ways is *not broad landscape comprehension*. Even if the lack of biodiversity is understood, it will not lead to broad comprehension unless this basic application goes to overall ecology. Each connection matters in order to reach questions concerning how the grossly humanized landscape speaks the social-political-economic language of agricultural mass-production. The essentially science-based comprehension is the way to begin a semantic map for comprehending this humanized landscape. Citizens need these semantic maps for the ability to grasp their own circumstance on the well-founded assumption that comprehension of the humanized environment is a condition for self-understanding, cultural understanding, and the possibilities for valuable change.

Secondary EL, that which begins as we reach the semantics of the landscape, reaches far beyond the landscape. Questions such as, “what does it *really mean* for my environment to be 65% row-crops?” “In what way did I or my community help to make the decisions that led up to these facts and what if there are reasons to change these facts?” Given the scale of mass production there are very few places to be entirely buffered from the consequences and reality of mass production. It is, however, true that lower income, less powerful, and marginalized citizens are seeing the worst.¹⁶ Iowa citizens, once aware of their broad ecology, will come to see and understand why there is such a dearth of public lands in the state. Such awareness will allow them to expand their semantic maps (insofar as they have anything like a semantic map).¹⁷ Ideally, semantic maps must be created from ecological axioms and the leading axiom is “everything is connected and in relation.” Hence, we ought to expect our semantic maps to move beyond “the local” *by connecting the local to the national and global*. A denial of this

¹¹ “Rural Iowa Report Shows Large Farms Continue to Grow, Small Farms Decrease,” *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/news/rural-iowa-report-shows-large-farms-continue-grow-small-farms-decrease>.

¹² “Snap Out of It, Iowans: Industrial Agriculture is the Problem,” *Bleeding Heartland*, April 28, 2024, <https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2024/04/28/snap-out-of-it-iowans-industrial-agriculture-is-the-problem/>.

¹³ “In Iowa, a Tale of Politics, Power, and Contaminated Water,” *Circle of Blue*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.circleofblue.org/2023/world/in-iowa-a-tale-of-politics-power-and-contaminated-water/>.

¹⁴ Schneider, Keith. “In Iowa, a Tale of Politics, Power, and Contaminated Water.” *Circle of Blue*. <https://www.circleofblue.org/2023/world/in-iowa-a-tale-of-politics-power-and-contaminated-water/>

¹⁵ So, Kat. “Climate Deniers of the 118th Congress,” *Center for American Progress*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/climate-deniers-of-the-118th-congress/>.

¹⁶ Merchant, James, and David Osterberg. 2018. “The Explosion of CAFOs in Iowa and Its Impact on Water Quality and Public Health.” *The Iowa Policy Project*. <https://www.iowapolicyproject.org/2018docs/180125-CAFO.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Public and Private Land Percentages by US States,” *SummitPost*, accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.summitpost.org/public-and-private-land-percentages-by-us-states/186111#google_vignette.

leading ecological axiom, in combination with other cultural features, is both a cause and effect of authoritarian politics.

In recent years, especially in the rural Midwest of the United States, “asset-mapping” has been a consistent endeavor. A lack of basic “assets” such as healthcare and adequately nutritious food is, of course, a serious concern. The maps allow city and county planners (and others) to identify strengths and weaknesses (unfortunately mostly weaknesses). What I am suggesting here is a categorical step past the asset mapping: a semantic map, by engaging humanistic studies and the social/natural sciences, addresses the meanings behind the asset maps. From a philosophical lens, for example, the meaning behind many a “lack” is historically bound injustices in the distribution of social goods. Such a conclusion is only emphasized when we try to *comprehend* the incredible *surplus of assets in some parts of the community*. As we endeavor to follow the above ecological axiom, seeking to find the relations between the local, national, and global, we will find that the Iowa agricultural system has profound implications across the globe. Iowa agricultural pollution has gone national and global (as I will soon detail) and the methods of mass production are being replicated in other parts of the nation and world.

IV: Ecological Literacy and Quasi-Aesthetic Concepts

Comprehension of the landscape is further burdened by the complete normalization of the mass-production system. Citizens take this landscape as what to expect from the “countryside.” On top of this normalization comes the myth of farming in its aesthetic form, which is an aspect of the above discussion on health and fecundity.

In a research project on herbicide resistant weeds, we frequently heard the term “pristine” used to describe Iowa soybean and corn fields.¹⁸ We heard this term used by agronomists, producers, crop specialists, and other stakeholders. The term is an accurate description of most corn and bean fields in a *narrow sense*. What we see, as we drive along country highways or the interstate, are corn and soybean plants with weedless spaces between the rows. Pristine then means: no weeds. Iowa farming tradition places considerable weight on the clean look of farms which represents rural prosperity *in general*. Weed free or “pristine” fields represent the tradition of dedicated field work.

“Pristine” conceals a literally underlying truth. What cannot be seen are the herbicides which make for the pristine fields. The scale of mass-production eliminates the possibility of mechanical weeding and so chemicals are used and have been used to the great detriment of well-being across the board. Beyond the chemical pollution, are the harms done to row-cropping itself. Consistent use of herbicides, particularly on genetically diverse weed species such as Palmer amaranth, quickly produces herbicide resistance. And then a war with natural selection proceeds which necessitates the use of more and different chemicals. Such a war is detrimental to row-cropping because there is considerable cost and application difficulties. The only winner in the war is the herbicide industry, which is- in fact- a part of the agricultural system. Any real harm caused by herbicides is the cost of doing business. Heavy herbicide use is now a normalized aspect of the industry and so a normalized, although unseen, aspect of the environment.

The aesthetic term “pristine,” even as it is accurate with respect to the actual look of corn and bean fields, results in contradictions. First, chemical application presents problems for rural prosperity as it creates discord between rural citizens. Organic farms, tree farms, and wineries have been and continue to be victims of overspray.¹⁹ Hence, the process which produces pristine also produces destruction and this contradicts the traditional virtue of hard field work to care for crops. The “traditional value” of neighborliness is necessarily undercut by the problem of scale. Herbicide application is essentially a one-person job with high tech sprayers and application sensors. Second, the heavy use of herbicides produces pollution in the soil and in the air: the opposite of clean. Agricultural run-off from row-cropping fields, exacerbated by tiling systems, efficiently moves the chemicals into rivers and streams.²⁰ We would not be at all surprised if a weedless Iowa corn field is as polluted as an abandoned industrial site in the inner-city of Chicago.

Unfortunately, this is not the only problem with “pristine.” The agricultural system includes a huge number of livestock, and the numbers are increasing. As already mentioned, there are between 23-25 million hogs in Iowa and they are confined in small spaces (CAFOs). Hog waste is gathered in lagoons/pits and then used for field fertilizer. 23-25 million hogs produce an amazing amount of waste by comparison to human beings. One hog producing county in Iowa creates the equivalent amount of human waste as Chicago.²¹ As this waste is spread on row-cropping fields and inevitably over-applied, run off leads to extreme nutrient pollution in streams and rivers. This nutrient pollution is ever-increasing and now contributes 30% percent of the pollution that causes the “dead-

¹⁸ Decker, Leslie, Maggie Long, Clint Meyer, and John Pauley, “Problems in the Food System are Wicked,” *Yale Food Systems Symposium*, Yale University, 2018, 23–24.

¹⁹ “Pesticide Drift in Iowa,” *Pesticide Action Network*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.panna.org/resources/pesticide-drift-iowa/>.

²⁰ Jones, Chris. *The Swine Republic*. 2023. Ice Cube Press. Iowa City, IA.

²¹ Ibid.

zone” in the Gulf of Mexico.²² Hence, the pristine Iowa row-cropping fields are so filthy that they cause hypoxia thousands of miles down-river. This pollution does consistent damage to other food systems and costs millions of dollars each year.²³ If citizens could grasp the dimensions of this filth and its consequences, they might retract their pride in pristine. In short, Iowa row-cropping fields are filthy. The scale of this pollution is symmetrical with the scale of “product” and has obvious national and international implications. Huge amounts of waste into oceans becomes “everyone’s problem.”

There are *layers of mythology* that obfuscate and so make comprehension more difficult. “Pristine” is the term directly applied to row-cropping fields. “Bucolic” is a term often used to describe the Iowa countryside in general.²⁴ The bucolic concept finds visual aid in a cottage industry of wildlife and farm-scape paintings that can be found in virtually every kind of office in the state. It is undeniable that the paintings are evoking the aura of the agricultural context. The lexical definition of “bucolic” is “relating to the pleasant aspects of the countryside and country-life.” A difficulty here emerges concerning aesthetic judgments. A visiting journalist covering the recent Iowa caucus looks out her car window and sees a rolling landscape of corn and beans and says to herself: “how peaceful and pleasant.”²⁵ Is she wrong? At the very least we might want to know what she knows about what she is judging. Or one might say, the landscape looks peaceful and pleasant but it is not, in fact, peaceful and pleasant. How it appears is radically different from its actual nature.

So, what if we suggested that ecological literacy is a necessary condition for the aesthetic judgment made by the journalist? She does not meet this necessary condition. Hence, she is not in the position to make the judgment. This line of reasoning is clearly problematic. What we need is a distinction to guide us in these sorts of cases. That some person finds appearances pleasant and peaceful is not subject to correction, but a claim about the *very nature* of the landscape is subject to correction. Our journalist is not in the position to make any claim about the nature of the Iowa countryside because she does not know enough to make such a claim. She can claim whatever she wants about how the countryside appears to her. This distinction is crucial because many people will make claims about the Iowa countryside and be in full agreement that what appears is pleasant and peaceful. Nothing follows from this group judgment with respect to the actual nature of the countryside. All that we can say is that many people regard their experience of the countryside to be pleasant and peaceful. This aesthetic fallacy is mirrored by a political fallacy: how the political situation appears to me and my group *is the reality* of the political situation.

Suppose we now fill in the background and foreground with strong ecological literacy. Our journalist ends up studying ecology and the Iowa agricultural system. She learns that row-cropping on such a scale is causing constant and highly destructive soil erosion and in combination with swine production the row-cropping fields create nutrient pollution in streams and rivers. She also does some ecological/ontological reflection and realizes that no parcel of land, no eighty-acre cornfield, can be causally separated from adjoining land or even from distant watersheds. She then learns about the science that links agricultural mass-production to the dead-zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Beyond all this, and aiming at “comprehension,” she connects the agricultural system to the political-economic-and social systems and comes to see how the landscape is formed from a human reality fraught with deep internal and external problems. It seems to me that she now has good reasons to deny that the landscape is, *in fact*, pleasant and peaceful. Our journalist will now map row-cropping fields in connection to the holistic environment insofar as she knows it.

We can also see how breaking the bucolic bias might happen from a wider experience *of and with the landscape*. The journalist was looking out her car window. Engagement with the actual physical environment tells a story that flatly contradicts “bucolic.” As we look at ways to define bucolic we see “pastoral” which then connects to the pleasant and peaceful. For any citizen or visitor there is no way to engage with the row-cropping land. Besides the fact that it is privately owned, the row-cropping reality is not one to be walked or traversed in any way. Whereas “pastoral” seems to invite human engagement in peaceful and pleasant ways (a horseback ride across the land or a midday picnic). But these activities violate all aspects of mass-production. In truth, if farmers acquire much more land for mass-production row-cropping, there will be no land left for pleasant and peaceful activities in the “countryside.” Urban and suburban areas will be the context for recreation. Semantic maps must include what and why certain categories of space/land are *missing* (recreational, wilderness, etc.).

Consider these lines of reasoning through an argument from analogy. A group of young professionals are touring a recently “gentrified” neighborhood in Chicago with an interest in making a real estate investment. Many in the group are quite impressed with the aesthetics of remodeled houses and brick-paved streets. Houses are described as “elegant,” and the entirety of the neighborhood is described as “exquisite.” One person, however,

²² Christopher S. Jones, Jacob K. Nielsen, Keith E. Schilling, and Larry J. Weber, “Iowa Stream Nitrate and the Gulf of Mexico,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1–17, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0195930>.

²³ “Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone,” *The Nature Conservancy*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/priority-landscapes/gulf-of-mexico/stories-in-the-gulf-of-mexico/gulf-of-mexico-dead-zone/>.

²⁴ Simon, Roger.

²⁵ Ibid.

raises questions and regards the entirety of the neighborhood as “revolting” and “grotesque.” This person receives puzzled and hostile looks and then says: “you all have to realize that this neighborhood is the end result of red-lining laws and other forms of racial discrimination that creates the segregated city.” In this case, ecological literacy begins as the gentrified neighborhood is connected to the wider landscape of the city. A grossly segregated neighborhood accentuates the overall segregated quality of the city and so the judgment of “elegant” is cognitively soiled by historical and contemporary injustice. Comprehending the meaning of this landscape synthesizes undeniable facts about the landscape and new semantic maps are formed. People who pay attention may very well be repulsed by such neighborhoods to the point where they cannot “see them” as elegant or exquisite. By analogy, as citizens in Iowa, and those visiting Iowa, comprehend the ecology, the “bucolic” judgment is falsified. Viewing the landscape from an isolated and singular sort of lens, which is inevitably a form of bias, crimps and cramps normative judgments about the landscape.

The notion that the quality of my own experience of *x* somehow *unreflectively* corresponds directly to the quality of the *x* that is experienced is close to a solipsism. As it is held by a group, we can call it cultural solipsism. The correction is ecological literacy and comprehension, but as cultural solipsism is strongly embedded it becomes internally resistant to the very idea of externality. Traditional values that are held within a cultural solipsism then take on the quality of a permanence that resists *any sort of change or adjustments to context*. One might say, this is how “traditional values” become considered as “universal.” It is my view here that such a disposition is necessarily antithetical to democratic principles.

VI: Ecological Literacy, Agricultural Mass-Production and Democracy

Comprehension, as I have briefly described it in the above, presents a threat to cultural solipsism. Empirically, it is difficult to resist this conclusion. Consider the following political-social example. The Iowa State Legislature and Iowa culture has fought and continues to fight “critical race theory.” Legislators and other politicians argue that critical race theory ultimately asserts that the United States is a “racist country” and that divides citizens into two classes of “oppressor” and “oppressed.” On their view, which is essentially vacuous, the United States is not a racist country and citizens are just citizens, not oppressor and oppressed. Children and young adults should not grow up seeing themselves as oppressors or oppressed persons but as equals.²⁶

There are two lines of thought here. One concerns whatever could support the conclusion that the United States is not a racist country made up of oppressors and oppressed. The other is that the United States presented as a racist country does damage to children and young adults (not simply because the view is false but also because viewing oneself in these ways is inherently damaging). Looking at US history from a systemic point of view does, however, clearly reveal the United States as a racist country. The only way we can, in fact, comprehend the United States landscape is through systemic racism. Racist laws, the radical wealth and health gaps between white and black/brown people cannot *possibly be explained without an ecology of racism*. Without this comprehension, the problem cannot be articulated and so cannot be solved. The view that the US is not a racist country is one that includes racism as an accidental and so individualistic feature of culture. If racism is, in fact, the result of many bad or rotten apples, then we can blame the bad and the rotten and leave the culture out of it (of course, *we need to explain* how there are so many bad or rotten apples which will depend on systems).

Insofar as systems go unrecognized and systemic investigation is viewed as a threat, as in the above case, comprehension of the *agricultural system* is impossible. The default view, which is the aura of the AC, sticks with the farmer as the strong and virtuous individual, thus creating a protection from any sort of corruption. And given that cultural identity is formed partly from the AC and background, mythologies become *spiritual investments*. That farming could become corrupt is truly absurd and whatever has gone wrong, insofar as the wrong will be recognized, must be itself accidental to the practice of farming. Unlike some other critics of mass-production agriculture, I see the proclamations of politicians defending producers as paradigms of individual virtue as mostly sincere. The literally incomprehensible level of productivity seems to support the conclusion that producers are wise, virtuous, industrious, and economically brilliant. Such sincerity is, in my view, funded by cultural solipsism.

The actual state of affairs with respect to agriculture, all of agriculture, is essentially as it “seems to us.” In other words, our experience of *x*, and our historical understanding of *x*, is necessarily true of *x*. Endeavors to reform or change the agricultural system are then attacks on the truth, which are attacks on a mythically virtuous form of life. Cultural solipsism then necessarily removes itself from rational discourse because the truth, which is stagnant, is clearly seen. Hence, the political system in Iowa, entirely dominated by a cultural solipsism, can pass bills banning diversity, equity, and inclusion training and, at the same time, threaten the teaching of critical race theory in public universities. These bills, which have been passed into law, are aspects of the same cultural solipsism that has protected mass-production agriculture for decades.²⁷

²⁶ John Beaty, “Critical Race Theory in the Classroom: Iowa’s Critical Race Theory Ban and the Limits of the First Amendment,” *Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 27 (2024): 137.

²⁷ Ibid.

Comprehension of the agricultural system often begins with a troubling question. For example: how is it possible that the laws and legal processes protect mass-production agriculture from fines and penalties for the environmental damage it has done? And this question becomes more and more urgent as we situate ourselves within the current environmental circumstance both locally and globally. We cannot ignore the consequences of local production on global well-being without at the same time ignoring standards of justice. Symmetrically, we cannot ignore the consequences of *local production on local well-being*, and we quickly discover that mass-production is egregiously self-destructive: mass production is undercutting the conditions for its own existence and, in the process, damaging the current and future well-being of citizens, non-human animals and local/distant ecologies.²⁸

The bottom line here is that mass-production agriculture is *embedded* into the legal and political systems. Safe-guarding production has evolved well past its actual justification. For example, CAFO's are systematically protected from federal, state, and local control. The number of CAFOs in Iowa has gone from a few hundred in 1990 to nine thousand currently. Because the laws are a book in and of themselves, I here offer a summary from a recent law review essay.

There is little, if any, effective direct federal regulation of Iowa CAFOs, and repeated initiatives to expand the jurisdiction of the EPA in regulating CAFOs have been rejected.⁹⁹ Iowa's statewide legislation dealing with CAFOs is toothless, and is primarily concerned with promoting their growth, and with preempting local Iowa governments from exerting any meaningful control over their siting or operation.¹⁰⁰ Iowa DNR's regulations under the Master Matrix governing the siting and operation of CAFOs are very weak compared to such regulations in other states with large numbers of CAFOs.¹⁰¹ Similarly, conventional "prudent generally accepted management practices" with respect to CAFOs are largely directed at improving profitability and not at avoiding public health hazards or environmental degradation.²⁹

In short, regulation of CAFOs, such as it is, *favors the economic well-being of the CAFO operation over the well-being of citizens*. Since 1982, with the first "right to farm" legislation, mass-production of livestock has been encouraged and protected. Legal protection from reasonable environmental standards allows mass-production agriculture to flout all forms of procedural justice.

Most recently, CAFO's have been correctly blamed for serious damage to water quality both in Iowa and well beyond.³⁰ The damage does, however, go well beyond hydrology. Most citizens in Iowa seem entirely ignorant of the connection between the mass-production of hogs and greenhouse gas emissions. According to recent studies done by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, methane and nitrous oxide- the two most potent greenhouse gases, are predicted to continuously rise from now until 2040. Estimates for 2020 GHG emissions from agriculture in Iowa are **40 MMtCO₂e with the predicted rise to be 65 MMt by 2040.**³¹ Agriculture is responsible for 82% of the methane emissions and 94% of the nitrous oxide emissions.³² All experts agree that CAFO's are a central cause of this global problem but there are currently no plans in place to abate emissions. What makes these facts and numbers so important is what they reveal about the Iowa mass-production system.

The pressure for higher corn yields is partially caused by the political-economic pressure for more ethanol. Iowa produced 4.6 billion gallons of corn-based ethanol in 2022, which is by far the most in the United States.³³ Ethanol is supposed to be a renewable fuel and it is also supposed to cut CO₂ emissions. Both suppositions are radically false.³⁴ Corn-based ethanol is only a renewable fuel insofar as the mass production of corn has infinite potential, but as is clear by now, mono-culture row-cropping is self-destructive. Recent research has also shown that ethanol in liquid fuel *does not reduce CO₂ emissions*. Ethanol production requires more and more fertilizer, which is supplied by hog manure. The mass-production of hogs supports the mass-production of ethanol which

²⁸ Meyer, Clint and John Pauley, "Agricultural Aesthetics: The Self-Defeating Nature of the Iowa Agricultural System," *International Journal of Environmental Sustainability* 19, no. 1 (2023): 79, Common Ground Publishers.

²⁹ Hines, William. "Here We Go Again: A Third Legislative Attempt to Protect Polluting Iowa CAFOs from Neighbors' Nuisance Actions," *Iowa Law Review* 103 (2018): [page range], <https://ilr.law.uiowa.edu/volume-103-articles-essays/2>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Iowa Department of Natural Resources, "2022 Greenhouse Gas Emissions Report," accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.iowadnr.gov/Portals/idnr/uploads/air/ghgemissions/2022_GHG_Report.pdf.

³² Ibid.

³³ "2023 Iowa Ethanol Production Ticked Up to Another Record," *Iowa Renewable Fuels Association*, February 2024, <https://iowarfa.org/2024/02/2023-iowa-ethanol-production-ticked-up-to-another-record/#:~:text=JOHNSTON%2C%20IA%20-%20In%202023%2C,4.5%20billion%20in%202022.>

³⁴ Lark, Tyler, Nathan P. Hendricks, Aaron Smith, Nicholas Pates, Seth A. Spawn-Lee, Matthew Bougie, Eric G. Booth, Christopher J. Kucharik, Holly K. Gibbs. 2022 "Environmental Outcomes of the US Renewable Fuel Standard." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. 119 (9): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2101084119>

further supports the mass-production of corn. The bottom line is that 60% of the Iowa corn harvest goes to ethanol production and 40% goes to livestock feed.

The central way that Iowa politicians and industry leaders systematically work against escalating awareness of greenhouse gas emissions from livestock is through yet another myth. "Iowa Feeds the World" is a slogan that essentially all citizens are familiar with because there is a strong PR movement at its base. It does not work on its own; it has been synthesized with the strong residual of the agricultural context. Hard work, family values, fecundity, stewardship, safety, efficiency, and innovation all serve to make up this myth and its ultimate support are the sheer facts of mass production.³⁵ Just recall the fact that Iowa CAFO's brought 50 million hogs to market in 2022. The rest of the sheer facts are enough to make our eyes glaze over in amazement. In this case the sheer facts of mass production, as a foundation for this secondary myth, overwhelm any serious need for debate over greenhouse gas emissions.

It does not, however, take very much to obliterate this myth. CAFOs eliminate most needs for anything like traditional agricultural labor; CAFOs are not safe; CAFOs contradict stewardship. But most obviously, the only sense in which Iowa feeds the world is through meat production, with the primary meat being pork. Iowa's crop production serves the Iowa livestock and ethanol industry. Iowa corn production, with a 2023 harvest of 2.5 billion bushels, feeds livestock and makes ethanol. And then we come to the very troubling issues concerning the overall sustainability of meat production, but I would prefer to get to the bottom line. Iowa is really feeding the world with pork chops? This is hopeless from all points of view. As we get a glimpse into the wholistic picture, through methods of ecological literacy, the myth falls apart. Once the myth is obliterated, we can then at least start to think about future possibilities and create a ground for cultural knowledge. But the longer the myth endures, and even the residue of the myth, the harder it is to think outside the system of mass-production agriculture.

Unfortunately, these farm myths intersect with cultural lies within a very dangerous political circumstance in the United States. Many people hold the belief that greenhouse gas emissions and global warming are bogus and the deeper we go into the cultural wars the more adamant the denials.³⁶ In short, we cannot reach a consensus on what needs to be debated and decided. In some places in the United States, such as Iowa, there is clearly no consensus on global warming *as a pressing issue*. Bringing up greenhouse gas emissions from mass-production agriculture in Iowa is a non-starter that will spark immediate antagonism and inevitably that antagonism will also connect to the myths discussed: the very idea that the Iowa farmer contributes to environmental injustice will not be tolerated. The very idea that the Iowa farmer is the direct cause of animal suffering will not be tolerated.³⁷ What follows is the force of authority. Whether or not CAFOs will be allowed to increase in size or number is no longer in the hands of citizens.

A *communal process* for determining the nature of our ecology seems to fit well with the idea of a *democratic process*. If, however, that communal process brings with it potential landscapes and potential semantic maps that threaten a dominant form of life, we have trouble. Myths, as I have argued, will generally support that dominant way of life so that the values in question, whatever they may be, are not *significantly or fairly* challenged. Dominant forms of life, whatever they may be, damage the potential development of their own values without consistent challenge according to the inevitability of change. Once we choose not to change, to hold on to what we want to believe, we do damage to the very possibility of democracy. The necessity of change in beliefs in this case comes from the very form of life that is being so strongly defended. Mass-production has, in general, been a driving force in environmental destruction which has led to so much of our troubled present. Change is already present, already changing into something even more problematic, as we refuse to face the real values that led us to environmental destruction.

The Governor of Iowa, Kim Reynolds, recently "denied a request to endorse applications being made by Iowa counties to tap into a federal environmental grant program."³⁸ These grants, climate pollution reduction grants, providing up to 5 billion for state and local governments, are meant to address air pollution with a focus on greenhouse gas emissions. They are part of Biden's infrastructure funding. Most Iowa counties are rural and most contain CAFOs. It is, of course, possible that some of these grants, if accepted, would significantly challenge the expansion of CAFOs. Reynolds has not weighed in on her denial, she has given no reason as to why she is doing this, but it is consistent with her criticism of the Biden administration. Denying federal funding to help the environment is not the usual political move. Most states are quite happy to get funding. One must think that

³⁵ "Miller-Meeks: Thank a Farmer," *Miller-Meeks Press Release*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://millermeeks.house.gov/media/in-the-news/miller-meeks-thank-farmer>.

³⁶ So, Kat.

³⁷ "How Do Iowa Farmers Ensure the Wellbeing of Their Farm Animals?" *Iowa Farm Bureau*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.iowafarmbureau.com/Article/Question-How-do-Iowa-farmers-ensure-the-wellbeing-of-their-farm-animals>.

³⁸ Clayworth, Jason. "Kim Reynolds Snubs County Environmental Efforts," *Axios*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/local/des-moines/2024/02/15/kim-reynolds-governor-environmental-grant-snubbed#:~:text=Kim%20Reynolds%20snubs%20county%20environmental%20efforts,-Jason%20Clayworth&text=Brendan%20Lynch%2FAxios-,a%20federal%20environmental%20grant%20program>.

Reynolds is more than just dismissive of Biden, that she sees him as illegitimate. So CAFO operations need not worry over more exposure with respect to greenhouse gas emissions, at least from federal grants. But then, as we have explored, the Iowa farmer is a steward and not a polluter. This is just another example of political lies intersecting with cultural myths to authorize the status quo.

VII: Circling Back

We sometimes ignore the necessary conditions for the development of values within a culture. Such an oversight encourages individualism *as if* the values and virtues of everyone within a culture are strictly a matter of individual development. What if, however, deeply held values, leading to virtues, are both a matter of cultural circumstance and specific cultural *organization*? Clearly, what I called the “agricultural context” is a social system which encourages and finally demands “neighborliness” and the family of virtues that come with it. A social system where housing and labor are fully separated and where those living nearby *have little or no bearing on our daily well-being* will by and large fail to produce “neighborliness.”

Of course, the very idea that others living near us “have little or no bearing on our daily well-being” may be more of a perception than a reality. But this perception is itself produced by the social system. If I must somehow continuously articulate how and why others matter for my well-being, and if the substance of this articulation becomes “theoretical” or dependent on some religious or moral principle alone, I become bound to the perception of separation. Moral principles must be tied to a pragmatics of circumstance to embed into human reality. On the macrocosmic view, the United States *seems isolated* from the rest of the world in the sense that seeing how the nature of our consumption has consequences for others is not *simply obvious*. The reality of climate change remains a “theoretical” postulate to many United States citizens. Hence, ecological literacy is a vital pragmatic endeavor and perhaps a necessary condition for motivating real change.

There is no question that mass production agriculture shattered the value and virtues of neighborliness. The rural landscape no longer speaks the language of a shared enterprise and agriculture no longer engages citizens in ways that connect communities. As neighborliness crumbles, other related values go through an evolution. For example, the way the private property axiom is *interpreted and asserted* becomes emblematic of division. Organic farmers and rural property owners frequently complain of herbicide drift from mass-production row-cropping operations and they, of course, assert property rights as a basis for their complaint. Large operations also have their property rights and their right to conduct business. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Iowa politics has embedded mass-production agriculture into Iowa law, creating a threat to the property rights of rural landowners and smaller agricultural operations. A peaceful co-existence of property rights and mixed activities on the rural landscape are threatened *just as mass-production receives consistent support from the law. This is the corruption of democratic principles. Equality under the law is systemically violated.*

Even with overwhelming evidence that Iowa rivers and streams have been and are being severely polluted and so ruined by mass-production agriculture, the state government consistently provides protection to the polluters.³⁹ This is easily documented. Many in the legislature say that to create more “regulations” (instead of relying on “voluntary measures”) is a step toward “socialism” and a “violation of private property rights.”⁴⁰ Such assertions rely on a *mythology of the farmer as steward of the land*, a virtue that belonged to the agricultural context. Mass-production cannot, from the necessity of its own internal logic, create the context for “stewardship” (an aspect of neighborliness). Hence, blaming any individual farmer for the pollution, while sometimes necessary, misses the central point. A mass-production agricultural system at a large scale is going to produce massive amounts of pollution in several forms (herbicides, pesticides, animal waste/nutrient pollution). The truth is that state political leaders have, like the rest of the culture, been overwhelmed by the forces of mass-production.

The crushing power of mass-production/corporate agriculture is an element within cultural solipsism. All these elements circle the wagon and exclude *external insight or criticism*. For a most recent example, the State of Iowa legislature just passed an education bill that mandates schools teach “exemplary figures and important events in western civilization.” While this may seem essentially innocuous, the motive behind such bills is to teach how western civilization has produced “the freest, strongest, most prosperous nation-civilization in the world.” These virtues are mandated to stand in contrast to “alternative forms of government, and the crimes against humanity that have occurred under communist regimes since 1917.” Content of the bill is produced by a national organization called *The Civics Alliance* (Iowa politicians are not writing their own bills): this is a trend across the United States. Inevitably what rises to the top is a free-market capitalism which, of course, falls within the wide value of “freedom” and contrasts with “socialism” and the violation of property rights and self-determination.

³⁹ Hines, William.

⁴⁰ Iowa House Resolution 18. 2021. H.F. 18, 89th General Assembly. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/LGI/89/HR18.pdf>.
[iowa.gov/docs/publications/LGI/89/HR18.pdf](https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/LGI/89/HR18.pdf).

Never has US culture needed philosophical-historical insight more urgently. In the above “educational” bill what we have is the self-sealing conceptual scheme of *half-truths*. Once sealed tightly enough, those within this conceptual scheme no longer have the burden of denial. We might say, if the truth is known, then denial is not required: a complete *dismissal* is more like it. And indeed, this is what we see. There is no mandate to teach about the genocide of Native Americans, no need to discuss the lynching of Black Americans in the Jim Crow south and Midwest, no need to discuss the self-torture of the Vietnam War, and no need to discuss the complicated and contradictory history of free-market capitalism and human rights. In short, we have no reason to understand or discuss the epistemic struggles with ourselves and our culture. Incredibly, there is still no reason to discuss climate change even though this is a direct threat to *every aspect of free-market capitalism*. So, no reason to educate ourselves about the greenhouse gas threat posed by mass-production agriculture. These are all self-destructive tendencies, the irony of self-assurance, and as those tendencies go outward, they are necessarily violent.

The actual content of the politics is not the central problem. Hence, the critique here is not *directly* political. Democracy starts to fray and then finally tears when *political authority endeavors to determine the nature of social and cultural value*. Which values can survive is ultimately a test focused on their relevance to and pragmatics for a collectively imagined future. Authority of “traditional value” is antithetical to this test as it cannot be imaginative. All authority can do is project the past upon the present and the future. As such, it entirely fails efforts to synthesize reason with imagination. Of course, criticism of the arguments in this essay will very probably state that the “traditional values” are the choice of citizens and are revealed in how they vote and participate. The response to this criticism is troubling but true: a democratic process can end in undemocratic results.