Let’s Make PARITY Our National Policy

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This is George Naylor’s Keystone Address to Farmers Leading the Food Movement

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Being from the future, I could tell them with confidence that the prescription to their economic woes was exactly what led to the collapse of agricultural and rural communities back in the U.S. that I had just described. That prescription has failed miserably and is failing again in 2016. Back home in Iowa, most remaining farmers farm thousands of acres, and yet some have already been told by their bankers that there will be NO NEW LOANS to put in the next crop. Based on what I witnessed in the 1980’s, I can say with confidence the next farm foreclosure crisis is just beginning.

Ownership of Land is 10%
The typical farmer owns probably only 10% of the land they farm, the rest is cash rented where the landlords often take the highest bid from the biggest, most industrialized farmer. Farmers through the years have invested in bigger and bigger livestock facilities. A neighbor used to point to his empty silo and say it was his ‘Monument to Stupidity’ just one of many farmer investments that became obsolete much faster than expected. Now almost all large pigs and chickens and even market gardens are owned by corporations and fed in giant feedlots and Confined Animal Feeding Operations or CAFO’s as defined by the Clean Water Act. The millions of gallons of manure along with the fecercrow to fencercrow farming of corn and soybeans mean Iowa’s lakes and waterways become more polluted every year. Getting bigger on matter how small a farmer you are or how big you are already clearly is no answer to a farmer’s problem.

I Came from the Future
When I had told byligue of representing the National Family Farm Coalition at meetings or trade agreement protests of the international movements of peasants, farmers, farm workers, fishers, called La Via Campesina. I would jokingly say that I came from the Future. I would describe the situation in my community of almost no remaining farmers, rural communities that have become rundown, rural ghettos, the loss of biodiversity and soil erosion and water pollution - a virtual Silent Revolution, but a revolution in how we think and how we unconsciously support the status quo.

Many Food Theories
I’ve known so many wonderful people trying to rectify our food and agricultural systems through the years so that the words: healthy food, family farmer, and conservation actually meant something concrete. I’ve been thrilled so many times by the leadership of modern farmers who, like their ancestors, were trying to change policy or figure out a new market to stay in business. On the other hand, there have been many theories claiming to represent real change in our food and agricultural systems for the better, but in fact were not. These theories may have seemed logical, but in fact supported the status quo where all questions were boiled down to what is best for the individuals, sometimes including corporations. Of course, by an error of logic, the proposals were going to be good for all of us, especially providing cheap food for poor people and researchers had science to back them up. So I’ve learned in my 40 years of farming and farm activism that we need everybody and their ideas and actions to be part of the puzzle.

But most importantly, We need to be part of the SAME puzzle - the puzzle for democratic, egalitarian social change that respects our ecological limits, rather than a puzzle that intentionally or unintentionally supports the status quo that only creates more problems for our democracy, our health and our environment. This will not only require a political revolution, but a revolution in how we think and how we unconsciously support the status quo.

"A Monument to Stupidity" An Empty Silo
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IT’S COMMODITIES, STUPID!
That means we need to decommodit- ize agriculture, whether by policy or develop local markets like many farmers here today. I believe unless we recognize that industrialized agriculture depends on production and consumption of commodities, that our most basic assumptions of economic behavior actually assure the individual status quo, the big problems I mentioned will never be solved and we will be wringing our hands at future summits much like I’ve done for the past 40 years. The logic of commodity consumption and production is at root of most of our environmental and social problems. What percentage of our population is happy because we are paying $2 per gallon for gasoline instead of $4? Almost everyone! So our economists and politicians tell us ‘We want cheap gas, and WE should be happy about oil giants.

Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing
Sentimentality or a political campaign line like ‘I Love Farmers’ won’t remedy our food and agricultural problems. Agribusiness and other wolves in sheep’s clothing use the same devices. We should all admire farmers who survive by being entrepreneurs, but to say that...