

To Build a Progressive Populism Look to Farm Country

By Siena Chrisman

With their sights now firmly trained on 2018, Democratic strategists and liberal pundits have an opportunity to re-think populism and redefine it to better include farmers and rural communities.

Many Democrats still can't figure out how to approach white rural residents, who are often cast as irredeemable hillbillies responsible for the election of Donald Trump. While whiteness was the clearest predictor of a vote for Trump, it is rural and working-class whites who have been held responsible, as no one is suggesting giving up on well-off white suburban voters.

Scapegoating leaves us at a standstill. It also ignores a rich history: In the 1980s, when rural life was rapidly becoming as bleak as it is today, a perfect storm of politics and economics hit middle American, in the form of the farm crisis. In response, white Midwestern farmers emerged at the forefront of resistance to the prevailing government agenda of privatization and deregulation, fighting white supremacist groups, and partnering with labor unions and Black politicians.

Instead of demonizing the descendants of that rural-populist uprising, we need to ask: How did that happen and how can it happen again?

Over 500 farms a week were lost through the 1980s: the properties were sold to larger operations and families were forced to move from land they had farmed for generations. Without the engine of farm sales, Main Street businesses, farm-implementation factories, schools, churches and eventually whole towns dried up. Promised economic efficiency became on-the-ground desolation.



source: farmaid.org

Mental health advocates at the time suggested that farm loss was so emotionally and financially significant that it traumatized not only individual families, but entire rural communities, leaving swathes of the country with chronic long-term stress and depression.

After losing both her farm and her husband in just three months, Oklahoma schoolteacher Mona Lee Brock became a farm crisis counselor, fielding tens of thousands of calls from desperate farmers. "A lot of them were in deep depression," she said in an interview with filmmaker Charlie Thompson. Brock linked that depression to elevated rates of cancer, heart disease, and high blood pressure. "It was just breaking apart out there," she added. Suicides, spousal abuse, and other violence spiked. Sound familiar?

As the places people had been proud to be from disappeared, groups like the paramilitary right-wing Posse Comitatus and Christian Identity Believers (who teach that whites are the only true descendants of God) used the crisis to spread right-wing, anti-government conspiracy theories and race-hatred. Their adherents attended farm auctions and support groups, offering a listening ear and eventually distributing literature with concrete explanations for the loss and

changes farmers were witnessing: ideas built on 17th Century anti-Semitic propaganda and which encouraged actions against Blacks, Jews, and other "enemies of the Republic."

But an alternative also emerged. Across the farm belt, farmers gathered around kitchen tables and in church basements to sort out the devastation. They figured out how to help each other and researched the real roots of the crisis: farm policy that favored big business. Iowa Farmer Denise O'Brien was still learning to farm, but found herself quickly drawn in. "I attended so many meetings and felt overwhelmed with the gravity of it all," she wrote in an unpublished essay about that time. "People were losing their farms. I didn't totally grasp the whys and hows, but I did know there was injustice. [My neighbors] were my teachers."

The Farm Movement, as it came to be known, eventually made national headlines, partnering with celebrities like Willie Nelson – whose Farm Aid concerts brought awareness and financial support – and politicians like Jesse Jackson, but its activists leaders were home grown.

Groups like Progressive Prairie Alliance, Prairie Fire Rural Action, and the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition set up food pantries and held "Know your Rights" Forums. They helped fiercely proud neighbors apply for government benefits and translated people's experiences into legislative proposals. Farm wives like Lou Anne King and Linda Hessman taught themselves agricultural credit law to understand what was happening on their own farms and found themselves running ad hoc legal and crisis hotlines from their dining rooms.

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These groups also helped farmers see the connections among federal policies that made them lose their farms and the erosion of local factory jobs and patterns of disinvestment in majority-Black cities. Some farm movement organizers built relationships with Black-led farm groups like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and found allies in the Congressional Black Caucus. Their regular publications took a wide view of the crisis, emphasizing the hardship not only in the Midwest but across the South, where aggressive foreclosures were compounded by decades of rampant discrimination by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Black land loss was many times the national average.

As many as 150 farm groups had formed by the middle of the decade. Echoing the original populists – the left-wing, agrarian 1890s People's Party – nearly all described themselves as "populist" and "progressive," by which they meant favoring candidates and policies supportive of small family farmers.

1998 Presidential run of Jesse Jackson, another, populist, catalyzed the movement. While farmers were an enthusiastic segment of his Rainbow Coalition, he developed his progressive farm platform in consultation with movement leaders. Many of his staunchest supporters in the Midwest had never met a Black man, but they knew he could talk about the farm crisis better than they could themselves.

"Farmers were so damn eager to hear someone represent them and tell the rest of the world what was happening," says Roger Allison, a Missouri cattle farmer who worked closely with the candidate. Jackson prioritized the farm belt as much as he did his traditional urban base, "going to these crazy rural places and saying "Bail out the family farmer!," Allison says. "It was something the farmers had never seen. It was an enlightenment."

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Meanwhile, the farm movement reinforced Jackson's message in farmers' lives. The direct services addressed immediate needs, while tractorcades and other creative protests, law suits, and nationally televised Farm Aid Concerts built national sympathy for the farmer's plight. The activists' focus on federal policy meant that a farm bill returning economic power to family farmer very nearly passed in Congress in 1987, and President Reagan, famously hostile to farmers most of the decade, signed legislation later that year that stemmed foreclosures and kept more families on their farms.



Roger Allison
Executive Director
Missouri Rural Crisis Center
Founded on 1985
State Wide organization of
5,600 farm and rural families
with 13 chapter around the state

With fewer farmers in immediate crisis – partly because there are fewer farms overall – the farm movement has quieted in the decades since then. But it hasn't died. Roger Allison founded Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC) in 1985 and still runs it with his wife Rhonda Perry. Today MRCC gives a powerful voice to its 5,600 member families, fighting for independent family farms, a locally based economy, and grassroots democracy in deep-red rural Missouri. One of the organizing principles, as Allison puts it, is that "Farmers are not going to win economic and social justice in

Family Farm Defenders

isolation from the rest of society." So, the members see it as their duty, to "do everything they can to strengthen understanding among diverse groups of people."

Allison and Perry aren't the only ones. There is a long history of grassroots, multi-issue, equity-based rural organizing in Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, west to Colorado, Montana, and Oregon, and down to Kentucky and North Carolina, just for starters. These groups have simply been outgunned in recent decades as "The Right" has focused on building a rural base while "The Left" has concentrated in cities.

Populism, claimed by both Left and Right in the 130 years since its coining, has leaned more decisively Right in the last decade, espoused not only by the Tea Party and Donald Trump, but by leaders around the world such as Marine LePen and Narendra Modi. But in rural white America, where the idea, where the idea began, it is ripe for reclaiming. The way to support a resurgence of progressive populism in the heartland isn't to parachute in as saviors. It is still, as a farm movement of the 1980s demonstrates, to take seriously the very real concerns there – poverty, drug epidemics, suicide – and invest in what's already happening on the ground.

In rural Missouri, Roger Allison says he and others have spent the last year, "fighting back, just like we always have." Fighting back, ultimately, means addressing members' needs and getting them involved in the solution, from opposing factory farms and organizing rural health care to bringing rural and urban youth together at farm camp.

But they can't do it alone. "We need help out here," Allison sighs. "Nobody's ringing our doorbell to say "Hey, we want to put money into rural organizing." It's about time a lot more people did.

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