An Agrarian Imaginary in Urban Life: Cultivating Virtues and Vices Through a Conflicted History

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence and use of agrarian thought on collective understandings of food practices as sources of ethical and communal value in urban contexts. A primary proponent of agrarian thought that this paper engages is Paul Thompson and his exceptional book, The Agrarian Vision. Thompson aims to use agrarian ideals of agriculture and communal life to rethink current issues of sustainability and environmental ethics. However, Thompson perceives the current cultural mood as hostile to agrarian virtue. There are two related claims of this paper. The first argues that contrary to Thompson's perception of hostility, agrarian thought is popularly and commercially mobilized among urban populations. To establish this claim I extend Charles Taylor's notion of a social imaginary and suggest that urban agriculture can be theorized as an agrarian imaginary. Entwined with the first claim is the second, that proponents selectively use agrarian history to overemphasis a narrative of virtue while ignoring or marginalizing historical practices of agrarian violence, exclusion and dispossession. I do not discount or deny the significance of agrarian virtue. By situating agrarian thought within a clearer virtue ethics framework and acknowledging potential manifestation of agrarian vice, I suggest that the idea of agrarian virtue is strengthened.

Keywords: Agrarian, Social imaginary, Urban agriculture, Virtue, Vice, Charles Taylor

Introduction

Food is increasingly becoming a source of concern for people living in large developed cities and urban environments. This concern is not primarily about scarcity or price, but the conditions under which food is produced. Is the food organic? Is it local? Were migrant labourers subjected to harsh working conditions in its production? Were the cows fed a vegetarian diet? Did they eat corn or grass? Was the corn genetically modified? Are the eggs free-range? These questions, and others like them, are the subject of documentaries,

government reports, popular books and academic research. Many of these analyses use themes of alienation to highlight perceived problems of the industrial food system. Urban residents of Western societies are told that industrial agriculture has alienated them from food, the land and each other. A solution offered is a return to farming and consumption practices that existed prior to industrial agriculture. Advocates proposing this solution appeal to ideas of small-scale farming coupled with an ethics of community and character formation associated with agrarian traditions. In re-applying agrarian ideals to urban contexts, it is argued that the social, environmental and political ills linked to industrial agriculture and globalized urban life can be remedied.

This paper aims to add an orthogonal line of thought to a long conversation on the environmental and social ethics of the city (Jamieson 1984; Lawson 2001; Light and Wellman 2003; Thompson 2010). Rather than valorise the rural (Berry 2009) or defend the urban (De–Shalit 2003), this paper explores the influence and use of agrarian thought on collective understandings of urban food practices. In particular, I am interested in the use of agrarian ideals as sources of ethical and communal value in urban contexts. The contemporary articulation of agrarian is perhaps best expressed in Paul Thompson's impressive book, The Agrarian Vision. Thompson aims to use agrarian ideals of agriculture and communal life to rethink current issues of sustainability and environmental ethics in food practices (2010: 8). However, Thompson perceives 'the current cultural climate [as] somewhat hostile to the conception of agrarian virtue that underlies the agrarian vision of the twenty-first century agriculture' (2010: 80). Although Thompson's sense that there is a hostility towards agrarianism is warranted in relation to the agricultural industry and government policy, I point to census data and popular discourse to argue that a growing number of consumers in urban environments are highly receptive a notion of agrarian virtue and 'its salutary effects of moral character' (Thompson 2010: 80). Due to the popular reception of agrarian thought as a source of virtue, I argue it is necessary for proponents to be clearer about the history of agrarian thought and practice to ensure a widespread embrace of agrarian virtue does not have a negative impact on society. I contend that contemporary proponents of agrarian social thought focus too heavily on agrarian virtue and fail to address the possibility of agrarian vice.

There are two related claims of this paper. The first argues that agrarian thought is popularly and commercially mobilized among urban populations. To establish this argument I extend Charles Taylor's notion of a social imaginary and suggest that urban agriculture can be theorized as an agrarian imaginary. According to Taylor, a social imaginary describes 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (2004: 23). I contend that images and narratives of industrial ruin, agrarian virtue and urban renewal combine to establish an agrarian imaginary that frames the way people understand their social existence in relation to food consumption and production. Furthermore, the agrarian imaginary enables urban food practices to be seen as a continuation of historical agrarian practices and as providing unquestionable goods that have practical, social and political benefits for society.

Entwined with the first claim is the second, that proponents selectively use agrarian history to emphasize a narrative of virtue while ignoring or marginalizing historical practices of

agrarian violence, exclusion and dispossession. Proponents explicitly place agrarian thought into the tradition of virtue ethics, and therefore ought to give greater recognition to the way a virtue operates as the mean between two vices. If my assessment of the collective mood is correct and urban populations are embracing a form of agrarian virtue, then my argument that agrarian vice has been ignored requires careful attention.

To be clear, I am not discounting or denying the significance of agrarian virtue. By situating agrarian thought within a clearer virtue ethics framework and acknowledging potential manifestation of agrarian vice, I suggest that the idea of agrarian virtue is strengthened.

This paper is structured by four sections: (1) provides a brief overview of the agrarian tradition that is appealed to by proponents of urban agriculture and critics of industrial agriculture; (2) outlines the theoretical apparatus of the agrarian imaginary and the way it enables the appropriation of agrarian narratives to make urban food practices meaningful; (3) catalogues the practical, social and political benefits putatively associated with urban agricultural practices influenced by agrarian thought and practices; and (4) argues that proponents appeals to agrarian history neglect an appropriate consideration of vices, which I contend are manifest in urban contexts.

Agrarian Histories: Individual and Community Virtues

The history of agrarian thought and practice is long and contested (Govan 1964; Griswold 1963; Hofstadter 1956; Moore 2010; Smith 1950; Wirzba 2003). Any attempt to define the agrarian tradition is difficult due to the diverse representatives of agrarianism throughout history. For example, the Diggers in seventeenth century England, Jeffersonian farmer-citizens in eighteenth century America, the Country Party in 1920s Australia, the Southern Agrarians in 1930s Tennessee, the Khmer Rouge in 1970s Cambodia and contemporary Amish in Ohio and Pennsylvania can all lay claim to aspects of the agrarian tradition. Shared themes could be abstracted from these manifestations, however my interest lies in the way contemporary proponents emphasize certain themes and histories while discounting others. My objective is not to isolate an essence of agrarianism but provide an overview of the select history used by philosophers, popular authors and community organizers to position agrarian thought and practice as a source of individual and community virtue.

Proponents of agrarian thought and practices in the Anglo-American world tend to draw primarily from what has been referred to as Jeffersonian agrarianism (Smith 2003: 22). According to Paul Thompson, Thomas Jefferson is ‘easily the most emblematic figure, if not the patron saint, of an agrarian mentality’ (2010: 157). Jefferson’s often-quoted remark that farmers are ‘the most valuable citizens’ has become a central tenant of agrarianism (Thompson 2010: 53) and influenced agrarian political thought in North America and beyond (Botterill and Cockfield 2010; Craig and Phillips 1983; Thompson 2000: 120). I refer to Jeffersonian agrarianism not as the crystallization of Jefferson’s thought on agriculture and society but in reference to the interpretative tradition that has grown around his initial writings. Agrarianism is not merely a set of ideas about farming, but contains political and social ideas that reinforce each other to establish an agrarian vision for the way society should be organized. As such, I briefly sketch the political and social threads significant in contemporary articulations of agrarianism.

Agrarian political thought provides the context for the production of virtuous citizens. According to Charles Eisinger, three political principles are emphasized in Jeffersonian agrarianism: (1) 'every man [sic] has a natural right to hold some land', (2) 'agriculture is the mother of organized society' as it provides the conditions for private property, and (3) due to agricultures position as the 'mother of organized society' and condition of private property, it 'must be the primary concern of the state' (1947: 13). The idea that every person has a natural right to hold some land draws on Lockean notions that by mixing labour with what nature provides, the individual 'makes it his Property' (Locke 2003: 112). According to Eisinger, Jefferson and American colonial thought drew on Locke to justify the idea that '[f]armers who occupy and improve the land thereby have a natural right to it' (Eisinger 1947: 14). The ownership and improvement of the land tie the farmer to the land and give them a strong interest in the organization of society. For Jefferson, agriculture stabilized democracy as small family-farming encourages loyalty and interdependencies with surrounding farmers and establishes a mutual interest in securing the Republic (Berry 2003: 29; Hofstadter 1956; Thompson 2010: 44). In contrast, manufacturing produces 'subservience and venality, [and] suffocates the germ of virtue' therefore Jefferson advised that '[w]hile we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench…let our work-shops remain in Europe' (1984: 290).[1] Agrarian political thought stemming from Jefferson emphasizes the importance of farming for the creation of property and a stable democracy, leading to the valorisation of small-scale agriculture as the primary concern for the State.

The social virtues associated with agrarian thought and practice entwined with these political principles. In a passage from Notes on the State of Virginia Jefferson emphasizes the significance of the virtuous farmer in stating: 'Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, in whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue' (1984: 290). Agrarian virtue, as described by Jefferson and articulated by Thompson, is not an ethics learned from books or philosophy classes, it is an ethics that is lived and demonstrated in the character of the person (Aristotle 1980: Book II, 1103b1). 'Farming itself' writes Thompson 'was thought to form the character of rural people' (Thompson 2010: 78). For example, in cultivating the land individuals develop an awareness of 'the limiting conditions of life' (Wirzba 2003: 6) that encourages a humble and patient character. By humbly recognizing the 'fragility and impermanence' (Wirzba 2003: 6) of life, the farmer views food, health, prosperity and land not as calculable commodities but as a gift.

Wendell Berry has been a leading proponent of agrarian thought and practice over the past half century (Smith 2003). Berry has developed and appropriated Jeffersonian ideas to argue that the agrarian farmer's intimate and caring connection with the land distinguishes them from industrial agriculture. According to Berry, the relationship of care creates the conditions where the 'farm gives gifts because it is given a chance to do so; it is not overcropped or overused' (2009: 128). In humble and respectful relation with the land as a gift, agrarian virtues of self-reliance, interdependence, sustainability and community are purported to be grounded (Berry 2009: 45).

[1] The connection between agriculture and democracy goes to the heart of Jefferson's dispute with Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson regarded Hamilton's ideas on central government and mercantile economy as likely to lead to a return to the old injustices of Europe with a few governing without the consent of the governed (Mayer 1994: 198), which was a major concern for Jefferson (Helo 2009).

The context of farming as a practice that builds virtuous character is purported to prevent the development of vices such as greed, dependency and selfishness. Interdependence with neighbours for projects such as barn raising, mutual assistance during times of adversity, and the sharing of produce in times of abundance are agrarian social virtues that advocates such as Berry and Thompson contend prevent virtue of self-reliance from becoming vices of self-indulgence, selfishness or greed (Thompson 2010: 81). Thompson's assurance that farming produces virtue rather than vice because of the community orientated nature of small-scale family farms, appears to neglect his own commentary on the Aristotelian idea of virtue as the mean between two vices (Aristotle 1980: Book II, 2; Thompson 2010: 81). As is discussed in section four of this paper, agrarian virtues such as communal interdependence may keep the vice of selfishness in-check. However, there is also the vice of being too community focused, which can lead to exclusion of outsiders and limitations placed on those within.

As mentioned, agrarian social and political thought combine to produce virtuous individuals and communities. Explicitly drawing on the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, Thompson emphasizes that 'people living under social and material conditions conducive to virtue should tend to be virtuous' (Thompson 2010: 81). The small-scale agriculture and family farms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided the social and material conditions conducive to virtue. Thompson and Berry contend that if given the opportunity these practices and forms of social organization could again be a source of virtue, albeit modified. Thompson argues that even if the social and material conditions of agrarianism are not in place to produce virtue, then people 'can come to understanding of virtue when such a society is taken as a model' (2010: 82). A contemporary reverence for agrarian ideals and social organization makes 'it is at least possible for a virtuous community to produce virtue in a vicarious manner' (2010: 82). Although the actual social and material conditions of agrarian life would make it easier to cultivate agrarian virtues, surrogates such as poetry, literature, farm experiences and farmers' markets make it possible to cultivate virtues (Thompson 2010: 82–83, 121). The use of these surrogates and their proliferation in contemporary Western society occupy the remainder of this paper.

Although only cursory, this history of agrarian political and social virtues has gained strong purchase among urban residents concerned about environmental and social factors surrounding the production of food. However significant themes are absent. These histories do not reference the social and political vices of agrarian practice and thought associated with colonial dispossession, racial violence and gendered exclusion (Allen and Sachs 2007; Craig and Phillips 1983; Holmes 1969; Naples 1994; Watson 1985). The select use of agrarian history that emphasizes virtue while ignoring vice is itself an ethical problem. For if agrarian thought contains within it the seeds of democracy and virtuous community, as claimed by advocates, yet historical manifestations excluded racial difference, confined women and depended on indentured labor, then legitimate questions are raised regarding how democratic and virtuous these ideas actually are. This critique does not entail a rejection of agrarian virtue, but that a failure to acknowledge real and possible agrarian vices leads to the possibility of such vices going unchecked and unnoticed. However, prior to this argument, I trace the combination of agrarian thought with social and environmental concerns about the effects of Western consumer society. I suggest that these concerns provide the conditions of possibility for a vicarious agrarian virtue to be adopted by individuals and communities in urban contexts.

Agrarian Imaginary in Urban Life

Describing the embrace of agrarian ideals in the US during the middle of the twentieth century, Richard Hofstadter wrote, the 'more commercial [American] society became, however, the more reason it found to cling in imagination to the non-commercial agrarian values' (1956). At the time Hofstadter was writing, 16 % of the US population lived on farms. A further half-century on <2 % of the US population lives on farms. There are similar trends of urbanization in other industrial societies, such as Australia. If Hofstadter's assessment of the 1950s was correct, then there is arguably an even stronger desire to restore or imagine a connection to the agrarian past. This desire could be evidenced by the popularity of farmers' markets, community gardens and urban renewal projects. In recent years, city councils and non-profit organizations have launched urban renewal projects that emphasize food production in inner-city environments. New York, Sydney and other cities offer grants and allocate land for urban farms, community gardens and farmers' markets. From 2004 to 2011 Australian cities have witnessed a 53 % increase in farmers' markets (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry 2012). In 2011 there was annual increase of 17 % in farmers' markets in the United States. Alaska had an annual increase of 46 %, while Texas, Colorado and New Mexico each had 38 % increases (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service 2011). Both motivating and responding to government initiatives have been numerous popular books, television programs and documentaries encouraging urban residents to transform the built environment and embrace agricultural practices. University researchers in human geography, built environment, environmental sciences and urban studies have also argued that agrarian practices of small-scale agriculture has the potential to beautify post-industrial sites and positively impact community health and the environment (Dixon and Capon 2008; Dixon et al. 2009; Duany and DPZ 2011; Franck 2005).

As mentioned, Thompson feels that 'the current cultural climate is somewhat hostile to the conception of agrarian virtue that underlies the agrarian vision of the twenty-first century agriculture' (2010: 80) Thompson is certainly correct that the policy climate is hostile, favouring a small number of large industrial farmers over a large number of small agrarian farmers. However, I argue increases in farmers' markets, community gardens and popularity of agrarian media, such as books, documentaries and magazines indicate a cultural climate that is embracing a conception of agrarian virtue. The rise in popularity of urban agriculture among residents of large cities can partly be explained as a response to concerns over climate change and a general belief that industrial agriculture has negative effects on health, the environment and society.

In many ways this story is not new. Narratives of industrial ruin and the need to return to simpler practices coevolved with narratives of industrial progress (Foster 1999). However, unlike eighteenth century critiques of industrialization or the back-to-the-land movements of the 1960s and 70s, urban agriculture is increasingly accepted as part of mainstream food practices. Urban agriculture may contribute only a small percentage of total urban food needs, however contemporary uses of agrarian narratives and images have a powerful influence on the way individuals and communities imagine their relationship to nature, food and the people that produce it. The relationship between agrarianism and urban agriculture is simultaneously deep and vague. Wooly ideas such as "local food is good" or "industrial

agriculture has negative environmental impacts" serve as proxies for specific political or theoretical positions.

The vagueness and imprecision of these ideas should not lead to the conclusion that they are unimportant or insignificant. Charles Taylor's notion of the 'social imaginary' is a useful mechanism for understanding the simultaneously deep and vague influence of agrarian thought in contemporary urban environments. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's analysis of the nation as an imagined community (2006: 7), Taylor argues that social imaginary is 'the way in which our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain' (2007: 161). The imaginary carries deep normative ideas that motivate the way individuals and communities believe social practices and relations should be conducted (Taylor 2004: 23). The constellations of ideas that create the social imaginary are not formally expressed in a coherent theory or doctrinal statements that individuals choose to adopt or reject. According to Taylor, the social imaginary can 'never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines, because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature' (2007: 173). Individuals and communities are socialized into traditions, histories and practices that operate in the background yet make it possible to understand particular objects, activities and subjects as meaningful. The imaginary operates in similar fashion to what hermeneutic philosophers refer to as the 'background' (Dreyfus 1990: 5; Gadamer 2004: 251–254) or what Michel Foucault describes as a 'grid of intelligibility' (2004: 228). In this sense, I use imaginary as a descriptive or diagnostic tool for drawing attention to the way agrarian ideas and narratives shape the food practices of urban residents.

Taylor offers three signposts to identify what he means by the notion of social imaginary. First, it focuses on 'the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surrounding' (2007: 171–172). Stories, images and narrative fragments are often used to express the imaginary. Second, the social imaginary is 'shared by a large group of people'; not the whole society but it can be (2007: 172). Third, the common or shared understanding of the social imaginary enables 'common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (2007: 172). In sum, the imaginary is the collective use of stories and images to legitimate certain practices and articulate their meaning for a community. I contend that an agrarian imaginary operates to make certain practices of rural life, self-sufficiency and food production meaningful to urban communities attempting to draw on and replicate those practices. To guide the analysis of the agrarian imaginary in urban life I seek to address two questions. First, why is an agrarian imagination permeating the way urban populations understand their social surroundings and food practices? Related to this is the second question what are the goals or function of this social imaginary? Or in a slightly different formulation, what practices and beliefs does the imaginary legitimate and confirm?

The permeation of the agrarian imaginary in certain urban contexts is partly explained using a similar line of thought to Hofstadter. The more commercial society becomes the more tightly it clings to imagined non-commercial values. The increased distance between food consumers and the farmers and locations in which the food is produced has emerged as a problem. As the geographical, relational and epistemological gaps between the food consumer and the contexts of its production widen, new narratives or images are needed to bridge those gaps. Best-selling books like Michael Pollan's The Omnivore's Dilemma and documentaries like Food Inc. articulate narratives and circulate images that reveal these gaps to urban consumers and argue that they stem from the industrialization of agriculture.

Highlighting implications for health, the environment and community life, these narratives resonate with segments of Western societies that are in a position to control their food choices. A suspect, but unsurprising demonstration of the power of these stories is the way food companies have sought to represent an agrarian aesthetic on their packages with images of tranquil farm scenes and claims that the food is 'natural', 'organic', 'humane' or 'local', what Pollan calls the 'supermarket pastoral' (2006: 139; Thompson 2011). This too, I suggest, becomes enfolded into the agrarian imaginary.

Popular authors (McKibben 2007; Pollan 2006), author-farmers (Berry 2009; Salatin 2011), and academic researchers (Donahue 2003; Thompson 2010; Wirzba 2003) echo the eighteenth century debates between Jefferson and Hamilton, arguing that industrialization produces significant social, political and environmental problems: consumer anxiety (Pollan 2006), climate change and peak oil (McKibben 2007), impoverished communities and health (Berry 2009), and mistreatment of the land and animals (Wirzba 2003). In addition to these concerns many cities are entering a period characterized as post-industrial (Gospodini 2006). The combination of concerns over industrial agriculture and the abandonment of industrial spaces in cities provide the conditions for an agrarian imaginary to flourish on the other side of the industrial revolution.

I do not intend to imply that there is uniform acceptance of this negative narrative of industrialization, either in whole or part. The flexibility of the agrarian imaginary allows for diverse rationalities and levels of commitment without expecting individuals to have an explicit theoretical understanding that informs these practices. For instance, politicians and community developers are less dependent on narratives of industrial ruin and seek to tap into sentiments of beautifying the urban environment, developing public spaces for community interaction and creating new commercial opportunities. Rather than serving as an alternative to industrial agriculture, the agrarian imaginary operates at the level of aesthetics and community building by reconnecting urban residents to food production activities to increase health and well-being (GreenThumb 2012a).

To provide a more detailed picture of the agrarian imaginary it is important to explore the practices and beliefs that the imaginary legitimates and confirms. Many reasons are put forward for why individuals should adopt agrarian practices and ideas. However, why individuals do embrace agrarian ideals and practices is unclear. The following section demonstrates the way the agrarian imaginary operates as a grid of intelligibility through which urban residents understand their social existence in relation to food practices, and the way the imaginary informs normative notions of community, environmentalism or personal responsibility.

The Practical, Social and Political Ends of Agrarian Virtue

The agrarian imaginary makes food practices meaningful by providing the conditions for normative assessments to be made about individual and community virtue. Operating within and contributing to the imaginary, advocates of urban agriculture outline practical, social and political benefits of participating in these food practices. I outline these three areas in order to demonstrate the way food practices are made practically, socially and politically intelligible through the agrarian imaginary.

Practical Goals

The practical benefits can be summarized as: adaption to climate change, food security and sustainability. With increasingly dire predictions about the effects of climate change, it is argued that the more urban communities are able to produce and grow food then the better prepared they will be for spikes in food prices or scarcity. In his analysis of food security Bryan McDonald writes that a 'result of recent rising food prices and interest in food sustainability and self-sufficiency has been a renewed interest in urban gardening' (McDonald 2011: 122). There is debate over the extent to which urban farms can feed entire communities and meet all their nutritional needs (Sexton 2011); however advocates emphasize the practical benefits of urban agriculture as a means to supplement the cost of food in low-income urban populations (Atkinson 2012). In addition to providing food to urban communities dealing with shortages resulting from climate change or poverty, urban agriculture provides an avenue to assist in the prevention of climate change. According to the Sydney City Farm, urban agriculture is 'environmentally responsible', provides '[h]ands on involvement in local food production, composting, and sustainable living' and is a 'tangible expressions of a more comprehensive environmental commitment'(Clouston Associates 2010).

The characterization of these practices as 'tangible expressions' of a broader commitment to environment demonstrates the relationship between the imaginary and normative assessments of practices as indicators of responsible and ethical conduct. Andres Duany writes 'that because of its mitigating effect on climate change, a neo-agrarian way of life should be made available to as many as possible, for ethical reasons no less than practical ones' (Duany and DPZ 2011: 3). The normative claim that these practices should be adopted and made available to more people is reinforced by, and reinforces, the collective understanding of virtue provided through the agrarian imaginary. Although the practical needs of the environment and climate change provide an urgent call to motivate action, the social goals promoted through the imaginary are perhaps the most attractive feature to urban communities.

Social Goals

The social goals associated with urban agriculture include fostering community, engagement with nature and reconnecting food producers and consumers. The interrelationship between these goals are seen in the 62nd rule of Pollan's Food Rules: 'Plant a vegetable garden if you have the space, a window box if you don't' (2009: 135). This is a very practical and mundane suggestion, however Pollan elaborates that 'growing your own food' has 'everything' to do 'with repairing your relationship to food and eating'. According to Pollan, direct participation 'in the intricate and endlessly interesting processes of providing for your sustenance is the surest way to escape the culture of fast food and the values implicit in it…that food is a product of industry, not nature; that food is fuel rather than a form of communion with other people, and also with other species—with nature' (2009: 135). Like

earlier agrarians, the communion with nature provides the basis through which individuals can restore their relationship with others, the land and themselves.

Active engagement in practices of food production will not always be possible for urban residents, even in a window box. However, according to Thompson a focus on 'food rather than farming' (2010: 4) can serve to make the Jeffersonian ideals relevant to urban dwelling food consumers. In the absence of opportunities for urban residents to farm for themselves, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) are characterized as an optimal space for establishing the social virtues of communal engagement and mutual respect. Thompson argues that farmers' markets can function to develop agrarian virtues through a deeper involvement in the 'preparation and consumption of one's food' which 'can serve as antidote to the spiritual alienation' of the city (2010: 121). Urban farming, CSAs and frequenting farmers' markets is purported to help urban dwellers establish a 'deeper connection with nature', 'interact-face-to-face with people who produce food' and 'brush up against someone who is actually living out a life premised on self-reliance and stewardship' (Thompson 2010: 121). The implication is that these practices, however small, allow for the transaction of virtue through either an association with the land or with those who depend and live off the land.

Farmers' markets are purported to emulate agrarian values of community and virtue through a 'celebration of regional networks that join together producer and consumer, country and city, nature and culture' (Wirzba 2003: 16). In these spaces agrarian virtues are claimed to transfer to consumers through relationships with producers that are more than an economic transaction but a vicarious cultivation of virtue through an imagined agrarian community that extends beyond an individual farmers' market. To paraphrase Anderson's remarks on the role of the newspaper for imagined political communities, the exchange of virtue from the farmer to the consumer is a ceremony 'replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion' (Anderson 2006: 35). The imagined community enables the recognition of farmers' markets as sites of meaningful activity that cultivate agrarian virtues of mutual respect and interdependence both between the consumer and producer, as well as between consumers.

Political Goals

Tropes of urban restoration or renewal figure prominently in discussions articulating the communal benefit of urban agriculture (Ottman et al. 2010; Wirzba 2003: 5). Of course, the idea of renewal depends on a belief that there is some kind of decay. From the perspective of the agrarian tradition the urban environment has been, and continues to be, in desperate need of renewal. While perhaps not as strongly expressed, those living in cities and urban environments may also recognize a need for social renewal of the city. According to Donahue many urban and suburban residents 'wish to live in rural harmony', yet 'this romantic impulse' needs to be encouraged and transformed 'toward a workable agrarian reality' (2003: 35). For Donahue, this agrarian reality can lead to a transformation of the urban environment if citizens participate in food production and consumption informed by agrarian ideals. Community supported agriculture, community gardens and farmers markets are characterized as avenues to build 'political constituency of citizens willing to curtail the

excesses of the industrial economy' (Donahue 2003: 44). Thus for Donahue and others, the agrarian imaginary encourages the development of food practices that motivate political, social and economic change.

The agrarian imaginary bridges divisions between rural and urban life through mutual commitment to food practices informed by agrarian ideals. In countries such as Australia and the United States there are longstanding political tensions between rural and urban residents (Botterill and Cockfield 2010; Brett 2011; Northrup and Lipscomb 2010). Farmers' markets and CSAs are characterized as sites that enable urban residents to learn and develop a greater appreciation of rural life and struggles. For example, connecting urban consumers directly with farmers is a common theme in the missions of markets in Los Angeles (Farmer Net 2011), New York (Farmers' Market Federation of New York 2012) and Sydney (Australian Technology Park Precinct Management 2009). Wirzba contends that food 'is the most direct link we have between culture and nature, city and farm folk' (2003: 15). Similarly, Northrup and Lipscomb suggest that agrarianism is a 'political and cultural standpoint, aspiring to address both rural and urban contexts' (2010: 192). Adopting this perspective, it is hoped that practices such as farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture can enable urban and rural residents to come together to address political issues occurring in rural areas that affect all of society, such as hydraulic fracturing, rural health or irrigation policies.

These practical, social and political goals of urban agriculture are attractive and compelling, particularly when presented as a continuation of the rich agrarian tradition. The narratives, images and goals of these practices weave into and sustain an agrarian imaginary of the idyllic and therapeutic nature of rural and agrarian life that serves as a remedy to the destructiveness of industrialization and the city. I share aspects of this perspective and consider the agrarian tradition as a potential source of important metaphoric and literal tools that can be used to reveal and critique some of the ills associated with industrial agriculture. However, the apparent obviousness and unquestioned goodness of incorporating agrarian ideals into urban practices hides significant concerns that I wish address in the final section of this paper.

Virtues Without Vices? Repetition of a Neglected History

Mid-twentieth century critics of agrarianism such as Hofstadter and Govan, suggested that appeals to an agrarian way of life was a smokescreen for industrial agriculture and/or a nostalgic notion propagated by teachers, writers, philosophers and poets 'who milked no cows, shoveled no manure, and picked no cotton or peas' (Govan 1964: 44). Many of the urban residents frequenting farmers' markets or joining community-supported agriculture schemes are teachers, office workers or philosophers who don't shovel manure. It is therefore worth following Hofstadter and Govan's critical line of inquiry to ask if the contemporary agrarian imaginary serves to cover over or legitimate certain problematic practices. In this concluding section I point to four vices associated with Jeffersonian agrarianism that are ignored or downplayed by contemporary proponents: (a) rural and urban divisions, (b) defined social roles, (c) exclusion of difference, and (d) dispossession of land. Thompson does not completely ignore these vices but suggests they are the product of the eighteenth century (2000: 137). However, I contend that these vices are not the product

of the eighteenth century but are either an excess or deficit of the agrarian virtues. As such, these vices are not quarantined in the past but can manifest in contemporary urban agriculture informed by the agrarian imaginary. Importantly, I do not wish to overemphasize either agrarian virtue or vice, but argue that the incorporation of agrarian thought and practice in contemporary urban food systems can produce both virtuous and vicious individuals and communities.

Mutual Respect and Historical Divisions Between Rural and Urban Life

A political virtue purported to result from agrarian farming practice is mutual respect. Recognition that multiple roles and skills are required to produce and distribute food encourages commonality between those occupying different positions in society. However, historically there has been animosity between agrarian and urban life. According to Jefferson, '[t]he mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as do sores do to the strength of the human body' (1984: 291). William Jennings Bryan typified the rural critique of urban life in his "Cross of Gold" speech delivered on July 9, 1896, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Bryan issued the challenge: '[b]urn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country' (Bryan 1896). Echoing Bryan's challenge to burn down the cities, Joel Salatin recently questioned the value of cities, asking 'Why do we have to have a New York City? What good is it?' (Pollan 2006: 245). From Jefferson to Salatin representatives of rural life have questioned the moral, practical and political value of urban life.

Consumer practices such as farmers' markets and CSA have been described as avenues through which traditional tensions between urban and rural life can be mediated (Brown and Miller 2008; Hunt 2007; Northrup and Lipscomb 2010; Wirzba 2003). While this may be true in certain contexts, I contend that the very same potential for reconciliation and respect can also aggravate historical divisions and conflicts. I do not preclude the possibility that farmers and rural representatives could ignite tensions, particularly through polemics that emphasize the moral and political superiority of rural life over urban life (Botterill and Cockfield 2010; Ellis 2009; Stokes 2000). However, I contend that the asymmetrical nature of the commercial relationship of farmers' markets and CSA programs presents the possibility for urban residents to undermine the purported communal and egalitarian.

The asymmetry of the commercial nature of the relationship between urban residents and vendors at farmers' markets and CSA programs opens the possibility for vices of deficit or excess that fall either side of the median virtue of mutual respect. Although there are urban food deserts, most urban residents are not compelled to buy food in the same way the vendor has to sell it. Vendors at farmers markets or CSA farmers have a limited and particular market that demands certain values to be imbued in both the food and the commercial transaction. As food and its production become saturated with social, political and environmental virtues, there is a greater expectation for farmers to deliver the desired virtues. An excessive expectation to buy virtue, or vicariously acquire it through participation in an agrarian relationship that produces virtue, puts pressure on the farmer to supply something that is perhaps practically or commercially taxing. The asymmetry of the relationship means that if the desired virtues are not met or the price is too high, urban

consumers have access to industrial organic produce sold in supermarkets, which meets the letter of the organic law but violates the spirit of the organic movement (Guthman 2004). Thus an excessive desire for virtue could transform the agrarian relationship of mutual respect into overburdened exchange.

On the deficit side of mutual respect is the exploitation of food vendors. Research on CSA programs reveals the asymmetry of the urban consumer and farmer relationship. Carol Goland found a 50 % annual turnover of CSA membership, which was largely due to expectations not being met during fall months (Goland 2002). This places financial burdens on farmers such that CSA farmers in Marcia Ostrom's research (2008) 'lacked health care or funds for retirement and did not believe that they earned an adequate return…Most were not able to set their share price to cover their costs of production but could only charge what the market would bear' (Brown and Miller 2008: 1299). Although further analysis is needed, I argue that the agrarian imaginary could serve to exacerbate tensions between rural and urban communities by covering over the asymmetry of the commercial relation, resulting in a situation that undermines virtues of mutual respect and can lead to vices of overburdening and exploiting rural communities.

Interdependence and Defined Social Roles

Interdependence is a community virtue and the source of individual virtues in agrarian thought. However, this interdependency can also lead to narrowly defined social roles. According to Thompson, the agrarian tradition praises the family farm 'because each member occupies a social role that makes their interdependence easy to see…The individual is linked to the moral community by an extensive network of ties to specific others, family members, neighbours, and even businessmen in the nearby town' (Thompson 2010: 104). Yet the social virtue of interdependence can slide into vices where women, children and bonded labourers are confined to narrow and limited futures (Griswold 1963; Hofstadter 1956; Kennedy 2003; Smith 1950). While Thompson is aware of this history (Thompson 2010: 61, 80), popular authors and proponents neglect to recall these manifestations when outlining the virtuous features of agrarian and small-scale farming practices.

Urban agriculture has provided important avenues for women to establish relations of solidarity, community belonging and supplementary income (Jarosz 2011; Trauger et al. 2010; White 2011). However, according to Allen and Sachs 'agrarian ideology embodies traditional gendered roles and can pose a roadblock to raising issues of gender equality for both men and women' (2007: 5). The narrow conception of the family and its restrictions on the life course of children and women present a challenge to contemporary appropriations of agrarian social thought that emphasizes the virtue of interdependence. Thompson suggests that his 'new vision [for agrarianism] will not attempt to keep women in "their place," but neither will it obscure the contributions to community solidarity and the gender-oriented virtues that have characterized past ways of life' (2010: 85). Thompson does not elaborate on 'gender-oriented virtues'; however Erin McKenna critiques this perspective due to a history of disproportionate valuing of roles.

The undervaluing of women's domestic labour is compounded by a general aversion to labour saving technologies associated with industrialization (Berry 2009: 32; Thompson

2010: 113). According to McKenna 'the family farm depends on the often invisible and underappreciated labour of women on a day to day basis' (2012: 534). With women simultaneously performing the majority of domestic labour (Poortman and Van Der Lippe 2009) as well as supplementing or providing family income through off-farm labour (Allen and Sachs 2007; Naples 1994: 124), the agrarian imaginary has the potential to hide where the burdens of interdependent social organization lie.

Small-scale agriculture and urban food practices create the possibility of increasing the burden of domestic labour of women and legitimating it on the grounds of social and environmental virtues (McKenna 2012: 533). Emily Matchar explores some of the tensions between agrarian ideals and female identity in what she describes as the new domesticity (2013). Recent interest in domestic arts such as canning, knitting and chicken-raising may serve a variety of social and personal goals, but they can also mask inequalities and burden women with unrealistic expectations (Matchar 2013). Chaone Mallory has also addressed the tensions surrounding gender and progressive food practices. Mallory recently examined the invisibility of women in local food ways and the way food makes and remakes identity and social reality (Mallory 2013). McKenna, Matchar and Mallory provide important criticisms of urban and small-scale food practices. However, their work does not suggest that these practices are necessarily wrong. Similarly, my contention is not that the agrarian imaginary should be dispelled, but we need to be aware of the way it can blind us to gender inequality by hiding it behind virtues.

Communal Embrace and Exclusion of Difference

The agrarian attachment to the land led Jefferson to regard farmers as the most valuable citizens, yet history also reveals that the social virtue of belonging can also lead to hostilities when new people seek to use or encroach on those lands or places. Arguably the most notable cases of sectarian violence in the agrarian tradition are the farmers associations of late nineteenth and early twentieth century that targeted black farmers (Holmes 1969; Watson 1985). In 1890 there were 120 738 black farms and by 1910 this number had grown to 218 972; accounting for 14 % of all farms in the US (PBS 1999). However, the Depression, world wars, predatory property laws and farming associations drove black farmers from the land (McGee and Boone 1979). Associated with the early Klu Klux Klan, these farming associations felt economically and socially threatened by the possibility of former slaves owning and farming land. As such they 'opposed ownership of land by Negroes [sic]' and sought to 'compel negroes [sic] to vacate any and all property' whether they owned it or were tenants (Holmes 1969: 168). This opposition often took the form of clandestine and violent actions such as burning down homes and physical beatings. These nineteenth century practices of exclusion appear far removed from the agrarian imaginary described above, and any attempt to draw parallels could be perceived as trite or forced. However, I consider there are important lessons to be learnt in bringing this history of agrarian exclusion into closer conversation with contemporary uses of agrarian thought.

The literature discussing urban agriculture has rightly pointed to virtues of community building that have occurred through alternative food practices. However, an avenue through which the agrarian vice of exclusion operates in urban agricultural contexts is gentrification. The development of farmers' markets and urban farms often occur in areas that have

historically been populated with migrant, working class, and indigenous communities. City councils and new middle-class residents have praised these initiatives for renewing abandoned industrial sites, offering alternatives to supermarket chains and providing a place for community engagement and flourishing (Clouston Associates 2010; Hunt 2007; Knowd et al. 2005). However, these markets are also viewed as part of a gentrification process that establishes economic and symbolic barriers that exclude low-socio-economic residents from participating in the agrarian community (Vidot 2012; Wood 2012).

For example, the Eveleigh Market in Sydney is described in a local newspaper as providing 'ethical food choices, but the prices are too expensive for many public housing residents' (Black 2009). A local politician, Irene Doutney, agrees and proposes that the city council assist public housing residents in establishing 'their own regular market, probably in conjunction with other local charities, to make sure residents can have access to ethical food at affordable prices' (Black 2009). This is a pragmatic solution, yet it runs counter to the community-building goals of the agrarian imaginary as it demarcates residents along economic lines. Rather than providing a common ground of communal embrace and belonging, this example demonstrates the potential for urban agricultural practices to exclude and divide urban residents into two communities: one willing and able to pay the high price (what some argue is the real price) for produce, and the other that is excluded and 'left out' due economic and cultural barriers (Wood 2012). Although farmers' markets are not necessarily more expensive and in the US subsidies are available for low-income residents to purchase produce from famers' markets, there are socio-economic factors that can divide and marginalize residents.

The agrarian imaginary can and does serve to define a community. However, in the process it also excludes those that do not or cannot fit into that imaginary. An implicit exclusion that occurs through community building is not necessarily bad or problematic, but it requires acknowledgment. Recognition of exclusion is especially important if community proponents emphasis the value of ideals such as consensus and openness.

Cultivation and Dispossession of Land

The final vice is the use of the natural law idea that the land is in common to be privatized through cultivation. While agriculture is praised as producing property rights and establishing organized society, these practices are historically tied to the colonial legacy of stolen lands and violence (Eisinger 1947: 17; Taliaferro 2000: 88). Brian Donahue baldly states that the expansion of small agrarian farmers in the colonial period was due to there being 'so much land in America (once the original inhabitants had been swept aside)' (2003: 42). This story is not unique to the United States. The legal concept of terra nullius—land belonging to no one—was used in Australia to justify the British occupation of indigenous lands for settlement and agriculture. While there is debate over the history of terra nullius in British law (Borch 2001; Fitzmaurice 2007), the logics of terra nullius were in place allowing Australia to be colonized as an uncultivated and therefore ownerless land (Borch 2001: 237, 239).

The vices associated with gentrification and exclusion tie in with the historical dispossession of land. The gentrification of areas such as Harlem (New York) and Redfern (Sydney) has

been described as process of re-colonization (Lawson 2001; Shaw 2000; Stratton 1977). Human geographers describe white middle-class 'pioneers' as returning to urban 'frontiers' through 'beachheads' in a 'neo-colonial land grab' (Shaw 2000: 296; Smith 1996). If the period of gentrification of Harlem and Redfern in the 1980s and 90s was led by 'pioneers' the continuation of this neo-colonial pantomime is occurring through neo-agrarianism. As agricultural practices move into urban areas, simultaneously following and clearing the path of gentrification, I contend that the colonial logics of terra nullius are in operation.

Disused blocks, abandoned industrial sites or vacant lots are declared to belong to no one and suitable for development or cultivation. As with the agrarians of the colonial period, urban agrarians mix labour with the land to re-occupy and establish sovereignty over those lands. The occupation of urban spaces through agriculture is occurring by authorized and unauthorized means. Each approach reveals a legacy to the rationality of terra nullius. The authorized course, such as the Eveleigh Markets, requires approval of the governing authorities to grant the rights of use to underutilized, vacant or disordered lands to those who cultivate them (City of Sydney 2012; GreenThumb 2012b). The unauthorized course is simultaneously close and distant to terra nullius. In this scenario, residents cultivate abandoned or vacant lands without official approval, such as guerrilla gardening in New York City (Schmelzkopf 1995; Staeheli et al. 2002) or grass-roots developments in Detroit (Colasanti et al. 2012; White 2011). A third category could be included, those with contested authorized status, a key factor leading to the dispute between the South Central Farm and the City of Los Angeles (Barraclough 2009; Irazabal and Punja 2009).

In an important analysis of land use in urban food production, Sara Metcalf and Michael Widener note that guerrilla gardening and urban agriculture challenge the sacred notion of property rights and ownership. These practices also present avenues for new food production and distribution systems for marginalized and insecure urban populations (Metcalf and Widener 2011: 1242). In the debates over who gets to use public spaces it is important to consider the intended purpose and who stands to benefit (Blomley 2003). Although not immune from exclusionary and possessive features, I contend that a stronger case can be made for community-based initiatives to use public lands and spaces for subsistence and the benefit of residents living in the vicinity of the garden. In contrast, the claims and uses of land for commercially driven enterprises aimed at affluent consumers appear weaker and have a greater potential to marginalize existing residents.

In both scenarios, however, there is the potential for lands and spaces to be defined as vacant as the people or practices occupying those lands are not recognized or seen (Mitchell 1995). This is particularly true of the invisibility of people who use lots for homes. Their claims on public spaces for shelter and community go unrecognized or regarded as illegitimate (Schmelzkopf 1995: 371). I am not suggesting these lots should remain uncultivated or undeveloped to allow for homeless populations to continue using them, although I am not precluding this possibility. Nor am I arguing that markets such as the Eveleigh Markets should not have been developed. Rather, there needs to be a greater awareness that these spaces are not terra nullius and that community development and building cannot be done with complete ignorance or disregard of the communities that existed prior to farmers markets or community gardens. Admittedly more work is needed to provide a nuanced analysis of the relationships between urban agriculture, gentrification and the colonial legacy in the agrarian imaginary.

In sum, this section has sought to demonstrate the vulnerability of virtuous practices and communities to slide away from the mean and into vice. The historical manifestations of vices alongside virtues should provoke serious questioning as to how agrarian political and social thought is used in shaping urban agriculture. In particular, the increased acceptance of certain agrarian histories, enfolding them into an agrarian imaginary, has the potential to cover over or legitimate practices that exclude, burden or dispossess vulnerable individuals or populations. Thus, while practices of urban agriculture that cultivates individual and communal virtue should be encouraged, there is also a need to recognize historical vices and cultivate attentiveness to the potential for these to manifest in contemporary urban contexts.

Conclusion

The four problems I have identified are influenced by factors beyond historical agrarian thought or the contemporary agrarian imaginary. However, the reason why I am critiquing these vices in relation to the agrarian imaginary is due to claims that urban agriculture and agrarian ideals produce virtues. It is important to indicate some of the tensions and problematic aspects of historical manifestations of this tradition that are ignored or glossed over in contemporary discussions. The intention of this paper has not been to argue that the presence of these negative or potentially negative features requires an abandonment of urban agriculture or appeals to an agrarian tradition. As stated earlier, I consider urban food practices informed by agrarian ideals as potential sources of community belonging, political activism and moral development.

Simon Critchley suggests that we 'live in symbolically impoverished societies which have been subject to the disappearance of forms of community where ethics is rooted in ethos, in custom, habit and tradition' (Critchley 2007: 70). I contend that the agrarian imaginary can serve as an ethos through which ethical activity can occur. However, it is important that in retelling stories and histories to establish new spaces for community interaction, there is also recognition that "other" histories and communities are possible, both virtuous and vicious. In providing a balanced history, not as a penitent confession but a sincere recognition of a vicious past, the agrarian imaginary has the potential to serve as the source of virtue that Thompson and others have argued for. However, the contingency of virtue and the historical narratives used to reinforce need to be acknowledged as such, otherwise the exclusion of the vulnerable will remain hidden by the hollowed out agrarian virtues of those who shovel no manure or pick no peas.

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