

Beyond the Rural Idyll: From the Creation of Exurbia to Neo-Agrarianism

Building on my doctoral work on issues of urban and peri-urban productive land use, I propose to combine historical research into land-use changes and ideals associated with early twentieth-century American urban-to-rural amenity migration (exurbanization) with social-science research into the motives and decision making processes of contemporary participants in local food networks in the same exurban region. Exurban food production networks provide an opportunity to explore tensions between agriculture and residential exurbia. This project aims to articulate the way that exurban ideals of nature and identification with an agrarian aesthetic influence environmental decision making at the intersection of the local residential scale and the larger, more abstract scale of global commodity chains. Juxtaposing the rise of exurbia, as represented in the historical documents of leading land managers at exurbia's inception, with an inquiry into the current motives and activities that contribute to agrarian identification in post-agricultural regions, I wish to broaden the discourse on exurban land preservation to include more explicitly the motives that drive both exurbanization and food activism, so that public environmental decision-making might better incorporate alternative forms of urbanization that address structural problems of the modern urban landscape rather than planning them into the periphery.

As land management became a field of expertise in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the attitudes and land uses of early exurbanites were influenced and supervised by an emerging manager class. These managers – agents of state control and of interaction with international discourses on resource management – were organized through institutions such as the schools of forestry at Yale, Cornell, and the University of Toronto. Using the archived records of the correspondence, teaching materials, and publications of leading land managers such as Pinchot, Fernow, Bailey, Carver, and Warren (in the Yale collection of Records of the Dean, the Cornell Liberty Hyde Bailey Collection, and the 1896-1917 archive of the Toronto School of Forestry), I intend to look at how these managers expressed their concerns for the exurbanizing resource landscape. I will focus particularly on two aspects of the way in which these professionalizers of land use envisioned and disciplined acceptable and desirable urban and peri-urban land uses: first, how they related their vision for American land use to other national and colonial models to which they had been exposed; and second, how they represented the translation of their environmental ideals into everyday life and land use, at the urban periphery, especially in terms of the ways in which their social and environmental improvement agendas were carried through into prescriptions for the production of spaces and identities divided according to whether they reflect productivity or amenity. In addition (and in contrast) to their courses, talks, correspondence, and academic papers, I wish to examine the translation of management discourses into the popular press, where most of the central figures also published.

The normative preferences and biases of these people who organized and authored policies for urban growth, natural resource stewardship, and country life have become foundations for North American environmental ideologies. These early twentieth-century gatekeepers of management and planning discourses mediated the encounter between urbanites seeking the amenity of 'the country' and rural productive land users struggling with the pressures of rural disinvestment and agricultural intensification. In the Canadian and New Zealand cases explored by my dissertation, the intersection between urbanization and productive peri-urban landscapes was often managed according to normative ideals of planned open space and professionalized resource production, displacing lay involvement in the planning of metropolitan edge change. Conservation strategies promoted an ideal of nature at the same time that trains, trolleys, and automobiles stretched the structure of cities into agriculture and forest lands. Side-stepping the question of what sort of relationship might be negotiated between urban settlement and productive land uses, the valorization of natural landscapes for urban peripheries devalued the human-shaped landscapes of agriculture.

Despite a century of reforestation in exurbia, however, an aspiration for agrarian landscapes has persisted, often in tension with the preference for nature. Recent agrarian resurgences centered around

food action networks concerned with food security, sovereignty, equity, and sustainability have sporadically brought questions about the relationship between urban settlement patterns and agricultural production back into public prominence. Questioning the anti-urban imagery of undisturbed wild nature that supports exurban settlement patterns, this movement to reclaim metropolitan working landscapes revisits the questions deferred by the land-use planning paradigms established a century ago. One hundred years after the pioneering of exurbs, the hybrid urban-rural identity of exurbia is being re-mobilized in support of a restoration of local food and natural resource networks. Emphasizing the production of food within first-world metropolitan areas, neo-agrarians harness the exurban pastoral to engage with issues such as hunger, inequitable terms of trade, agro-industrial agendas, and the relationship of the future of food to the future of capitalism.

Extending both my doctoral study of how agrarian impulses are – or are not – translated into social action and the historical research described above, I plan to interview participants in the Yale Sustainable Food Project – farmers, volunteers, managers, cooks, and distributors (1) about how they became involved in agriculture, (2) about how – and whether – their vision of agriculture has been informed and motivated by their visions of global agri-systems, and (3) by what models of agrarianism they have been influenced. My previous research on exurbia and urban agriculture has been based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, archival research, and policy analysis. My academic research on Toronto and New Zealand has been linked closely with my participation in urban agriculture and food policy projects with Foodshare and the ‘Food for Talk’ forum affiliated with the University of Toronto’s Centre for Urban Health Initiatives. I plan to juxtapose narratives of current agrarian action and critique in exurbia with the historical narratives of the creation of exurbia explored in my archival research.

This juxtaposition may illuminate the manner in which changing manager classes – from the one that emerged at the turn of the last century to the academics organizing projects such as the Yale Sustainable Food Project – have helped marry radical increases in residential mobility with particular ideologies of land use, vis-à-vis the city, nature, modernization, and the production and distribution of commodities. How did early twentieth-century land managers, with their emphasis on rational production and civic engagement, imagine urban-rural fringes as something more than escape? How does the current neo-agrarianism rely upon and reinterpret this vision?

This two-part project reflects my larger interest in the social and historical effects of global commodity relationships on the process, practices, and ideology of exurbanization, and also in the way that local provisioning networks counter the socio-environmental commodification and escapism that exurban landscapes represent. Exurbs formed in the New York-New England periphery at the same time that many of the problematic aspects of agriculture were displaced to primary producers in the American West and the global periphery. Wealthy, consumer-state, urban-centered views of agrarian practice and identity have shaped the reciprocal relationships between center and periphery (city and country, and also local and global production) both where these different cultural and environmental forms intersect, and also where they define, by contrast, and at a distance, the relationships between producers and consumers. Residents of wealthy nations construct – and at times appropriate – agrarian identities, out of a complex mix of narratives of improvement and decline in agriculture, environment, and global geopolitics. Exurban identification with, or appropriation of, agrarian identity may serve either to ameliorate or to obscure the implications of highly consumptive lifestyles. The contrast between an agrarian aesthetic and a dependence on agrarianism for one’s livelihood is stark, and the relationship between consumers who aspire to an idealized version of the producers with whom they have a distinctly hierarchical relationship is complex, problematic, and important to understand. Understanding the ways in which agrarian identity has been constructed and practiced in the history of exurbia and in new forms of American agriculture helps us (1) encourage a critical public discourse on modern agrarianism that relates local and global, (2) better address aspirations for successful but stable productive processes and ways of life, in both more and less developed regions, and (3) improve the prospect for a just and equitable constellation of modern production.