

# Entangled alternatives: political-economic conditions constructing farmer training programs as solutions to the farming crisis

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## Abstract

This article contributes to debates about the potential of alternative food networks and their contradictions using sustainability-oriented farmer training programs as a case study. I provide an empirical account of the political-economic structures at play in the construction of farmer trainings as a solution to the farming crisis, as well as the possibilities and tensions herein. I argue that the main rationale framing the farming problem in the public-institutional discourse – namely the apolitical production of a scarcity of farmers – and its discursive usage in popular and institutional circles directs the solution towards the urgent production of more farmers who will farm sustainably and independently of the current structural conditions in which farming is embedded. On the ground, this apolitical ecology is sustained by philanthropism and consumption elitism. In addition, the making of FTPs as an intervention to solve the farming crisis is determined by neoliberal governance structures that promote the devolution of power into the NGO sector and responsabilization of individuals. I finally call for a broader and non-binary vision to alternatives, in which political ecology perspectives bring relevant tools and insights. The case of FTPs throws light into the particular governmentalities, forms of governing at-a-distance, and whiteness associated with sustainable farming and agriculture, and the way society thinks of it.

**Keywords:** farmer training programs, emergent farmers, sustainable agriculture, alternatives, alternative food networks, NGOization of farming, power, privilege, California

## Résumé

Cet article contribue aux débats sur le potentiel des réseaux alimentaires alternatifs et leurs contradictions, en utilisant des programmes de formation des agriculteurs axés sur la durabilité comme étude de cas. Je donne un compte rendu empirique des structures politico-économiques en jeu dans la construction de formations paysannes comme solution à la crise agricole, ainsi que des possibilités et des tensions qui s'y rattachent. La principale raison qui encadre le problème de l'agriculture dans le discours public-institutionnel est la rareté des agriculteurs, sans référence au pouvoir et à la politique. Cet usage discursif dans les cercles populaires et institutionnels suggère de créer plus d'agriculteurs qui cultiveront de manière durable et indépendamment des conditions structurelles actuelles dans lesquelles l'agriculture est intégrée. Sur le terrain, cette écologie apolitique est soutenue par le philanthropisme et «l'élitisme de consommation». De plus, faire des programmes de formation l'intervention pour résoudre la crise agricole est déterminée par des structures de gouvernance néolibérales qui favorisent la décentralisation du pouvoir dans le secteur des ONG et la responsabilisation des individus. J'appelle à une vision plus large et non binaire des alternatives, dans laquelle les perspectives d'écologie politique apportent des outils et des idées pertinents. Le cas des programmes de formation des agriculteurs illustre les perceptions sociales de l'agriculture, la gouvernementalité, les formes de gouvernement à distance et les dynamiques raciales associées à l'agriculture et à l'agriculture durables.

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**Mots clés:** programmes de formation des agriculteurs, agriculteurs émergents, agriculture durable, alternatives, réseaux alimentaires alternatifs, ONGisation de l'agriculture, pouvoir, privilège, Californie

## Resumen

Este artículo contribuye a los debates sobre el potencial de las redes alternativas de alimentación y sus contradicciones usando los programas de formación de agricultores (en particular aquellos orientados a la agricultura sostenible) como caso de estudio. Análisis de manera empírica las estructuras políticas y económicas que influyen en la construcción de los programas de formación de agricultores como solución a la crisis agrícola, así como las posibilidades y tensiones que ello conlleva. Argumento que la principal lógica o relato sobre la crisis agrícola en el discurso público e institucional – en concreto la producción apolítica de una escasez de agricultores – y su uso discursivo en medios populares e institucionales dirige la solución hacia la creciente necesidad de producir más agricultores. Estos cultivarán la tierra de manera sostenible e independientemente de las actuales condiciones estructurales en las que la agricultura se encuentra inmersa. Sobre el terreno, esta ecología apolítica se sostiene con filantropía y consumo elitista. Además, la promoción de estos *trainings* como intervención para resolver la crisis agrícola es mediada por elementos de gobernanza neoliberal que promueve la delegación del poder hacia las ONGs y la responsabilización de los individuos. Atendiendo a los resultados, hago una llamada para una más amplia visión de las alternativas, en la cual la perspectiva de ecología política trae relevantes herramientas e ideas. El caso de los programas de formación de agricultores ayuda a comprender las gubernamentalidades, formas de gobierno a distancia, y dinámicas raciales asociados con la agricultura sostenible y la manera en que la sociedad piensa de ella.

**Palabras clave:** programas de formación para agricultores, jóvenes agricultores, agricultura sostenible, alternativas, redes alternativas de alimentación, ONGización de la agricultura, poder, privilegio, California.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the industrialization and globalization of agriculture has led to a crisis in the farming sector, as illustrated by low farm incomes and low profitability for small farmers. There has been an increasing degree of land concentration, and a rural exodus, among other social impacts. Environmentally, climate change and other impacts have influenced the scale and practices of agri-food production and distribution models, and health risks associated with food production (Lawrence *et al.* 2004; Magdoff *et al.* 2000). The crisis requires political solutions, including policy changes and novel programs that tackle these challenges. One growing solution is the promotion of sustainability-oriented farmer training programs (FTPs hereafter) that are designed to incentivize the emergence of new, socially and environmentally engaged farmers who will eventually compensate or solve some elements of the crisis.

FTPs are one of the most recent phenomena supporting the revival of the farming profession in the United States (U.S.). It is difficult to know the exact number of existing FTPs, but in the period from 2009 to 2012, 119 such projects were awarded a Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Many factors have converged to make farmer training programs all the rage across the nation. These include the putative loss of the American farmer, whose numbers declined 63% in the last century (Dimitri *et al.* 2005); the concern with the loss of farmers of color due in greater extent to the coloniality of U.S. agricultural policy (Almaguer 2009; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Graddy-Lovelace 2017); and finally, the romanticization of farming stemming from the recently reinvigorated sustainable agriculture movement (Guthman 2017b). This last issue has contributed greatly to the revalorization of the farming profession and thus to a greater interest in FTPs. This trend is motivated by environmental concerns over the sustainability of corporatized industrialized global agriculture which has reinforced the figure of the local small-scale or family farmer (Guthman 2014).

Farmer trainings align with the goals of alternative food networks (Goodman *et al.* 2014) "to revitalize the small farm sector and repopulate rural landscapes with socially and environmentally diversified farms" (Calo 2018: 1). Indeed, FTPs are one of the new farmer's entry points to the production side of AFNs: since most of these courses are sustainability oriented, it is logical that the emerging farmers will be inserted in such networks. Despite the rise of FTPs in the environmental non-profit world and the (alternative) farming

community, much remains to be understood about their significance in the current agrarian context, their process of institutionalization and their implications for the equity and justice in the future of farming.

Although many studies have celebrated the positive effects of these and other alternative spaces in socio-economic, political and environmental realms (Bailey *et al.* 2010; Conill *et al.* 2012; Seyfang 2010), more critical voices have revealed the difficulty of alternative programs and initiatives to overcome the structural constraints embedded in these alternatives to achieve a more profound socio-environmental transformation (Busa and Garder 2015; Guthman 2008a; Mostafanezhad *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, these initiatives have been pointed at for their lack of diversity, their inability to address inequitable access to healthy foods, or for the white cultural domination permeating them (Slocum 2007). Despite acknowledging that alternatives might not be able to overcome some attributes generally associated with conventional-capitalist spaces, a more nuanced perspective still sees a progressive possibility in alternative practices (Gibson-Graham 2006; Slocum 2007; Calvário and Kallis 2016). Here, FTPs are an interesting case for analysis because, as education venues, food production sites, and places of connection to the land, they have more diversity among members than more exclusive sites of consumption such as farmers markets (Alkon and McCullen 2011). FTPs are also initiatives heavily institutionalized and funded, in opposition to more grassroots or self-organized spaces (i.e., food coops, CSAs, and regional quality strategies).

This study aims to contribute to the debate in political ecology on the possibilities of alternative food practices (AFNs) for radical socio-environmental transformation (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Blumberg *et al.* 2020; Calvário and Kallis 2016; Giraldo and Rosset 2018). Political ecology has called for re-interpreting and representing ecological problems (Forsyth 2003; Robbins 2004), and more recently, solutions to those problems (as in Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2017; Guthman 2011; McCarthy 2006). I support here the recent shift in political ecology to expand the field's central thesis – that broader political-economical forces affect the conditions in which exploitation and degradation of natural resources occur – to the analysis of the structural forces shaping and constraining proposed alternatives to those problems (Robbins 2004). Thus, in this article I provide an empirical account of the construction of farmer trainings as a solution to the farming crisis, as well as the possibilities, tensions and contradictions embedded in them through a qualitative analysis of FTPs in California in the United States.

The article responds to the lack of empirical research on training initiatives within AFNs and on their constrained contributions to radical socio-environmental transformation. It is also driven by an empirical observation related to a dissonance in the organizations conducting training programs between, on the one hand, the main optimistic narrative constructed by the organizations themselves and the media, donors, or public agencies supporting these trainings, and, on the other hand, the skepticism of individuals involved in the programs about their ability to bring and sustain new farmers in a challenging environment. While the FTPs for emergent farmers seem to be widely celebrated by society, their working is influenced by deep-seated structures based on oppressive and privileged dynamics. In this article I untangle the political-economic structures around sustainable farming that situate the current form of FTPs as a viable solution to the farming crisis. I also pay attention to the ways such structures affect the internal dynamics of the FTPs.

After situating the trainings in the broader movement of AFNs (section 2), I place the study in the current debates about alternatives, their contradictions and possibilities (section 3). In section 4 I describe the study design and methodological aspects. Then, I analyze the structures at play in the construction of these trainings as the solution to the farming crisis (section 5). In section 6 I present a summary of results and discuss them in view of recent advances on the politics of alternatives in political ecology.

## 2. Sustainable farmer trainings as entry points to AFNs

Farmer trainings are pedagogical hands-on-oriented courses in which the art and science of farming are taught. They are generally managed by NGOs or educational institutions (ranging from more to less formal in nature). Commonly, the trainings consist of two parts: a more theoretical element in which farming techniques, crop planning, regulations or marketing strategies are taught in classes, and a hands-on element in which apprentices acquire practical skills in demonstration farms. Field visits to other projects are commonly included. Some FTPs include a third phase of incubation, in which organizations accompany trainees in the initiation of their own businesses, often under low-price land lease agreements. Some training programs – those oriented

towards young educated people – include a residential aspect in which all apprentices live in a semi-intentional community for the duration of the training. The trainings generally last for six months up to one year (or one growing season). FTPs have received direct institutional support from 2008, with the allocation of a US\$150 million budget in the Farm Bill for the BFRDP grants, under which eligible organizations (NGOs, private institutions of higher education and land-grant Universities) receive money – up to US\$750,000 – to develop trainings for a number of years (often three).

Given the rapid increase in the number of trainings, it is surprising that they have so far attracted limited research interest. In particular, they have not been inserted in the scholarly debate around AFNs (Goodman *et al.* 2014 for an overview). Yet, FTPs align with several alternative food movement goals, including the revitalization of the small farm sector and the repopulation of rural landscapes with socially and environmentally diversified farms (Calo 2018; Goodman and Goodman 2001). Today's emerging farmers are likely to be influenced by the recent prominence of AFNs, which have opened up market opportunities through direct distribution channels by revaluing local, organic and artisanal food. Prospective farmers participating in the training programs are likely to feed alternative markets in the future since a majority of the trainings are oriented towards sustainable or organic production (Niewolny and Lillard 2010).

The generalized concerns about the decline in the number of farmers on the one hand, and the new opportunities for small local farms created by the rise of AFNs on the other, have reinforced the mostly white, back-to-the-land movement. However, they have also provided opportunities for migrants that scale-up from farmworkers to running their own operations (Guthman 2017a; Minkoff-Zern 2018). Moreover, farming and gardening are considered as bringing an array of social and health benefits to at-risk communities, including community wellbeing or employment opportunities (Pudup 2008). Indeed, some FTPs are being oriented towards migrant farmworkers who aim to start their own business and other historically marginalized populations.

Political ecology "seeks to unravel political forces at work in environmental access, management and transformation" (Robbins 2004: xvi), and I adopt this lens to analyze the particular mechanism by which farming (as a socio-economic and ecological system) and the alternatives to mainstream agriculture are regulated, enhanced and controlled. I use sustainability-oriented farmer trainings as an illustration of alternative provisioning for socio-environmental change within the food production system. In this case, FTPs are aimed at shifting or compensating for the effects of the conventional agri-food system. Similar to other AFNs spaces, they aspire to create more small-scale sustainability-oriented farms while providing more alternatives to consumers, and making the possibilities of different economies and politics more visible. The way to contest or compete with the industrialized corporate agriculture model is through incremental shifts in the food system. However, in the case of FTPs, the alternative strategy might unintentionally bring individualistic and entrepreneurial logics that encourage farmers without necessarily questioning or fighting the conditions in which farming is performed (Beckett and Galt 2014; Calo 2018). Moreover, without further intervention, the benefits of the trainings are unequal, and create "a selective pressure on the types of farming and farmers that can truly enter the system" (Calo 2018: 3). As a result, the on-going institutionalization of FTPs (i.e. the acceptance, support and regulation by the state and other institutions with regulatory power, by which the values and the rationales around FTPs are increasingly incorporated into society) needs to be further scrutinized as an important element of the current dynamics around AFNs.

### 3. The (political ecology) debate around alternatives

In the context of socio-environmental change, 'alternatives' are sites (spaces, initiatives, organizations) to which some sort of difference is attached in relation to a mainstream Other (Fuller *et al.* 2010). The capacity of these initiatives to transform society is commonly debated through a discourse of alternative *vs.* mainstream; where mainstream represents a capitalist corporate model of commodity production and consumption, and alternative symbolizes attempts to reform this dominant system by bringing examples of thriving possibilities (Wilson 2013). Alternatives are often attached to an imaginary of change that sees them as able to bypass socio-political and economic configurations (Argüelles *et al.* 2017). Common alternatives studied in the context of socio-political and environmental change in the Global North are, beyond AFNs, barter groups, energy cooperatives, community economy initiatives, etc. Such initiatives are seen as "liminal social spaces of

possibility" (Harvey 2012), as 'nowtopias' (Kallis and March 2014), and as experiences that are organized differently, bringing new shared rules and practices (Raven *et al.* 2008) while aiming to create an environment of more local, self-organized, autonomous and resource efficient institutions. Furthermore, they are also praised for challenging hegemonic ideologies, resisting capitalistic logics, and empowering society (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014) whilst negotiating and responding to regulatory norms and opportunities (Pinker *et al.* 2020).

'Alternatives' are receiving scholarly attention in the field of political ecology, exploring the various ways in which these initiatives threaten to sustain or exacerbate social and economic inequalities, vulnerabilities, or injustices and power structures (e.g. Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen 2004; Anguelovski 2015; Guthman 2014, 2011; Hilbrandt and Richter 2015; Slocum 2007; Zitcer 2014). Critical studies of "alternative sustainabilities" in the Global North have often focused on the paradox that even "alternatives are in seeming opposition to what is bad, they work against broader transformation (...) because the creation of alternatives simultaneously produces place and people that for various reasons cannot be served by an alternative and therefore are put beyond consideration" (Guthman 2011: 6). In the case of sustainability-led alternatives (such as AFNs), there is a paradox. The intellectual and moral leaders of alternative organizations are those able to dictate new norms and values, and they are largely white and well educated (Rutherford 2007). The strong relationship between alternatives and environmental concerns – as alternatives seem to be necessarily environmentally sustainable – determines who is likely to be behind those proposed solutions, and the mainstream and accepted environmental movement is also predominantly white (Finney 2014; Zimring 2015). The question becomes, whose alternatives are being represented, and why? Further, such 'alternative' discourses and practices also intersect with legacies of racial and class struggle (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), demands for food and environmental justice (Agyeman and McEntee 2014; Bradley and Herrera 2016), and food and environmental privilege (Anguelovski 2015).

When analyzing sustainability-led or sustainability-informed-alternatives from a political ecology perspective, an important question to bring to the conversation is how these "solutions" are entangled with broader processes and networks of power and capital (Forsyth 2008; Perreault *et al.* 2015; Robbins 2004). Here, power is understood as a complex set of social relationships that constraint or enable access to "bundles" or "webs of power" that ultimately affect access to resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003). In political ecology, those bundles of power are commonly formed by elements coming from Weberian, neo-Marxist and post-structural theories (Svarstad *et al.* 2018).

Some current debates are articulated around the position of these alternatives in relation to the mainstream system of economic wealth creation and accumulation. Proponents of alternative economies often situate these initiatives as examples of economic diversity outside of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006). Gibson-Graham use this argument to call for a strategy towards a post-capitalist consciousness, in which other forms of economic relations are highlighted against the overstated predominance of capitalist relations in discourse and *episteme*. In contrast, other scholars consider these alternative economies from the point of view of "entanglements", and argue that a vision of economic diversity might look optimistic and premature (Tsing 2015, see also [Suryanata \*et al.\* 2020 for how the diverse economy lens fits with the issue of emergent farmers](#)). Entanglements are "attachments of material, technical, and social relations across divergent and even antagonistic terrains of politics" (Murphy 2012: 12). From this perspective, political ecologist Anna Tsing proposes instead an idea of 'pericapitalist' economies, recognizing the inevitable connections of capitalist and non-capitalist activities. In her view, "lives and products move back and forth from capitalistic and non-capitalistic forms, [shaping] each other" (Tsing 2015: 65). Her point is to recognize the non-capitalist relationships on which capitalism depends, but the reverse can also be true.

From Tsing's entanglement perspective, alternative and mainstream systems are co-determined, conjoined, and mutually constituted (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). For example, studies of AFNs have often pointed out the limited capacity of these initiatives to tackle precarity, to offer good working conditions for farmworkers, or to tackle self-exploitation by farmers (Allen *et al.* 2003; Calvário 2017; Galt 2013). The rise of AFNs in North America and Europe is connected to a revival of state-led rural development strategies (Goodman and Goodman 2001). Quality certification and other labeling schemes, for organics for example, are assessed by private organizations, and actually advance the commodification of food and farming practices (Brown and Getz 2008). Such certifications are oriented toward the consumers rather than towards improving

the work of growers (Argüelles *et al.* 2018). In other words, "most food alternatives sit on shelves in conventional supermarkets, and the idea of food alternatives sits squarely with mainstream consumer discourse" (Johnston 2017: 2).

Beyond economic, environmental and social materialities and tangible indicators, alternatives have also been studied in terms of their rationales, logics, imaginaries and other empirical realities. Research has sought out the differences between alternatives and the mainstream Other. An alternative imaginary of change in community economies still embraces some privileged narratives about what the world should look like, as well as paternalistic views of those who do not envision the same outcomes (Argüelles *et al.* 2017). Alterity, therefore, may be moderate, and subjective (Fuller *et al.* 2010). Aspirations, contradictions and tensions are part of the immaterial complexity of alternative practices (Begueria Muñoz 2016). Alternatives are often "caught in the middle" in terms of reconciling social, environmental, economic and other aspirations, not only due to their financial needs (as Dolhinow 2005 shows for NGOs) but also because of internal debates and tensions over their aspirations or ideals (Sekulova *et al.* 2017; Johnston 2017). Issues of exclusivity and social justice emerge, since alternatives tend to mobilize a selective understanding of social justice on labor issues, the rights of farmworkers, and other less-evident effects of the rise of healthy foods (Allen *et al.* 2003; Anguelovski 2015; Gray 2013).

Last, the fact that certain values, practices and actions embedded in alternatives are institutionalized has been seen as co-optation (Frantzeskaki and Rok 2018; Henfrey and Penha-Lopes 2018; Leitner *et al.* 2007). Scholarship on alternative practices has not paid enough attention to the on-the-ground processes by which certain initiatives get expanded and institutionalized (funded, supported, researched, disseminated) and how alternative food production strategies can be self-governed and lack regulation.

This research suggests that analyses of alternatives and alterity need further scrutiny. There is a need to better understand how alternatives are assessed as such, under what premises, what problems they tackle, how they interact with other systems (especially when they are institutionalized), and what do those linkages mean for their social transformation horizon? I address these broader questions through the case of farmer trainings, an overlooked and primary element of the current forms of AFNs. Specifically, I aim to understand how certain political-economic structures around sustainable farming situate FTPs as viable solutions to the farming crisis, regardless of their internal contradictions about the meaning and significance of these trainings, contradictions that have been suggested elsewhere (Argüelles 2020; Suryanata *et al.* 2020). This objective aligns with other scholars that have gone beyond the analysis of the 'alternativeness' of certain practices, to investigate and reveal "the tensions and contradictions underpinning the emergence, growth, [and] proliferation of alternative economic and political spaces" (Fuller *et al.* 2010: xxvi, see also Alkon and Guthman 2017; Bialski *et al.* 2015a).

#### 4. Design and methods

This article is based on the findings of five months of fieldwork conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area and central coast of California. The study is qualitative, using a case study approach. I carried out 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews and informal interviews with current apprentices, alumni and staff members of four different FTPs. I also rely on participant and direct observation methods, which took place during advocacy events, celebrations, communal workdays, classes, and volunteer farm work. I complement insights from interviews with a content analysis of training materials and websites, as well as related policy documents. Last, I use media accounts and popular literature to understand the public discourse about these trainings. Throughout the text, I reference some of this media to illustrate my arguments.

The selection of programs was geographical and by means of a typology. After identifying FTPs in the Santa Cruz and San Francisco areas, I contacted several of them asking whether I could conduct my research. The final four cases were selected based on diversity, and to represent the types of trainings found in this region. One training is located on the Central Coast (CS1), another on the San Francisco Peninsula (CS2), the third one is co-organized by two partner organizations from Berkeley and Oakland (CS3) and the fourth is run at a farm in the Salinas Valley (CS4).

CS1, CS2 and CS4 have a rural character while the one in the East Bay (CS3) is more urban-oriented. CS2, CS3 and CS4 are managed by non-profits while CS1 is developed by a sustainable agriculture center hosted in a public university. CS1, CS4 and CS3 had been awarded several BFRDP grants while CS3 hasn't

(but it is considering applying in the next round). CS1 and CS2 programs have a residential component and attracts educated middle-class people. CS4 is mostly oriented to farmworkers, while CS3 focuses on marginalized populations in the Oakland area. The training programs also vary in size (from 4-8 apprentices per year to 40) and trajectory (from two to fifty years of history). This diversity of organizations allows me to answer this study's core question about how these training programs are constructed and promoted as a solution to the farming crisis in public and institutional arenas, despite increasing internal mistrust within them.

## 5. Structures at play in the making of farmer training programs

### *The production of apolitical ecologies: the scarcity of farmers*

The farmer training programs are seen by their proponents as solutions, because the farming crisis is simplified to a problem of lack of farmers, and hence, training new farmers seems to be the most natural solution. One of political ecology's central theses is that scarcity is not absolute and nature-given, but rather socially produced (e.g. Bakker 2000; Kallis 2018). The relative scarcity of a natural resource also depends, for example, on population and consumption levels or technological and institutional production capabilities. However, the idea of scarcity and its framing as an *apolitical* ecology (Robbins 2004) (i.e. a socio-ecological problem which is simplified and decontextualized) is discursively used to advance the interests of those in power who benefit from the social processes that produce this scarcity, often in the name of solving it (Kaika 2004; Otero *et al.* 2011). Framed as a collective, natural problem, scarcity depoliticizes the decisions that create particular socio-environmental conditions (Swyngedouw 2004). The way current political classes interpret socio-environmental problems, and how these are detached from the political-economic and cultural context that produce them, is an exercise of power. It affects the governance of, for example, climate change (Swyngedouw 2010), soil degradation (Bryant and Bailey 1997), obesity (Guthman 2011) or as I argue, the loss of farmers.

Indeed, the main rationale to justify the existence and support of these training programs is based on the existence of a generalized problem of 'lack of farmers.' This is the rationale present in USDA BFRDP grant description, where quantitative data on the number of farmers and farms are used to justify the trainings:

The reasons for the renewed interest in beginning farmer and rancher programs are as follows: the rising average age of U.S. farmers; the 8% projected decrease in the number of farmers and ranchers between 2008 and 2018; and the growing recognition that new programs are needed to address the needs of the next generation of beginning farmers and ranchers. (National Institute of Food and Agriculture 2012)

Even though this rationale does not dig into the structural causes that might influence such changes over time, the 'lack-of-farmers' framing feeds a meta-narrative highly supported by different groups (legislators, NGOs, the media) that reinforce it through research and campaigning.

This meta-narrative has elevated the aging of farmers as a matter of concern, and it has made that particular problem politically dominant. This interest supports the existence of a myriad of NGOs and civil organizations linked to the environmental movement and sustainable agriculture, whose objectives are supporting the creation of a new generation of farmers or to advocate for their rights in formal institutional arenas. The work of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Land for Good, Rural Coalition, National Family Farm Coalition, Farm Beginnings Collaborative or New Entry Sustainable Farming Program are just some examples. They have the ability advance some regulations and programs mobilizing the apolitical ecology narrative behind the scarcity of farmers. Such programs include the BFRDP grant itself, which some of the aforementioned organizations lobbied for, and a partial student debt forgiveness for farmers starting in the profession, passed by some states (i.e. the New York State Young Farmers Loan Forgiveness),<sup>2</sup> which favors

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hesc.ny.gov/pay-for-college/financial-aid/types-of-financial-aid/nys-grants-scholarships-awards/new-york-state-young-farmers-loan-forgiveness-incentive-program.html>

the educated class. These regulations are often celebrated and claimed by popular food and farming media, such as the influential *Civil Eats*, without considering their equity (Orlowsky 2017).

There seems to be a public acceptance and adoption of this discourse, illustrated by the frequent allusion to farmers' age in public discourse as well as the growing media coverage of the topic. This includes the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, that have published articles on the issue of emerging farmers (e.g. Dewey 2017; Shattuck 2013; Lopez 2014). The media uses the scarcity of farmers in a quite apolitical and narrow way, often evoking the past. In response, the trainings themselves tend to reproduce the idea of a scarcity of farmers, for example this training launched by the California Certified Organic Farmers is introduced with this quote: "With fewer young people going into agriculture, many experts and sector leaders are concerned about the future of American farming. New organic farmers and entrepreneurs are needed to meet the demand for organic products that are healthy for both people and the planet" (California Certified Organic Farmers 2015). It is problematic that this discourse is mobilized in public rhetoric (often in progressive organizations or media channels), isolated from the structural reasons that create the decreasing number of farmers, or from an overall picture of the farming crisis.

The scarcity narrative is built on selective data, missing some nuances. Not all farmers are disappearing; immigrant populations that eventually become farm operators or managers are actually *increasing*. From 2002 to 2012 the number of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin farm operators in the U.S. increased by 32% (Vilsack and Clark 2014). A racial bias within the lack-of-farmers narrative is also apparent in the media. Wealthier classes are the ones highlighted as saving the profession (see Reynolds 2015 for a similar observation). Media reports repeatedly feature stories about people like Erik Groszyk, 30, who "used to spend his day as an investment banker working on spreadsheets. Now, he blasts rapper Kendrick Lamar while harvesting crops from his own urban farm out of a shipping container in a Brooklyn parking lot" (Fares 2017). These public representations of the new farmers' movement show a young class of workers disenchanted with their career possibilities, neglecting that, for many immigrant farmers, farming is not what they choose to do, but rather, their only possible livelihood.

The reality is that while an important part of the FTPs are dedicated to historically marginalized populations (around half of them, according to National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition 2017), these are less often considered as the future of agriculture. For example, the skills, experience and assiduity of farmworkers (which are needed to become farm operator or farm owner) are often unrecognized in public discourse and policymaking, which focus on a young generation of American farmers. Enlarging the debate to include a more diverse workforce would actually need to address legalization and overcoming roadblocks to immigration.

The created scarcity of farmers and its framing as an apolitical ecology might be obscuring the actual diversity of farmers, and also the reasons why people attend the trainings. Indeed, not all the trainees want to dedicate their lives to farming or aim a career change: some instrumentalize the trainings to access resources: many of the CS4 apprentices are running their own operations, and attend the training for the most part, in order to be able to participate in the incubator phase (so they can get subsidized land). Some others see the FTPs as a possibility for engaging in community development or food justice activism afterwards, while others highlight a spiritual or personal dimension. That was the case of a former apprentice at CS1, who argued:

It is almost that the farming, the gardening, the education, was a vehicle to allow us to come together as community, it gave us a purpose and a reason to be here, but really it wasn't my ultimate need to be a farmer, I was lonely, I was looking for kinship, I was looking for a bright and beautiful experience.

Experiences such as this one contradict the official line, on the reasons to participate in the acquisition of agricultural knowledge and to learn farming skills.

To sum up, FTPs are premised on the scarcity of farmers. The embedded rationale that feeds such idea – with roots in agrarianism (see Carlisle 2014 for an overview) and an eco-agrarian ethic (Alkon 2013) – seems impartial, incomplete and mostly white. An apolitical ecology feeds the funding apparatus that supports these trainings, which I analyze in the following subsection.



*Privileged philanthropism and elite cultural consumption*

The construction of FTPs as a feasible solution to the farming crisis is also facilitated by mechanisms of wealth creation and reproduction, private capital and philanthropism, which the organizations are able to mobilize using narratives around lack of farmers and sustainable farming more broadly. The rise of environmental and social concerns about agriculture and the appreciation of local and small-scale food projects among the *milieu* of the white educated middle-class (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Anguelovski 2015; Slocum 2007) coalesce around training programs for young sustainable farmers. Funding organizations or individuals compelled by AFNs' vision and with enough capital stimulate their support by donating money to training programs. Such is the case among the four case studies, which receive private funding in different proportions. In the current food frenzy, emergent farmers become a new target of philanthropism: private donors, holdings such as Bon Appétit, foundations such as Rockefeller, or businessmen like Kimbal Musk (brother of Tesla's CEO) are helping young people to boost the sustainable farming business. For example, one of the organizations co-organizing CS3 received a US\$600,000 loan from a "non-profit organization dedicated to catalyzing the flow of capital to local food systems,"<sup>3</sup> among other donations from a myriad of sources. This is a case of an NGO working with a disenfranchised population of apprentices from West Oakland – mostly Latina and Black women – benefiting from access to private funding, whose educated progressive founders were able to harness a vision of urban and sustainable agriculture and the creation of a new generation of farmers (regardless the recognized limited ability of the apprentices to thrive as emergent farmers). This situation of privilege, however, creates some tensions, awkwardness, and inequities within the organization. For example, during a class session in which one of the NGO founders explained to the apprentices the different sources of funding they were able to collect for starting the NGO (including money from foundations, private donors, or loans from relatives or big organizations), it became obvious that the apprentices themselves do not have the same access to funding. The chances of these entrepreneurs of being able to succeed in the food or agriculture sector, even as an NGO, are limited. Under the philanthropic arrangement for capital, those who share particular visions of the environment (e.g. Western environmentalists) are those entitled to solve its problems – by getting access to resources and ultimately, to power. This type of environmental privilege – by which certain classes and races are disproportionately able to enjoy not only environmental goods amenities (such as healthy food) but also recognition of their beliefs and objectives (Park and Pellow 2011) – also contributes to the making of the FTPs.

The other indirect funding source operating in these trainings – the selling of demonstration farms' produce at premium prices through common "alternative" venues such as farmers' markets, farm stands and weekly basket schemes – has naturalized social hierarchies in relationship to food access (Johnston and Baumann 2010) and reproduced them over time. The fact that these trainings are located in the San Francisco Bay Area, a major market for organic and other good foods, means that the demonstration farms have easy access to such markets. Although organizations try to combine those venues with less privileged ones, such a practice is not always easy to implement. In that regard, while CS4 producers attempt to sell produce in Salinas, a predominantly Latino city, they are in reality mostly selling to distributors linked to big organic supermarket chains (such as Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, etc.). Some farmers from the CS4 incubator are inspired by food sovereignty ideals, but they are resigned to sell to those distributors for the sake of economic survival. Another hub for distributing "good food" is the nearby Silicon Valley, where tech companies (e.g. Airbnb, Google) buy food from CS2 to serve it at cafeterias, or they offer it to employees as optional weekly food baskets (like in the CSA model).

Training organizations seem to accept that part of their work is funded by wealthy people attracted by popular imaginaries around land, farming and good food, and, even if they are not comfortable with part of their clientele, organizations often reproduce this by celebrating the involvement of/engagement with/alliance with wealthy classes and recreate privileged aesthetics and dynamics around food consumption (i.e. food festivals, gourmet experiences, "foodie" imagery, etc.). An example of such celebration comes from the one event at CS1 (an anniversary celebration lasting 4 days with multiple talks, sessions and tours). Alice Waters, celebrity chef and owner of Chez Panisse, was the guest speaker at a dinner with over 500 attendees. Her presence as the main speaker at the banquet symbolizes the organization's comfortable alliance with the high-end cuisine and wealthy

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<sup>3</sup> <https://slowmoney.org/about>

consumerism. At one point of the discourse, she joked around the use of millionaires' money for advancing alternative food strategies:

I am very convinced that we can [serve high quality organic food at schools and reconnecting children with food] in the next five years, because we have 50 years of organic farming in California, we have enlightened politicians (...) We have ... billionaires (laughs). They help (laughs from the public). We have lots of them (laughs). I mean, wouldn't it be amazing if we could feed all of the children in California with California food? Let's keep all the money in the state. Let's keep it all here. But... what can I say? *Vive la revolution!* Delicious!

The banalization of the wealth inequality embedded in this comment conflicts with the parallel social justice claims of the organization, mostly driven by a network of alumni of color and some staff members. This group has struggled over the years against the whiteness of the training program at CS1. Trainees from CS2 also highlight the importance of making sure that the training remains socially coherent. While most of them confronted the organization's practice of selling to tech companies, they remark that the social impact of the training comes in terms of representational justice. As a trainee explains: "I sold at the farmers' market in [the nearby town]. People were very curious in my personhood. Like, do you live here? Black female farmer ... I was breaking through all of their assumptions (...) CS2 has brought people of color, and non-white farmers, into this community." Hence, while the training organizations often make alliances with privileged organizations/systems, the trainees find their ways to speak out against or reverse structural inequalities.

Certainly, a certain tension exists within these trainings between the desire to advance a more just food system and the need for wealthy money to sustain farm operations. I observe that this tension becomes especially uncomfortable for apprentices and staff members of marginalized classes or races, who acknowledge that organizations strategically direct their discourses and actions towards the white wealthy class. Moreover, the issue of accountability to funding sources creates the need for organizations to comply with the objectives or the rationales of their donors. Money is directed to those able to mobilize the right sentiment among their benefactors, so organizations must be strategic about their message. For example, at CS2, Latino and Black apprentices and staff members reported some discomfort in a meeting held at the headquarters of the organization, in which a donor helped the farm team find reporting measures and indicators to make results attractive to other donors, that is, quantitative indicators to measure the organizational impact (e.g. number of farmers "created", visitors, and attendance to educational projects, among others). Some interviewees found that these indicators do not represent the real significance of the training for them and for society, and they are only directed to attract money in a very entrepreneurial way.

In sum, as a vivid illustration of the contradictions in the politics of empowerment (Murphy 2012), FTPs are constructed as solutions to the farming crisis by an existing funding apparatus (philanthropism and consumption elitism) based in particular imaginaries (i.e. romanticization of farming) as well as socially accepted norms (i.e. environmental privilege). In a capitalist system where wealthy money has the power to decide what deserves to be promoted, saved and funded, the cause of emerging farmers, as producers of healthy foods and sustainable futures, becomes a target of philanthropic ventures. Last, the broader governance processes in which FTPs are made deserves further attention when understanding the construction and popularity of these trainings.

#### *NGOization of sustainable farming and farmers' responsabilization*

In this last section, I argue that the making of FTPs as an intervention to solve the farming crisis is determined by neoliberal governance structures that promote the devolution of power into the NGO sector and the responsabilization of individuals, that is, the "concomitant faith in civil society and its components, including NGOs and communities" to solve or compensate socio-environmental problems (McCarthy 2006: 87).

FTPs can be seen as a strategy by the USDA and other public institutions to promote sustainable agriculture and domestic production and help reverse market failures associated with more productivist-oriented agriculture (Buller and Morris 2004). This strategy towards supporting post-productivist agriculture is often

planned through the NGO complex, as illustrated by the BFRDP (the most prominent funding program for FTPs), which assigns the task of solving the problem of the lack of farmers mostly to NGOs (56% of the beneficiaries, according to National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition 2017). Farming then becomes a task for the third sector – just as the environment, wildlife, childhood, etc. – and is hence susceptible to donations, evaluation, accounting and normalized visions of farming and farmers. It is this devolution of power from the state downwards and outwards which makes certain solutions or interventions possible, especially those which allow forms of "governing at a distance" (Rose and Miller 1992). Moreover, the elevation of emerging farmers as a political concern constitutes a form of policy ambivalence – with rural depopulation being driven both by technological changes in the production system and deliberate policy goals aimed at reducing the number of farmers in the U.S. (Beale 1964; Wood 2010). In return, this ambiguity might further help the USDA to legitimize the current policy status quo, that is, an agricultural policy system geared towards the agri-food complex. At the same time, the existence, mission and programs of the non-profit fundraising and financing complex is reinforced and legitimized by the running of FTPs as a strategy for solving the farming crisis. It is a win-win solution for both the NGOs and the state.

The NGOization of the sustainable farming sector itself (i.e. the sector's insertion in the non-profit and third sector domains, see Guthman 2008b; Pudup 2008; Rosol 2010) – contributes to the construction and promotion of FTPs. Indeed, the sustainable food production sector is commonly seen and treated as a social and not as a productive economic sector (which is what the conventional agri-food business came to represent). Hence, farming and growing food are increasingly inserted into the rationales and structures of the third sector and the social services they deliver. That is the case for the farms and demonstrative gardens at schools and universities, which have a more social rather than a productive function, or the thousands of urban community gardens in the U.S. In the case of the FTPs at BFRDP, targeted populations include refugees, migrant and other historically marginalized groups. In addition, as a working theme, training farmers gives legitimacy to education institutions or to NGOs, as indicated by several interviewees from the CS3 and CS1 programs.

Different farming and food organizations are emerging, such as demonstration gardens or FTPs themselves, whose mission is educating, training, or advancing social or food justice, instead of producing food in a cost effective and technically viable way. These socially-oriented organizations target more hiring of educated employees, with very different skills than those required for food production and distribution. A paradox then occurs: the prospective farmer attending the trainings is hired for food-related education and social work. As I observed, that is the intention of many apprentices in the first place and it is what the overall trend of the alumni's trajectories in the four organizations seems to indicate. In contrast, the number of apprentices working on or starting farm businesses is limited. Many trainees from a more educated milieu (CS1 and CS2) or urban settings (CS3) aspire to/work on/start NGOs or educational programs (i.e. food justice groups, school gardens, advocacy groups and others). In contrast, farmworkers (from CS4) continue working on farms (either as more skilled workers or running their own businesses). In addition, some apprentices start or collaborate with other training programs, since these create jobs for former apprentices, directly contributing to the further NGOization of sustainable agriculture. Yet, the NGOization of the sector does a disservice to sustainable farming businesses since the trainings often represent a subsidized non-profit form of farming that competes in unequal conditions (of funding, resources, labor) with other farms for market share. This contradiction was highlighted by some interviewees, who see the farms where the trainings take place as an inaccurate simulation of farming conditions, where the scale, the funding structure and the amount of free labor distorts what for-profit farm work entails. A trainee from CS1 explains: "It was difficult for me to understand the people who did not pay attention to classes, they did not want to stay in the sun or get their hands dirty... And some of us thought that here at CS1, they are not teaching them the real story (...) At least they should tell the truth." This quote expresses a condition that many trainees face during the program, which make them skeptical of the capacity of FTPs to successfully create new farmers.

The strong commitment to self-improvement is a required premise for the overtly neoliberal process of shifting responsibilities downwards, and from moving from a welfare state to an activating (or shadow) state. Here, the state does not provide services but rather encourages the creation of a favorable environment in which self-governing, responsible communities and individuals can flourish. In the case of FTPs, the combination of the agrarian and the sustainable agriculture imaginaries has elevated farming as "the most important work to be

done", and farmers "on the front lines in the struggle for survival" (Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture *et al.* 2017), creating "farming heroes" (Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture *et al.* 2017) who work hard to survive and take on the profession despite unfavorable structural conditions. FTPs themselves promote such professional ethics by encouraging the creation of new farmers, but leaving the structural dimensions mostly unaddressed and often falling into a rationale that presupposes farmers as able "to solve all the world's problems" (as a former apprentice from CS1 put it). He refers to the extended vision that requires environmental, social and economic sustainability as well as the political commitment of small farmers but without considering the tremendous difficulty in meeting all these ends. These expectations often lead to farmers' self-exploitation or internal contradictions and frustration (Galt 2013), when they are unable to meet the conditions they are expected to, such as producing organic food, fomenting direct relations with clients or making an impact in the local community. Improving the conditions of the labor force (i.e. migrant farmworkers), supplying sustainable food to marginalized communities (or helping them to produce it themselves) or engaging in different forms of political activism are other objectives that the prospective farmers set for their projects.

To sum up, FTPs are situated as a solution to the farming crisis in a particular governance context that promote individualistic and market-based solutions that hardly challenge structural conditions in which farming is performed. Attending to those structural aspects, FTPs could be situated as an outcome of the increased devolution of power to the NGO complex, and the NGOization of sustainable farming itself. Moreover, the trainings are also constructed by a 'farming hero' logic – under which farmers are responsible for their success and elevated to heroes for their willingness to work in unfavorable conditions.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

So the question is, do you teach it, do you recognize there is a phenomenon of the depreciation of the occupation, there is no farmers left, decreasing farmers, in the face of the structural issues and the environment (...) Do you teach it anyway? Regardless of where people go. And for me, yes, absolutely, you are not going to give up on it, because you never know what's gonna happen in the future, and even if it doesn't work out for how many generations... but at some point you imagine this pathetic ridiculous corrupted insane cannibalism that is modern imperialism is going to fall, and then what? Nobody knows how to farm? You have to grow a seed of, like, culture somewhere! (Staff member and former apprentice, CS1)

Scholarship on 'alternatives' has urged us to consider the context, the connections, and the processes in which alternative practices are formed, to assess the alterity of these practices and their transformative potential (Blumberg *et al.* 2020; Fuller *et al.* 2010). In this study I untangled the political-economic structures that construct FTPs oriented to sustainable agriculture as a solution to the farming crisis, despite the internal skepticism I found among the organizations (staff members and trainees) themselves. I also paid attention to the ways such entanglements affect the internal dynamics at the FTPs.

**First**, I argue that the rationale framing the farming problem in the public-institutional discourse – namely the apolitical production of a lack of farmers – and its discursive usage in popular and institutional circles directs the solution towards the urgent production of more farmers who will farm sustainably and independently of the current structural conditions in which farming is embedded. As Murphy argues, "problems are in part fashioned out of the very solutions that presupposed them (...). The work of bringing a problem into being is also inevitably, as is in all work, the exercise of power on uneven conditions" (Murphy 2012). In this case, the recurrent discourse around loss of farmers, and around FTPs as a solution to tackle it, embeds privileged white imaginaries about food and farming that romanticize the farming profession and dictate a selective understanding of the farming problem. The rhetoric of lack of farmers that the institutions, media and trainings themselves adopt responds to an imaginary that represents the farming crisis as one of lack of knowledgeable people willing to dedicate themselves to farming. I have problematized this rationale as incomplete and biased (e.g. by race) and linked to misleading narratives that greatly affect the way the background problem (a corporate-led agri-business sustained by a capitalist and neoliberal system) is (un)framed and thus (un)addressed. In view of these findings, I suggest greater attention to be paid on how the

imaginaries and knowledge that create a scarcity of farmers are constructed and interpreted (Bakker 2009; Otero *et al.* 2011).

**Second**, I untangle how mainstream political-economic structures support the creation of FTPs (the societal construction of apolitical ecologies, a capitalist funding apparatus and different forms of neoliberal governance), showing that the production of these trainings as a proposed alternative to industrialized conventional agriculture is highly mediated by power. The privileged imaginaries that converge around the philosophies underpinning farming make the issue of emergent farmers particularly attractive to donors who share the widespread "agrarian dreams" (Guthman 2014). The trainings organized in California studied here rely heavily on philanthropism and money from the wealthy, which are both funding the trainings directly, and also indirectly subsidizing the alternative food market, recreating forms of environmental privilege. The entanglements of FTPs with such structures, together with the politics of imaginaries within the trainings (Argüelles 2020), create possibilities and self-reflection but also some internal tensions and skepticism within organizations. The need for wealthy money to run the trainings creates tensions within participants and staff members, especially those of Black, Latin or Asian origin, as well as issues of accountability to donors that are problematic and often internally contested.

**Last**, I show how certain governance structures and mentalities facilitate the rise of FTPs. The task of producing farmers needs to be situated in the broader governance context where these trainings operate. I point at the devolution of power and its materialization in the NGOization of agriculture as being linked to the production of the trainings. I problematize the increasing portrayal of farming, and of sustainable farming in particular, as a non-profit business (increasing the division with the profitable Big Ag). I also argue that a pervasive logic of 'farming hero' forges the trainings. This logic pushes the promotion of emergent farmers in the most precarious conditions. When farming is "the most important work to be done" regardless of challenging conditions – farmers are pushed to adopt a farming hero halo, tied to elements of responsibility, sacrifice, and self-help.

What do these findings bring to the debates on the politics of alternatives? In the existing debate about the role of alternative food networks – and alternatives more broadly – in bringing about social change, the critical voices argue that the most celebrated alternatives promote ideals of individual responsibility and choice, masking neoliberal forms of governance (e.g. Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Busa and Garder 2015; Guthman 2008b). On the other hand, proponents claim that these economies and initiatives represent emancipatory solutions and are performative examples of "other worlds" (Gibson-Graham 2006) or that they signal socioecological imaginaries (Leitner *et al.* 2007) that subvert the dream of infinite material wealth (D'Alisa *et al.* 2015; Kallis and March 2014). Others argue that, as a highly replicable local experiments, these environment-driven initiatives have the ability to actually tackle climate change (Feola and Nunes 2014; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). In this study I bring a primary aspect to this debate: the consideration of how alternatives are produced and sustained. I propose looking at how problems are framed, and what solutions or alternatives, among the possible and impossible ones, are selected, by whom and for whom. AFNs and alternative economic practices tend to be understood and analyzed as a grassroots phenomenon, (e.g. community-led farmers' markets, self-organized time banks or alternative currencies, energy coops, etc.). However, most of these initiatives are to some level institutionalized, that is, state-funded, supported, legitimized and/or socially accepted. In a context of regulatory failure and devolution of power, different levels and domains of governance are indeed keen to support certain practices or initiatives in order to improve socio-environmental conditions.

The field of political ecology has questioned the production, interpretation and representation of socio-ecological problems and more recently developed new research on "alternative sustainabilities", including how broader political forces shape the conditions in which problems are framed and solutions proposed. According to Tim Forsyth (2003), the point of a critical political ecology approach is not to falsify myths – or even necessarily to reveal another certain explanation – but to illuminate problems in new and meaningful ways that might lead to other types of policy intervention. To do so requires a reconsideration of the problem's definition (a scarcity of farmers in this case), as well as paying attention to the broader socio-political environments that support certain types of solutions – and that allow farmers to thrive or let them "die" (Guthman 2017a; Li 2010).

This analysis does not aim to dismiss the work and importance of FTPs in the struggle to shift the agri-food system. A political ecology approach to alternatives helps acknowledge material and immaterial linkages to power and capital. Avoiding seeing these linkages as necessarily contradictions, and moving beyond binary thinking and good/bad dichotomies, I argue that the attention to the issue of emergent farmers by these organizations is entangled in broader social, cultural, economic and political processes and structures comprised of ambivalent policies and regulations, privileged imaginaries about food and farming, and neoliberal structures sustaining the trainings. This occurs even as farming, and the training of new farmers in particular, is promised as a source of potential transformation and a relevant field on the alternative politics (e.g. Calvário 2017; Meek and Tarlau 2016; Parr and Van Horn 2006). Teaching people how to farm and produce food is of extreme importance in the current political context, and is an exercise that creates different possibilities for reconnection with the land and re-organizing production structures. My aim is not to dismiss the importance of training people how to farm, as a crucial dimension of politics, knowledge-making and as a hopeful task striving for a different future. Nor do I wish to merely reduce it to a damaging or misleading strategy or action. Instead, following Murphy, I suggest these training programs are both countercultures and progressive social practices, entangled with emergent neoliberalizing processes: "a coalescence of appropriation and appropriations, of antagonistic and yet enabling relations" (Murphy 2012: 93). My point is to show that constructing these trainings as a response to the farming crisis, often represented by the rampant decrease in the number of farmers, is irremediably linked to questions of capital, privilege and universalized precarity. The case of FTPs throws light on the particular governmentalities, forms of governing at-a-distance, and racial dynamics associated with sustainable farming and agriculture, and the way society thinks of it.

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