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# “No matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican or neither”: Pragmatic politics in opposition to industrial animal production

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars call for unusual, visionary pathways forward to counter authoritarian control in situations of helplessness and inequality. Popular strategies for change in such contexts often call for large-scale state interventions achieved through party-line politics. This paper examines two groups that stopped the construction of industrial hog facilities in the United States and finds that rural emancipation comes through direct action, with the state as a secondary, rather than primary, vehicle for change. Pragmatic rural politics predicated on immediate concerns and pathways for action underscore effective protest against corporate agribusinesses. Those involved pursue ends rooted in their shared commitment to a livable and prosperous rural future.

## 1. Introduction

In January 2017, the American Farm Bureau Federation – the largest farmer organization in the United States – felt a tremor in the rural hinterlands of west central Illinois. A young farmer, Matt Howe, resigned from the Fulton County Farm Bureau Board of Directors over the group's support of a 20,000-head swine facility just thousands of feet away from his family home. His letter of resignation, picked up by the *Chicago Tribune* and reported on as far away as Washington, DC, said:

I simply cannot continue to offer my time and resources to an organization which supports the installation of these CAFOs [Confined Animal Feeding Operations] without regard to the effect on residences and family farms to which so many people have devoted their time and constant attention, some for generations.<sup>1</sup>

The Illinois Farm Bureau, including its Vice President, hosted a special, closed meeting with the growing tide of defecting members in the area. Their efforts were to little avail. Matt Howe had the organized support of his community, centered around a country church and led by teachers. They refused to withdraw their dissent. As opposition momentum grew, the corporation withdrew its plans to build (*Associated Press*, 2017).

This momentous victory in a resource-strapped but ingenuity-rich rural community was thought impossible five years earlier. At that time, the expansion of Professional Swine Management (PSM), the

seventh largest pork producer in the country (Freese, 2018), had gone largely unchecked. The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) had not in recent memory faced reproach for serving corporate agribusinesses from its own member base, which includes insurers alongside farmers (Graddy-Lovelace, 2019). Integrated and monopolized agricultural production and the groups that represent it continue to control discourse around property rights, land use choices, environmental laws, rights of human health, access to markets, and moral norms in rural areas (Bell, 2004; Hendrickson, 2015; Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007; Pruitt et al., 2018; Salamon, 1995). Yet nearly all of those who live in the rural U.S. now make a living outside of agriculture, often with increasing precarity and inadequate wages (Guptill and Welsh, 2014; Scoones et al., 2018). Those remaining in agriculture do not only prevail in more obvious ways, like political elections and ownership over the means of production. Their power also imbues local symbolism and folk narratives, e.g. God Made a Farmer.

Industrial-scale agribusinesses effectively use such symbolism alongside intimidation to maintain control over the political economy, despite ever lessening distribution of economic returns (Ashwood et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2015). The consequent conditions of inequality and even hopelessness are not unlike other rural contexts globally where authoritarian populism is flourishing (Adaman et al., 2019). Yet, little emphasis has been given to corporate agribusiness as a structural aspect of disenfranchisement in the rural U.S. potentially shaping the current political climate. Rather, scholars have largely analyzed voting patterns

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<sup>1</sup> In an July/August 2016 newsletter, the Fulton County Farm Bureau chapter newsletter featured a photo of Matt Howe serving watermelon at a local event and gave him perfect marks for attendance at meetings (See <http://fultoncfb.org/resources/4.pdf>). For *Chicago Tribune* coverage, see <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/watchdog/pork/ct-pig-farms-cleer-farm-memory-lane-met-20170124-story.html>.

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and cultural norms around government intervention (Hochschild, 2016; Vance, 2016; Walsh, 2016) at the expense of attention to rural injustice (Carolan, 2019; Roman-Alcalá et al., 2018). Important insights derive from going directly to the sites of injustice that industrial agriculture generates and documenting the successful alliances that confront exploitation. Such an approach cuts through negative narratives and even stereotypes about rural people and their politics by better understanding when and how action happens, even when authoritarian populism appears to have broad appeal.

This paper presents an analysis of two groups that successfully stopped the construction of large-scale, corporate owned industrial hog facilities in Illinois: Rural Residents for Responsible Agriculture (RRRA) and Neighbors Opposing a Polluted Environment (NOPE). In 2013, RRRA was the first group to publicly stop the construction of a large-scale hog confinement in Illinois, the sixth largest U.S. state in terms of population, as it is home to Chicago, but which in terms of area is largely rural. Since 1999, Illinois has been the fourth largest producer of hogs in the U.S., while in gross terms, hog production between 2008 and 2017 has increased between 15 and 42% relative to gestation, farrowing, and finishing (Checkoff, 2018; United States Department of Agriculture, 2017; United States Department of Agriculture, 2014). Hog production has expanded from Iowa, the leading hog producer, to neighboring states like Illinois, particularly in light of North Carolina's moratorium on hog production in response to pollution and health impacts particularly egregious in communities of color (Wing et al., 2008). Deleterious impacts include public liability for pollution events, reduced home values, nutrient and bacterial water contamination, increased risk of influenza pandemics and antimicrobial resistance, loss of leisure time and social interaction, and air pollution, contributing to higher rates of allergies, asthma, stress, mood swings, sore throats, and headaches (Ashwood et al., 2014; Gilchrist et al., 2007; Radon et al., 2007; Tajik et al., 2008).

I use a combination of interviews, archival, observational and experiential evidence that pertain to NOPE and RRRA members, key political figures, and those who have tried to stall industrial facilities that eventually were constructed. RRRA organized against a proposed 18,000-head gestation swine facility, and the group's strategies for action spread from its birthplace in McDonough County to NOPE in neighboring Fulton County. I completed 21 recorded and transcribed interviews in 2017 and 2018. My archival evidence includes siting documents and hearing transcripts from the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Meeting observations come from participant observation with RRRA and NOPE, between 2011 and 2017.<sup>2</sup>

My analysis suggests that pragmatic politics, sometimes utilizing the state and at other times disavowing it, underlie effective protest. The matter becomes less about big state interventions or grand party affiliations to confront authoritarian populism, and more about the creative adoption of various strategies tailored to group members' respective strengths. Sometimes group members seek to purposefully discard the overarching apparatus of power and at other times utilize it to impact change. In any event, the politics are direct, dispersed, and immediate, suggesting that the basis for rural emancipation may lie in participatory strategies not necessarily wedded to electoral politics, but those open to creativity, local know-how, and determination.

## 2. Pragmatic politics, populism, and possibilities for rural emancipation

Taking a pragmatic approach to confronting authoritarian populism, though, has yet to gain much attention in the scholarly literature (Scoones et al., 2018). In part, this is because authoritarian populism

itself is of big politics and big states. A leader develops a charismatic bond with the masses, promising to overcome the worst ills facing them, but instead utilizes the power gained through a populist platform for personal advancement at the expense of democratic rights. What Thompson (1971) calls violations of the moral economy, Hobsbawm (1959) dubbed primitive politics, and Norris and Inglehart (2019) call cultural backlash all feed into what they understand as reactionary populist action. Crises of accumulation may shake legitimacy enough to give opportunists the space to consolidate control (Borras, 2019; Gramsci, 1971; Tilzey, 2019). Meanwhile, politics of fear pave the way, offering security in return for conformity and obedience where one is either in or out (Finchelstein, 2017). Preventing such ends, then, historically centers on changing voting patterns (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), structurally reorganizing the state, and effecting as much through revolutions or mass social movements (Scoones et al., 2018).

As useful as these ends may be to addressing authoritarian populism, they are patently grand or at least indirect. There appear few immediate ways for a person to become involved in changing their lived reality, and rather require centralization or outside education to change voter values. Further, such understandings may overstate the proximate origins of crises and understate the role of longstanding exploitation. Russia is a case in point, where the legalization of land sales has over decades brought “oligarchic capital to the countryside” and exacerbated poverty and unemployment (Mamonova, 2019: 570). Russian President Vladimir Putin attained power by framing himself as a benefactor or a “muzhik’ (a real man, a man of the people),” which in Tsarist Russian meant peasant man (Mamonova, 2019: 569). Such use of power follows a typical authoritarian populist recipe, where claims to serve the masses later lead to a consolidation of power that benefits the few (Gonda, 2019). Addressing authoritarian populism thus requires more than recent attention to wavering voting patterns or temporary crises (White and Williams, 2012). Araujo et al. (2017) write that attention ought to be afforded to the hierarchical dimensions of the state, where the “Party and the ballot box” limit and constrain potential emancipatory strategies (61). Rather than emancipation vis-à-vis the state, Ince and Bryant (2019) advocate for borderless, post-state societies that provide mutual aid. The general idea is pursuing “direct access to power” (Springer, 2016: 6–7). It is through direct action, Araujo et al. (2017, 612) argue that “right-wing populisms” can be engaged with, rather than demeaned or ignored.

Populism utilizes a mix of direct action and state intervention, meaning that its formative elements might provide insights to its counter in the authoritarian case. Notably, populism may not create the conditions necessary for systemic change, but it can provide an opening for such change to happen (Bosworth, 2019). Lauded emancipatory alternatives, like the now faltering democratic confederalism in war-torn Rojava, have some element of direct action coupled with state power, namely the monopoly on violence (Bookchin, 1991; Scoones et al., 2018). In part, this is because localism or direct action bring with it a suite of challenges relative to context specific dynamics of oppression (Hinrichs and Clare, 2003; Ince and Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre, 2016; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). At the turn of the 20th century, U.S. agrarian populism, for example, purported to have local ideals, while never taking a clear position on the role of the state, making it somewhat “fraught” (Graddy-Lovelace, 2019, 397). In some cases, it even promoted racist, xenophobic, and sexist ideals (Naples, 1994). Farmer uprisings fueled the tension between a need for state-imposed land redistribution and direct action (Berry, 2003; Naples, 1994). Goals included pragmatic ones, like the ability to “secure a dignified livelihood and life from agriculture on a community level” (Graddy-Lovelace, 2019, 397). This end, though, was readily manipulated as in the case of the U.S. South, where large planters and owners leveraged fear of market exclusion to divide landless tenants of different races from yeoman farmers after the Civil War and into the Jim Crow era (Woodward, 1971). Working-class politics driving agrarian populism largely faltered as railroads and other barons of capital countered

<sup>2</sup> Direct quotes are from recordings. All group members' actual names have been replaced with pseudonyms, in accordance with IRB protocol. In some cases, I further protect member identities through plausible deniability.

efforts to stall the corporate reconstruction of capitalism in the mid to late 1800s (Hahn, 2006; Sklar, 1988). Still, some of the major policy reformations of U.S. agriculture, like the New Deal, to some extent responded to demands for a more equitable future for rural communities, farmers, and laborers (Gilbert, 2015; Roman-Alcalá et al., 2018). But even after the Great Depression, this never translated on the ground to agrarian populists embracing a particular stateless or big state version of the state to solve their problems (Thompson, 2007).

Certainly, the agrarian populism of yesterday is not the same as the authoritarian populism of today. Perhaps most importantly, farmers account for only a portion of actors that shape emancipatory ends, as the group members discussed in this paper demonstrate. Only one out of every ten workers in U.S. rural economies is employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, or mining (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Consolidation of the farming sector and increased use of technologies that require fewer workers have reduced the opportunities for viable livings in agriculture (Hendrickson et al., 2001; Howard, 2009). While those farms grossing more than \$250,000 and less than \$10,000 are on the rise, those in-between are on the decline, constituting fewer in number, income, and garnering less public support (Guptill and Welsh, 2014). In 2020, inflation adjusted net cash farm income is expected to decrease by 9% relative to 2019, about 0.6% less than the 2000–18 average (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020). Yet despite these farm related declines, the rural population is increasing. Since 1976, the nonmetro population on the whole declined, but between 2016 and 2017, rural counties added population for the first time in the decade (United States Census Bureau, 2017; United States Department of Agriculture, 2018).

The broader rural dynamics shaping the current political reality have yet to fully translate into alternatives to authoritarian populism. Scholars often romanticize at least some version of agrarianism, even if they take more into account its problems (Guthman, 2004; Newby, 1983). Take for example the Organic Movement, Slow Food, La Via Campesina, and other peasant or farmer-specific revolts (Edelman and Borras, 2016; Goodman et al., 2012; Lapegna, 2016). This is not to say that agriculture does not remain crucial for emancipatory politics. Such ideas go back over a century. As Kropotkin 1913 [1972] writes, “The day Paris has understood that to know what you eat and how it is produced, is a question of public interest; the day when everybody will have understood that this question is infinitely more important than all the parliamentary debates of the present times – on that day the Revolution will be an accomplished fact” (219). Yet thinking that such emancipation is rendered by mainly farmers, farm workers, and peasants overlooks the many diverse actors involved in pragmatic politics, as this paper documents. Challenges to such hegemony may not be mainstream, nor visible from afar, because they are dispersed in accordance with those of not any one position, but of many (Gaventa, 2019).

Taking into account the diverse positions and roles that potentially can confront authoritarian populism requires a vocabulary that crosses the direct action and state divide. I use three terms – pro-state, anti-state, and stateless – to capture the mix of positions that enable pragmatic emancipatory politics (for more details, please see Ashwood, 2018b). By statelessness, I mean a vision for society free from the coercion of the state, but also acts of reciprocity, mutual aid, and communalism that can happen *within* a state ruled society. Agrarian populism adopted a stateless narrative by promoting ideas of subsistence often set against city-state interests. Yet in our efforts to detail revolutionary acts and radical movements, we often overlook the everyday practice of community aid and reciprocity that require no state to unfold (Graeber, 2015). These are the pragmatic elements of rural politics that require explicit attention, and I afford that attention in my presentation of results.

Anti-statism, then, is the stateless ideal in a defensive position, where agitations derived from coercion motivate politics *against* the current power hierarchy. This captures those who want to reduce the

state's power at any cost – often a motivator of “draining the swamp” – that then enables authoritarian candidates to come to power by offering to single-handedly reduce the scope of a bloated government. I characterize these advocates as retractors, those who immediately seek to reduce the scope of the state despite the particular costs. However, anti-statists can also include what I call reformers, those who seek a more gradual route for the reduction of state power, and in the meantime, may even advocate for more of a particular type of state. Some of those protesting industrial-scale animal production advocate for laws that better curtail the industry, while recognizing that the industry's power is derived from misplaced state power. This exemplifies an anti-statist of the reformer typology.

Last, the pro-state position captures those who explicitly advocate for state construction or regulation of life according to a plethora of issues, like the market economy or morality. In the context of a grievance like hog CAFOs, the pro-state typology includes those who believe that if the state would just enforce its existing laws, problems with industrial animal production would disappear. Crucially, though, these state ideologies – pro-state, anti-state, and statelessness – are not pure ones. Mixes of these positions can combine, but these three typologies help identify the ways in which pragmatic politics cross seemingly un navigable gulfs.

### 3. Enacting pragmatic rural politics across the divide and against the odds

RRRA and NOPE effectively conjoin a variety of state ideologies to halt the further encroachment of industrial animal production in their communities. In these cases, mixes of pro-state, anti-state, and stateless ideologies emerged in five main ways to facilitate direct action, amongst the most promising means to counter exploitation (Heynen and Van Sant, 2015). First, agricultural insiders took a stateless stance against coercive forces in favor of practicing mutual aid toward their neighbors. Second, anti-statist retractors and reformers were brought together by the identification of the corporate interests benefiting from proposed hog CAFOs. When corporations claim family farm status and this manipulation goes unrecognized, retractors can instead support CAFOs. Third, even if participants held party leadership roles, they were able to set aside their affiliations for the pragmatic purpose of stopping the construction of a CAFO. When party politics persist, they lessen the ability of group members to seek and achieve mutual aid, suggesting that emancipatory efforts centered around a particular party platform may be an ineffective counter to authoritarian populism. Fourth, while coercive forces in the state were strategically countered via statelessness and anti-statism, pro-statists identified specific elements of statutes that helped opposition work. Last, non-regulatory institutions are crucial vehicles of support, able to work across pro-state, anti-state, and stateless positions.

#### 3.1. Mutual aid: breaking of ranks by agricultural insiders

Farmers who confronted corporate agribusiness in favor of their community ties played a pivotal role in giving the broader neighborhood early notice and a legitimate voice of protest. In doing so, these farmers enacted statelessness through acts of reciprocity toward their neighbors in the spirit of mutual aid (Polanyi, 1944; Kropotkin, 1914). Even in the face of the grave cost of breaking with the corporate agribusinesses woven into their personal and business relationships, they enacted everyday communalism (Graeber, 2015).

Two insiders – one a cattle, grain, and former hog farmer; and the other a grain and former hog farmer – both learned about proposed gestation facilities in the case of RRRA and NOPE *well before* the state gave any formal notice. The RRRA farmer, David, was approached by a neighbor who offered to site Shamrock Acres LLC on his land, asking if David would accept manure from it. David became curious about the number of hogs that would be on the site, and with the help of his

family, filed the first Freedom of Information Act request with the IDOA. Once David found out the magnitude of the operation – over 18,000 head of swine – he went door-to-door in his neighborhood, explaining what the scale of Shamrock Acres LLC would entail based on his 30 years of hog farming. David also wrote the first letter to the editor in opposition to the facility that appeared in a local newspaper. With this information in hand, residents then learned about the state regulatory framework, the Livestock Management Facilities Act, which required the collection of signatures to request a public hearing. They did so, and in the meantime, became well-organized, visible, and vocal.

The second farmer, integral for NOPE, was approached by PSM to see if he would provide a site for one of their large-scale gestation units. Edward refused, recounting his experience with a PSM official:

I met with Sam, and we drove all over the place. We got back up to the place, and I said, 'you are with Professional Swine Management. You're looking for a hog facility.' He said, 'yeah, that's what I'm doing.' I said, 'well, I was told by Gene that you are looking for like a boar station. And it would be a small facility for like 250 boars. And he goes, 'yeah, that's what we're looking at. But we are also looking for some other things.' I said, 'whoah, whoah, whoah. That is why I am straight up with you, and I want you to be straight up with me. If you are talking like those places [nearby], I appreciate your honesty and I appreciate meeting with you. But, I wouldn't do that to my neighbors out here.'

But Edward kept his ear close to the ground to find out if any of his neighbors provided PSM the site it sought. Eventually he met a neighbor outside the Dollar General, who asked him casually: "What do you think of the hog farm coming in?" Edward, in a state of shock, quizzed his neighbor, found out where the proposed site was, and immediately called and visited neighbors who lived or owned land next to the proposed site. In doing so, NOPE, like RRRRA, gained months of prior notice, and learned of the opportunity to request a public hearing. NOPE connected with RRRRA members, learned from their strategies, and prevented the facility from progressing to the public hearing stage, a feat RRRRA did not achieve. NOPE gained unparalleled community and farmer support to prevent the construction of the facility, in no small part because residents like Edward already had experience living next to two PSM facilities, which although miles away, had a stench that made life outside their farmhouse difficult: "All of my life I have been around livestock," he said. "But to me, it is not a manure smell. It is a chemical smell." Edward said he could no longer sit in the yard or grill for the first few years the facility was in operation.

The breaking of ranks by insiders, though, is far from easy. Twenty of David's hay bales burned to the ground in January on snow covered ground, which he believes to be a case of arson. David and Edward faced verbal assault from other agricultural insiders in sale barns, at land sales, in the restaurant eating with family, and at community events. Some farmers stopped speaking to them. Another NOPE member and Republican, Ashley, whose family had old business ties to the community, tried unsuccessfully to stop a PSM facility that bordered her family farm before the NOPE group formed. Ashley described, as she sat with Ashwood in a restaurant, the threats she received: "They were sitting here and were soliciting people. They were asking if they would come do me harm." She explained that "they" were representatives of the Illinois hog industry. One of Ashley's daughter's childhood friends, sitting in an adjacent booth at the time, overheard the comments and called her daughter immediately. Fearful after learning about the threats, Ashley installed a security system in her house and at her elderly mother's home. She no longer walks in the woods unarmed. She said, "I thought at the time, this is sad. I'm on my own property, and I feel like I need to carry a gun on my own property." She optimistically, though, looks to the future, now that NOPE has formed and prevented the construction of other facilities.

When agricultural insiders do not oppose industrial-scale projects, their neighbors face what seems to be an insurmountable barrier: the powerful rhetoric that they are anti-agriculture, anti-farm families, or anti the local economy. Even when their families are longstanding

members of the community, as in Ashley's case, rural residents often fail to penetrate the ideological vice of industrial agriculture that frames such production as mutual aid via economic development and local ties. Melissa, whose parents formerly farmed and now works a white collar job, said after having learned just weeks before our interview that the facility's application was approved by the IDOA, that "What's upsetting is I found out tons of people knew about it even last fall and never said a word." The siting of an industrial hog facility has yet to be prevented in Melissa's county, at least a facility that is publicly protested – even though the Attorney General filed pollution lawsuits against corporate hog operators in the county, and neighbors filed a nuisance lawsuit. A dense network intertwines political elites, major agricultural operators, old family blood, and business interests in the county. Melissa sees the situation starkly: "Farming has turned into only people that were handed everything."

Still reeling after her group's defeat, Melissa attended a meeting hosted by another group fighting a hog facility, where they discussed what had happened to her. Jeremiah, although not a farmer, spoke mainly to Ellen, finding it hard to condemn the facility Melissa was protesting because he knew the family constructing the buildings. He saw them as part of mutual aid, rather than extraction.

Jeremiah: One thing you've got there is a person who has just entered the construction business. He is very well known, and he is very well liked, he is a very nice person. And this is Richard Jones. And he laid out his livelihood to buy this equipment. And you're not going to find a lot of resistance because a lot of people there don't want to go against him. Nobody wants to see him go broke. I do not want to see him go broke. They are going to support him. I would say that is why there is not a lot of push back in [town]. And everybody sits around and says, 'there is not a lot you can do about it.'

Ellen: I know you have heard that quite a few times.  
Melissa: Yeah, and that's why they say they cannot do anything.  
Jeremiah: I know your road commissioner. And Richard and him worked together, Richard worked for his dad when he was in the spray business. They are all close friends. And I am just saying.  
Ellen: It is neighbor against neighbor.

Melissa: And that's the problem. They are letting them do construction on the roads for free. And they are fine with that. So it's like, 'okay, does he have insurance for that? Liability protection?' There was someone who could not even get to their property because he had just slung mud all over at the end of their lane.

Jeremiah: The Company has taken over. From my understanding, the road commissioner has given them permission to take over that part of the road, it's kind of a dead end land. They made some kind of agreement, as I understand it ...

Melissa: [She interrupted Jeremiah, saying] There is no agreement. It is just verbal. [She laughed with irony.] They are just letting him do it.

Another group member spoke up and redirected the discussion to praise Melissa's tremendous organizing skills. The member explained later that she sought to prevent the conversation from shutting down Melissa. When debate about hog facilities settle on local benefits and ties – however negligible, and regardless of the expense born by the dozens, even hundreds of dwellers around a facility – the benefits of a privileged few can eclipse the costs of the many.

Farmers hold unrivaled ideological power over their communities, enabled in part by the support of corporate agribusinesses. When farmers diverge from the prevailing power apparatus, the severing of social ties can be a shock, but offset by the forging of new ties that cultivate reciprocity. Those involved in NOPE or RRRRA interviewed for this piece said that their neighbors grew markedly closer thanks to their activities. A husband and wife farming duo explained the situation as follows:

Bob: Right now this community is a lot more banded together, and, know one another, and are together on something, than what they have been in I would say 25, 30 years. Your rural communities, they're becoming more diverse and people moving to the country. It's not farm ...

Nancy: Farmers, it's not all farmers anymore.

Bob: You get away from the tightness of the small little community because everybody's doing their own thing. But this is really, it's pulled a little community together. I mean, I know people now in the community that I had no idea who they were, you know.

### 3.2. Clarity of corporate involvement

Pinpointing corporate structure and support of CAFOs play a crucial role in preventing their construction. Despite the corporate networks that inform their livelihoods, agricultural insiders find the space to favor reciprocity toward their neighbors and communities, rather than agribusiness. If corporate power goes unidentified, and stays unnamed rather than named, CAFO operators and proponents proclaim with little contestation the economic benefits of the hog industry.

Yet pinpointing corporate relationships at the local level is extremely difficult, primarily because the major companies involved in industrial animal production utilize constellations of corporations with anything but clear identities (Ashwood et al., 2014). Farmers involved with RRRRA pierced communicatively, but not legally, the corporate veil by talking at local coffee shops, roadside chats, and meeting with other neighbors at a nearby park. They traced feed deliveries to particular companies, as well as veterinary services. Additionally, pro-statism had a role to play. Jennifer, a retired legal aide, went to the Schuyler County courthouse and retrieved litigation information on PSM, while a former confinement worker shared his insights at a group meeting. They found out that the innocuous sounding Shamrock Acres LLC was an offshoot of PSM facilities charged by the Illinois Attorney General with a litany of pollution violations, including a “nauseating odor” leaking from a pile of dead hogs; purple colored liquid from another composting site; and at a different facility, a lake smelling of livestock waste (Ashwood et al., 2014). RRRRA shared such information via interviews with media outlets, letters to the editor, and personal phone calls to political representatives. The group requested that the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) release site construction plans that pertained to Shamrock Acres LLC, a proposed hog facility that was not clearly tied to any corporate entity. The documents they received after a Freedom of Information request lacked facility blueprints, which the IDOA refused to release. An RRRRA group member sued and won, forcing the IDOA in the future to release such documents. NOPE benefited by later having default access to blueprints [see Fig. 1].

By linking pollution to identity, PSM became known as a corporate group composed largely of investors, rather than family farmers. A top google hit pertaining to PSM was an RRRRA member's letter-to-the editor saying as much. PSM's biggest growth sector was in gestating or sow facilities – large scale investment units that pool together capital for building and operations. Between 2015 and 2016, PSM's number of sows grew by 17% (Freese, 2016). Years later, the *Chicago Tribune* covered the firm's history of pollution and animal abuse (Jackson, 2016). Shamrock Acres LLC eventually withdrew its application to construct in 2013, and three years later, NOPE utilized RRRRA's strategies and documents to mount their own resistance. RRRRA's connection of Shamrock Acres to a larger, corporate management group momentarily combined retractor and reformer anti-statism. Those who wanted less of the state (retractors) could combine with those who wanted more of a different kind of state (reformers) to together work to stop the construction of the facility. The pro-statist's skill at diligently and structurally using legal knowledge to make the identification of corporate affiliations possible then conjoined with anti-statists to promote action and change.

When corporate involvement goes unrealized, though, the capacity

for the anti-state retractor and reformer to join together falters. Jennifer was unable to stop subsequent hog confinements next to her home, particularly because they purported to be family farm operations, an identity of particular appeal to retractors.

There's a much smaller one that's sited near our farm now, and they got that in through a loophole in the law. They put two hog confinements right next to each other and claimed they belong to different owners. And as soon as they were built they built a walkway between them and they were taken over by a family corporation. So they were able to skirt the manure plan requirement and the public information hearing requirement. I mean they claimed uncommon ownership, when in fact it was all owned by the same family. So we've got problems now. I'm not sure I can live much longer in the country because of the dust and the hog confinements.

While the ‘family’ understanding of the operation prevailed at first, RRRRA members later discovered that the facilities were tied to TriOak, a corporation that has yet to receive the sort of sustained scrutiny as PSM. Known farm families, which typically have grain operations and little experience with hogs, build TriOak facilities that by contract use their grain, according to one interviewee, or buy grain from other farmers uninvolved with hog production at Bushnell, Illinois (TriOaks Foods, 2018a). TriOak typically hires the laborers, which includes titles such as “Individual Pig Care Field Person” and “Swine Technical – Farrowing/Breeding” (TriOak Foods, 2018b).

Local elites have been able to keep their names mostly unattached to TriOak, as in the case of the facility next to Jennifer's home, by building multiple, smaller facilities that skirt limited regulatory requirements, and claiming family farm status. A farmer (who was vehemently opposed to protest against PSM earlier) and an active member of the Republican Party, later called TriOak a “good neighbor” and PSM “a bad neighbor” – signaling that even local elites and supporters of industrial agriculture had turned against PSM in McDonough County thanks to RRRRA's painstaking work. But not TriOak. The company's uncontested claim as a family farm especially appeals to anti-statist retractors, and those of a stateless inclination –most classically agrarianists (Sklar, 1988). In contrast, identifying corporate hierarchy and absentee profit conjoins anti-state, pro-state, and stateless position to stop exploitation.

### 3.3. Pragmatic Politics without parties

Leaving one's party politics at the door, but not a political commitment to rural prosperity, is a crucial element of rural direct action. Win-or-lose party politics collapse the capacity for rural communities to engage in the diverse activities necessary to launch a successful organizing effort (Graeber, 2013). Community driven rural protest absorbs elements of statelessness by focusing on community good; but when party politics infiltrate protest against corporate agriculture production, they can splinter the stateless ideal between anti-state retractors and reformers. Erin, a key organizer with Illinois Citizens for Clean Air and Water (ICCAW), explained that before a CAFO was sited nearby her family's farm, that she did not consider herself a “political person.” She was neither a Republican nor a Democrat. Today, she finds herself aligned with Democrats because she sees them as more likely to represent her groups' platform on a broader political stage. Still, she said, “It's all money” at the nearby capital of Springfield. Illinois typically is controlled by Democrats in the state legislature – in large part due to Chicago – yet Erin said that the state has the laxest regulations on industrial animal facilities in the country. Party affiliations often matter little. She described the ideal combination of people for stopping CAFOs: “So if you had a recipe, I would say non-farmers and farmers, young and old, people with children, people without, no matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican or neither.”

Bending toward a stateless position comes with the recognition that there are broader forces at work, primarily corporate accumulation of profit and the dispossession of many. Jake, a grain farmer and NOPE

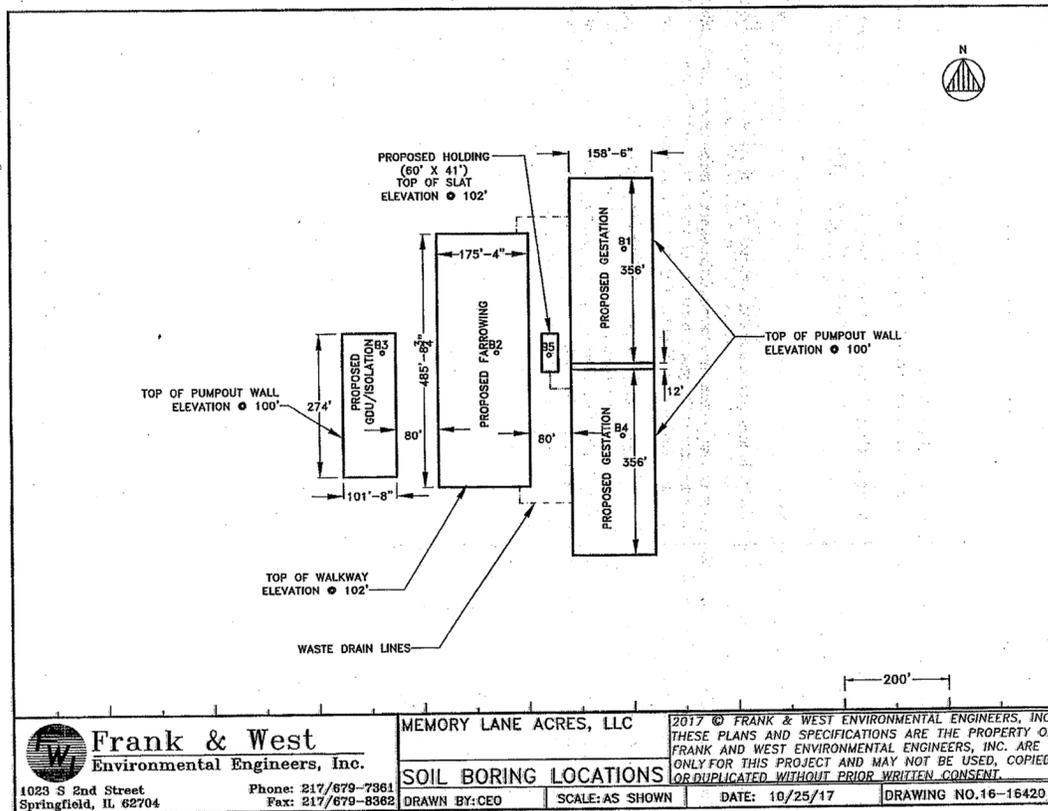


Fig. 1. Swine facility blueprints like those of Memory Lane Acres LLC became publicly accessible after a RRRRA group member took the Illinois Department of Agriculture to court and won, forcing the agency to release the documents.

member, explained how party-lines mean little in the context of stopping corporate agribusiness:

Ashwood: And with the hogs, does it make a difference? Do you feel like if the representatives you talked to were Democrat or Republican, did that make a difference?

Jake: No, I think what made a difference between Republican and Democrat concerning the hog situation is if Farm Bureau was in their back pocket. I don't think it made any difference if you were Democrat or Republican.

This shared recognition of money as the culprit enabled direct action, even during the contentious time of the 2016 Presidential election, in which NOPE became most active. Sophia, for example, is known as one of the staunchest Republicans in her group, and before her activism, had limited experience with agriculture. While she supported Trump as a candidate, by the time I interviewed her in fall 2017, she found herself disenchanted with both parties. She said:

Sophia: I think around here, I think it's more Democrat, but I'm Republican. So, you know, we all get our little, you know, we'll mention something, or ... but we don't get like at each other's throats over anything.

Ashwood: Has [the hog CAFO] changed your opinion of Republicans or Democrats?

Sophia: Uh, they're all the same, pretty much. There's a few good ones on both sides.

Ashwood: And is that what you thought before or ...

Sophia: Uh, no. I really thought, you know, I mean, even the

election, the Trump election, I really thought that the Republicans were out to help people. But then, you know, they're all in it for the money and the power.

Recognition of the power and money driving party politics provided a central means to "avoid cooptation" by the coercive state and its agribusiness support by finding "gaps through which" NOPE could exist through fragmentation of power (Zibechi, 2010: 89). This dispersion of action and agenda transcended the party line – although not completely obliterating parties, which ideologically continued to live on in "the bosom of the community" (90).

Party-lines remained a reoccurring barrier to cohesion, action, and eventually change. Bob, a Democrat and NOPE member, explained: "That's the one thing I've learned. As soon as you walk through that door, you leave your politics outside the door. We had one guy. He's diehard Republican, super nice guy, but he would always want to bring it up in the middle of a meeting, and I said, 'Jeremy, leave that shit outside the door.'" And Jeremy did end up "leaving that shit" outside the door. But Bob lamented that sometimes another group member, who he called of the "diehard Republican Tea Party," would tell him, "Well, you're one of the good Democrats," suggesting that Democratic party alignment typically was synonymous with bad people. Members of RRRRA and NOPE structurally had prior involvement with different parties, making for a powerful network that crossed lines, and thus potential pro-state and anti-state conflict. As such, they could be stateless while at the same time anti-state, pushing their reforming and retracting visions for change through their activities elsewhere. Still, national politics that butted up against communal ties was hard to fully escape. A key early organizer, James, tired of the retractor Republican

politics that he saw Trump as enabling, simply quit. “I just dropped off the board a couple of weeks ago because probably on our board three-fourths is Republicans. And they think Trump is the second coming of Christ. And I am like, ‘I don’t even want to associate with you guys anymore.’” The immediacy of pragmatic rural politics, mixing pro-state and stateless elements, can thus regularly be undermined by the daunting structural constraints regularly imposed by electoralism.

### 3.4. Skirting and utilizing hierarchy

RRRA and NOPE straddle a combination of anti-statist disregard for a corrupt government with spurious laws, and painstaking pro-state adherence to the law in an effort to stop hog facilities. Some group members embraced the state’s ordering, which Ward (1973) understands as antithetical to direct action. Ward (1973) defines the law as, “the expressed will of the state,” with most crimes coming from property, and the role of the police being the maintenance of law, and often enough hierarchy (127). Taking such an in-or-out approach to the law, though, misses the reciprocity necessary for pragmatic work that effectively affronts legal coercion. It potentially excludes people of a pro-state orientation who are crucial for direct action efforts and go about it in a way that engages the state. Take, for example, NOPE member Jane, a teacher who traveled to Springfield to try to meet with representatives, thought that if the existing laws were actually enforced, the hog CAFOs would not be a problem:

When citizens can show that the siting criteria is not met, the department of ag needs to go by what the law says. I know the people I have talked to, they’re like, ‘you’re not going to change minds or anything.’ But it comes down to, we have to follow the laws.

Ashley, like Jane, thought the best method for reform was enforcement of existing standards:

I want the rules to be adhered too. That’s totally all I want. They have a set of rules, adhere to them. Stop, stop skating around them, stop pretending they don’t exist, they’re there for a reason, and I know ICCAW thinks they are not working but, and it may be because I’m not into this enough to understand all of it. It’s very possible.

Jennifer thought much the same:

The thing that I found most important for my own actions was to learn what the law said. We used the law to fight the citing of Shamrock Acres, and we were successful at it. And Memory Lane Acres is using some of the same methods we used. We found a loophole in the law, to be quite honest, that allowed us to come up with a defense that they couldn’t get around.

While the painstaking legal work done by Jane, Jennifer, Ashley and others can prove vital in stopping hog facilities, it also runs the risk of stalling purposeful community organizing by treating existing laws as sufficient. It also assumes the legitimacy of such facilities in the first place, in the event they adhered to criteria. The broader problems of the industrial food system, and the role that state policies play in forcing smaller farmers out of business to the detriment of rural communities, can become lost in legal trivialities. RRRA’s success afforded NOPE cautious optimism, perhaps lending to their more predominant understanding of the law as legitimate. For those hundreds, perhaps even thousands of hog facilities that have been approved (the specific number is not fully known, as the IDOA or Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) do not provide a publicly available list), and those many thousands more who live beside them, existing laws are insufficient.

Before RRRA stopped Shamrock Acres LLC, members shared rumors about attempts to infect confinement herds with diseases, release hogs into the wild from their cages, and questioned whether the burning-to-death of thousands of hogs in neighboring Schuyler County at a PSM facility may have been orchestrated. Such ponderings were not out of

scope, as RRRA faced a political climate where never before had an industrial hog facility been stopped in the state through public organizing. While not condoned by the group, these discussions marked a different aim or end – one rendered against a state that took no notice of the concerns of those most burdened, and forced to sacrifice for the benefit of largely urban and increasingly international consumers. Only those who identified as men engaged in such conversations, particularly farmers and workers who knew hog production well. Those who identify as men can also, as this paper has presented, use legal means for reform. But when the odds of success through legal means appears low, the appeal of rebellion heightens. This parallels other documented acts of rebellion or resistance in the rural context for men, like poaching, against all powerful corporate-state alliances (Ashwood, 2018a). Pragmatic rural politics come through interplay, while revolts and rebellion unfold in conditions where coercion and hierarchy are acute, and few effective alternatives possible.

### 3.5. Expert, but not regulatory, aid

Non-profit and higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to facilitate pragmatic rural politics, especially when regulatory agencies and elected officials are mostly hierarchical and disconnected. The startling imposition of a CAFO, and the dramatic rush to try to stop it, was, in Jake’s words, “very chaotic.” In the height of the protest, Jake set aside any farm work he could and devoted his time exclusively to the cause: “Because I mean, the pressure was on. We didn’t know what we was doing, and so we had to learn very, very fast.” Communities seek accessible information that helps them understand the effects of such operations, but which is largely unavailable from regulatory agencies. The IEPA was unresponsive to RRRA’s and NOPE’s concerns, at one meeting informing an RRRA member that she should, “Change the law if you have a problem with it.” The IDOA explicitly emphasized the animal industry as a tool of economic development. While land-grant universities play a sizable role in the support and development of CAFOs, this support is none-the-less contested from within and between institutions. At NOPE’s request, the John Hopkins School of Health’s Center for a Livable Future sent a letter to their County Board and the IDOA summarizing the major impacts of industrial production on the spread of pathogens in surrounding communities; contamination of ground and surface water; and release of air pollutants and odors. Institutions of higher education proved crucial in face of daunting opponents, who claimed in an RRRA member’s words that, “poop doesn’t smell.” Steve Wing, a University of North Carolina epidemiologist who did groundbreaking research on CAFO exposures and community health, personally shared papers via email with RRRA. RRRA in 2012 attained free legal representation from the Washington University Environmental Law Clinic. In the event that the IDOA approved the Shamrock Acres LLC permit, the Environmental Law Clinic was prepared to sue the agency for not upholding the Livestock Management Facility Act. Further, the university at the time had an Intellectual Property and Nonprofit Organizations Law Clinic, which helped RRRA handle donations, fundraising, and expenses.

The formal organization of resistance efforts can sometimes signal their end, and in RRRA’s case, formal incorporation came after the bulk of the organizing was done. Critics argue that incorporation signifies a moment of separation of the movement as a whole from the bodies of its leaders (Zibechi, 2010). Yet without access to mediating institutions, the movements documented in this paper arguably would have faltered. This further exemplifies the power in joining together pro-state, stateless, and anti-state positions.

ICCAW came in at key moments of crisis when community members found themselves overwhelmed. Jake said that,

“Emily’s been a big help,” referring to an ICCAW representative, and Melissa put it more poignantly:

It’s so funny, I was just like a moth to a flame. Everybody was

unorganized and here comes Emily, and Emily is so, she is just like a tornado, you know? [she laughed]. And she just sucks everything in. You just gravitate toward her, because I could tell she was a lady that knew, and I went straight to her.

Emily warned groups when otherwise unknown deadlines were approaching in the current regulatory apparatus. ICCAW is the only group working explicitly to challenge existing livestock regulations in the state, while simultaneously guiding communities in a regulatory framework that works against them. Unfortunately, rural communities on the aggregate receive fewer dollars from non-governmental non-profits respective to their percent of the population, meaning that there is a shortage of groups like ICCAW regardless of the issue (Pender, 2015).

#### 4. Conclusion

The lived experiences and change-based strategies of those most aggrieved provide important insights into emancipatory rural politics. Authoritarian populist candidates derive power in the action void where rural discontent lies. Sparking change in such contexts requires innovative collaborations that counter the idea that elections through the state are the only means for change. When the state appears the only option for reform, stateless possibilities based on ideals of mutuality and reciprocity become particularly susceptible to authoritarian populism as retractor anti-statism. Preventing this end in favor of pragmatic rural politics calls for a space where people with pro-state, stateless, and anti-state ideologies can come together, but not become further divided in accordance to party-line aims, which instead seek to change values or votes.

An enabling mix of state ideologies provides for emancipatory alternatives in face of further extraction. Insiders (in this case farmers) chose mutual aid in favor of their neighbors, an affront to the coercive demands of corporate agribusiness. This is the living of statelessness, where empathy prevails over profit. These farmers were able to find the space to counter coercive power via their own knowledge of hog production and the extractive, corporate affiliations of what was proposed. Simultaneously, the broader group efforts required two structural dimensions revelatory for emancipatory efforts more broadly: access to a wide variety of institutions that do research and provide support (namely ICCAW and universities); as well as open access to corporate and court documents. Local dispersion of power and action folded into organizations much less predicated on hierarchy, a crucial element of anti-statism (Zibechi, 2010). With this support, those of pro-state, anti-state, and stateless positions could combine for direct action. Hearings were held, documents retrieved, and lawsuits filed. Regulatory agencies were critiqued and pushed back against. Embracing, or at least understanding, anti-governmental perspectives in light of regulatory apparatuses that explicitly dispossess rural people equips groups with a powerful diversity of ideologies, and relative toolkits to address the most surprising of challenges that may arise. Unfortunately, the tendency for the law to move toward for-profit corporate protection, and away from freedom of information, bodes poorly for pragmatic, rural action in the U.S. and elsewhere. The centralization, rather than dispersion of knowledge and research, provides an opening for authoritarian populism and a stifling of direct action.

The primary lesson of this case-study is that pragmatic action can be taken together across different state ideologies and even with the help of existing institutions. Some of the participants may in other parts of their lives still identify as Republicans or Democrats, while simultaneously learning the capacity to set aside those differences for mutual aid. An enabler of authoritarian populism may come in only pursuing solutions that advocate grand parties and leaders through party-line platforms and coercive states. To take mutual aid literally means face-to-face interaction with what has been framed as impenetrable difference, building a politics of empathy and hospitality that empowers the

many, and in doing so, modestly presents an alternative to coercion. It is in through these smallest, yet largest, of endeavors that pragmatic rural politics can be found thriving and leading toward an emancipatory future.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Loka Ashwood:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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