



Divergent approaches to the ‘family farm’: celebrate, reform, or abolish?

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Accepted: 5 August 2024

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Abstract

As the United Nations declared the beginning of the “Decade of Family Farming” in 2017, scholars were increasingly questioning the romanticized and uncritical use of the term to mask some structural inequalities, including patriarchal ownership, colonialism, heteronormativity, family and child labor exploitation, poor labor standards, and environmental destruction. This introduction to a special symposium on the family farm differentiates scholarly approaches to studying family farming into three categories: celebratory, reformist, and abolitionist. After summarizing the papers included in this special issue, this introduction contends that it may be time to move beyond biological and marital relations when analyzing the most effective ways to solve social and environmental problems related to agricultural production.

Keywords Family farms · International agricultural development · Agrarianism

Abbreviations

CAFO	Concentrated animal feeding operation
CSA	Community supported agriculture
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
RTF	Right to Farm
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNFFF	United Nations Decade of Family Farming
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

(2019–2018)” to champion the roles of small family farmers in achieving sustainable rural development. Defined as “a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family, and is predominantly reliant on the family labour of both women and men (9),” the UN promotes family farming as a leverage point for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (FAO and IFAD 2019).

At the same time, the label family farm has encountered rising critical engagement from across the social sciences. A growing body of scholarship argues that, as a discursive formation, the family farm (1) de-politicizes the forms of dispossession, environmental degradation, and accumulation of wealth arising from settler colonialism and agricultural industrialization; (2) makes invisible the dependence on exploited transnational labor for family-run farms; (3) provides a romanticized impression of small-scale operations when, in reality, a small number of large and highly-capitalized family-owned farms account for a substantial portion of the value of agricultural production; and (4) alienates non-heteronormative ways of agrarian life. In the context of these competing discourses, and in light of the global attention called to family farming by the UN at the current juncture, we convened this special symposium to invite reflection on the meanings and maladies of the family farm. The authors in this symposium collectively ask: What are the diverse forms, contexts, and purposes of families who farm together? What meanings are invoked by different actors

Introduction

This special symposium identifies and questions the multiple and divergent uses of the “family farm” terminology and associated agricultural development models at a critical juncture in agri-food systems change. In 2017, the United Nations (UN) launched the “Decade of Family Farming

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using and celebrating the terminology of the family farm? Who benefits and who is harmed by rhetoric, policy, and advocacy for family farms?

In the remainder of this introductory essay, we provide a framework for categorizing and interpreting scholarly contributions to analyzing the family farm. From our view, these contributions have been made from three main perspectives, even though the work we describe has overlapping and blurred boundaries. We refer to these three approaches as celebratory, reformist, and abolitionist. The celebratory approach refers to discourses such as those promoted by the UN Decade of Family Farming that at their core equate family farming with sustainable development – as both a means for, and an end to, its achievement. The reformist approach offers a gentle critique of the explicit promotion of patriarchal, heteronormative family structures through the family farm discourse, highlighting the multiple forms of families who farm and the diversity of scale and strategies for sustaining their agrarian livelihoods. Finally, the abolitionist approach—which informs much recent work, especially in this special symposium—seeks to expose the family farm discourse as an anti-politics machine that obscures and perpetuates the ongoing modernization and inequity of agricultural systems. In the following section, we describe each of these views.

Analytical approaches to the family farm

We begin with a seemingly simple question: What is the use of the term family farm/farm family? Inspired by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed’s book *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use*, for this symposium, we take the words *family farm/farm family* and ask what these words do for farmers, laborers, communities, and the environment. Understanding the use of something requires “following around” words and asking, “where they go, how they acquire association, and in what or with whom they are found” (Ahmed 2019: p. 3). Understanding the uses of the family farm/farm family thus requires knowing who applies this descriptor to units of agricultural production and to what end.

Celebratory approach: promoting the ‘family farm’ for sustainable development

We start with the depiction of family farming by the international development sector and other proponents who have celebrated family farmers as essential actors in the 2030 global Sustainable Development Agenda. In this use, the family farm is touted as a crucial actor (even panacea) for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Here, the family farm terminology functions as a way to

rally diverse groups in the development community around a shared and seemingly non-controversial set of actions and proposals toward global development.

In 2014, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declared the International Year of Family Farming, celebrating how “family farmers” are active in “feeding the world” and “conserving the earth” (FAO 2014). Following this effort by FAO, and in the wake of the launch of the 2030 SDGs, the UN declared 2019–2028 “The Decade of Family Farming (UNDFP)” (FAO and IFAD 2019). More than 50 National Committees on Family Farming have been created to advance dialogue and political commitment to the promotion of family farms (FAO and IFAD 2019). In the Global Action Plan for the UNDFP, family farming is portrayed as a kind of magic bullet for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Family farmers are said to play not only indispensable roles in meeting environmental objectives of biodiversity protection and climate resilience but also in socio-economic aims of generating income, community well-being, gender equality, and cultural preservation. In fact, a diagram in the first pages of the “Action Plan” illustrates family farming and/or family farmers as positively connected to each one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (FAO and IFAD 2019: p. 11), an approach that instrumentalizes family farmers in the 2030 Global Sustainable Development Agenda and thus contributes to the typification of family farms as the ideal agricultural production model.

Prominent examples of this celebratory perspective include fair-trade and some food sovereignty advocates on one side and peasant-modernization advocates on the other side. Both sets of advocates start with an essentialized notion of farmers. Holt-Giménez (2010: p. 2), for example, takes as a given that small farmers around the world are marginalized groups struggling to survive and that those advocating for food justice and food sovereignty are seeking either to reform the market economy to get more income and resources to small farmers or to more radically transform the agriculture and food system to better “serve people of color, smallholders, and low-income communities while striving for sustainable and healthy environments.” By contrast, modernization advocates contend that getting smallholder farmers improved agricultural seeds and machinery can help them to better sustain their families (Schurman 2018). In an analysis of a debate over the introduction of genetically engineered cotton in Burkina Faso, Luna (2019) shows how these two sides of the debate can be characterized as essentializing family farmers—one romanticizing and the other seeking to modernize the peasant. Luna (2019) argues that both sets of advocates overlook the complexities and inequalities of farming households and communities.

Reformist approach: highlighting the diversity of families in sustainable agriculture

The reformist perspective positions family farms in opposition to corporate, large-scale, industrial farms. In the international development sphere, the UNDF uses this technique by using broad terminology surrounding family farmers, such as indigenous, pastoral, and traditional. In the U.S. and European contexts, local, small-scale, and sustainable contrast corporate agriculture and are often shorthand for family farms and vice versa. This juxtaposition of family farms and corporate farms has been cemented in popular writings and academic research over many decades. Writers like Wendell Berry (1977) often conflated the family with local, sustainable, wholesome, and small-scale food production. More recently, in *Empty Fields, Empty Promises* (2023), scholars critique Right-to-Farm (RTF) laws as supporting Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), arguing that “RTF laws have moved away from the family farms they often purport to protect” (Ashwood et al. 2023: p. 4). However, family farms and CAFOs are not mutually exclusive. In this case, perhaps the very characteristics of the unit being supported have shifted so dramatically over the past century that some reformists fail to recognize the incongruence of using a unit of production defined by marriage and biological relations as an indicator of production practices.

Reformists argue that to persist, these family farms need greater support through policy, like improved RTF laws, and programming. For example, Agriculture of the Middle scholars argue that this type of operation—that is, farms that are not well fit for direct markets nor global commodity chains—are declining as the agrifood system bifurcates into small and large-scale farms most appropriate for direct and global production, respectively (Kirschenmann et al. 2008). One approach to increasing the viability of Agriculture of the Middle farms is through improved markets that acknowledge the value of socio-ecological outputs called Values-Based Supply Chains (VBSC) (Kirschenmann et al. 2008; Feenstra and Hardisty 2016). Kirschenmann et al. (2008: p. 6) argue that the Agriculture of the Middle is not about “saving family farms” but rather protecting the future stability of the agrifood system. However, without any discernment between family and this type of production, family farms are again purposed as the potential saviors of the ills of contemporary agricultural production. Agriculture of the Middle epitomizes the reformist approach: Family farms are being threatened, and policy and research should identify more effective ways to support this unit of production, which

will result in improved environmental sustainability, rural livelihoods, and other socio-ecological outcomes.

In addition to market-based barriers, reformist scholarship has also illuminated the lived realities of family-based agricultural production and how these farms often rely on various forms of self-exploitation. Scholars have emphasized hardships associated with the family farm, such as off-farm employment, lack of healthcare and childcare, and farmer mental health issues (Inwood et al. 2019; Becot and Inwood 2024; Lorenz et al. 2000). In terms of childcare, although the family farm discourse connotes pictures and rhetoric of happy, wholesome children, there is little support for farms in accessing childcare (Becot et al. 2022). Instead, farmers are forced to make changes to business production and off-farm work to accommodate extreme deficiencies in meeting their childcare needs (Becot and Inwood 2024). By contrasting the romanticization of family farms with the often harsh lived experiences of farmers, this body of research illuminates the flaws of the celebratory approach. Yet, despite these barriers to viability and well-being, reformists often do not disregard the family farm as a model worth promoting. In a reformist fashion, this approach offers ways to fix and improve upon the existing agrifood system to better enable family farms to exist without questioning the effects of upholding the family farm discourse.

Abolitionist: the family farm as anti-politics machine

Historicizing the 'family farm'

We now turn to a tradition of critical theorizing that has radically engaged with the origins, intentions, and political-economic effects of the family farm label. Many involved in the abolitionist approach reject the terminology of the family farm and the assumption that this unit of production will offer sufficient interventions to the industrialized agrifood system. We begin this subsection with the scholarship that provides a historical overview of the development of the family farm as an officially recognized unit of production in the U.S. context, then share contemporary scholarly perspectives on its uses as a kind of anti-politics machine (Ferguson 1990) that de-politicizes support for patriarchal and industrialized agricultural production. This research demonstrates that the family farm is not a naturally occurring phenomenon (Leslie et al. 2019). Rather, this scholarship suggests that the family farm is a concept carefully crafted for different ideological ends.

The family farm/farm family originated in the context of the individual farmer. Developed most prominently through Jeffersonian Agrarianism and Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century, the farmer was conceptualized through the

yeoman myth of heroic individuals participating in westward expansion through the dispossession of land from indigenous communities (Calo 2020). This agrarian political philosophy rationalized chattel slavery for white landowners who were deemed morally superior (Thompson 2000).

According to Rosenberg (2016), by the early twentieth century, new uses for the family farmer emerged. In *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America*, Rosenberg (2016) details the uniquely US-specific emergence of the family farm rhetoric, gendered division of labor, and ideals of “agrarian futurism.” Rosenberg (2016) articulates “agrarian futurism” as the “ideology linking the governance of human social and biological reproduction to the practice, theory, and language of agriculture” (12). Crucially, agrarian futurism articulates the connection of agricultural production (crops and livestock) with cultural production (sexuality and gender norms). This ideology solidified the family farm as an ideal approach to agricultural production, inseparable from white heteronuclear reproduction.

Led by agricultural progressives at the time, the state, marketers, and financial institutions sought to integrate agriculture with urban order by designing programs to educate and encourage debt-financed mechanization and expansion (Rosenberg 2016). Discouraged by rural patriarchy's opposition to external professionals, agricultural progressives needed new pathways to enter the farm (and, by extension, the home) to open opportunities to turn agriculture into a capitalist endeavor. Youth, through 4-H clubs, were successfully enrolled in this mission to embed gender and sexual norms into the future of agriculture, thereby establishing the white, heteronuclear family farm recognizable today. Rosenberg (2016) argues that the family farm's rise in this historical and geographic context makes an explicit connection between mechanized, input-intensive agriculture and rigid masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality.

By the 1930s, from an agricultural progressive's viewpoint, the family farm had done what it was designed to do: integrate farms into global markets through debt-financed, mechanized production (Rosenberg 2016). This shift in family farms was reflected in efforts to redefine the unit. Effland (2021) describes how a group of academics and policymakers met at the University of Chicago in 1946 to update the definition of the family farm to better reflect reality. As Gilbert (2021) points out, technologies and inputs were becoming more common, and farm size was increasing as farm numbers were declining. Therefore, the assembled interests dropped “small” from the common phrase in USDA policies “small family farm.” The problem from their perspective was that some of the smaller farms in the U.S. were too marginal to be viable, and some of the largest farms employed wage laborers. They eventually decided to define the family farm as an entity that was large enough to employ and support family members but not so big that they needed

to hire laborers for the entire year (Effland 2021). The goal of this effort to redefine the family farm, along with many other such efforts, has often been to make farms at different stages of national development conform to the Jeffersonian ideal (Gilbert 2021).

Further, Rosenberg (2016) documents the global expansion of the youth agricultural program 4-H during the Cold War to countries like Japan, Brazil, and Vietnam. The family farm through the accompanying 4-H program model was exported in order to encourage acceptance among foreign societies of modernized agricultural technologies (e.g. high yielding, intensive-input rice) and Western technocratic expertise. Such investment in the family farm model was inherently political, as this model was used to aid counter and anti-insurgency efforts, particularly communism. The guiding ideology at the time was that no matter the economic state, a happy, healthy home—defined by a heteronuclear structure with distinct gender norms and application of modernized agriculture—could stabilize and pacify rural populations around the world. This exportation discouraged other forms of household structures like polygamy and sought to solidify the field as men's domain and the home as women's. As this historical review details, the family farm served specific interests, particularly U.S.-based interests surrounding strict gender and sexual norms, reproduction of land-owning white populations, and global acceptance of agricultural modernization and U.S. hegemony.

Family farms and contemporary agri-food capitalism

Building on the historical roots of the family farm, those in favor of abolishing the ideal and terminology of the family farm take issue with a number of the contemporary aspects of this unit of production, including the inability to undermine capitalist production, exploitation of wage workers, and contradictions with gender equity goals. For example, the agrarian transition in the U.S. raises questions about why the family farm would continue to be promoted as one of the most prominent solutions to rural livelihoods and agroecological issues. As described by Lobao and Meyer (2001), the agrarian transition is reflected by not only a decrease in the number of farms but also that today, most farms have become “marginal production units that cannot fully employ or sustain families” (109). The ability of household production to undermine capitalist production was limited to a certain local and geographic timeframe facilitated by favorable socio-political circumstances, including colonization (Friedmann 1978).

Similarly, scholars highlight how family farms share characteristics with capitalist production. In the United States, despite widespread changes in agricultural production over the last century, approximately 97 percent of farms in the

U.S. are categorized as “family farms” (Whitt et al. 2023). How, then, could an official classification system offer a definition of a particular type of socio-economic unit that captures almost every single instance of that unit? By the USDA definition, this means the majority of the business is owned by an operator and individuals related to the operator through blood, marriage, or adoption (Whitt et al. 2023). Yet, in the U.S., family farms vary dramatically in economic scale, commodity production, and environmental conservation, undermining the analytical purchase of this term. The USDA categorizes family farms by Gross Farm Cash Income (GCFI), which is a measure of farm revenue. GCFI categories include the following: small-scale farms less than \$350,000, midsize farms \$350,000-\$999,999, and large farms \$1 million or more. Although small-scale family farms represent 88 percent of farms in the US, large-scale farms represent 52 percent of the value of production (Whitt et al. 2023). Over the past decade, large-scale farms have increased in terms of their number, size of land area operated, and value of production, while small and midsize farms have declined in all three areas (Whitt et al. 2021). Similarly, the operating profit margin, which indicates the share of gross income that is profit, offers a way to measure farms' financial performance. Based on operating profit margin, small-scale family farms have higher financial risk, whereas midsize and large family farms have lower financial risk (Whitt et al. 2023). As this data indicates, not all family farms are the same, and large farms have done relatively well in recent years.

A growing literature documents how family farms increasingly share a dependence on exploited waged labor under the pressures of agricultural concentration and consolidation. Harrison and Getz (2015) compared job quality in the California organic fruit and vegetable and Wisconsin dairy industries and found that larger farms “fared better than or no worse” than the smaller farms for most of their metrics, which included multiple aspects of compensation, scheduling, benefits packages, workplace satisfaction, and workplace protocols, and worker health and safety. Similarly, Gray (2014) argues that the small family farms of the Hudson Valley of New York producing for the alternative, so-called “local food movement” are ironically dependent on exploited transnational waged laborers. Moreover, she argues that demonstrations of care, support, and rewards for workers by farm employers are best interpreted as a paternalistic system of labor control that helps keep the migrant farm workforce in place. These findings complicate assumptions that the increased proximity between workers and farm owners, presumably more characteristic of family-operated farms, will result in less exploitative labor dynamics.

Returning to the UN proclamation of the value of family farming, an abolitionist perspective would argue that the Decade of Family Farming ignores problematic notions

associated with this form of production and, through this silence, perpetuates these discourses and their associated harmful effects. For example, scholars of the U.S. agrifood system have demonstrated how patriarchal gender relations and women's subordination are bolstered through family farming (Friedmann 1978; Sachs 1983). An extension of these foundational feminist critiques would suggest that the contemporary global adoption of this language contradicts the women's empowerment and gender equity goals widely promoted by the SDGs (and the Millennium Development Goals before) – an effect that is, of course, ironic given the international development community's widespread celebration of family farms as a means of achieving sustainable development.

Overall, those using this abolitionist approach critique celebratory and reformist perspectives as failing to identify the historical settler colonial origins of the family farm, the white supremacy and heteronormativity tied to retaining land ownership and wealth, and the contemporary failure of family farms to move away from the exploitation of land and labor for capital accumulation.

Contributions to this special symposium

This special symposium gathers new research regarding how the family farm functions globally. Despite the uniquely U.S.-centric concept, we see how this model has permeated globally in policy and practice. A common thread among these papers is not only how the family farm model undermines involvement in agriculture from non-dominant groups but also how many populations are subjected to an unrealistic vision for agriculture, which is widely declining.

Mincyte and Blumberg (2024) illuminate the essential role the state plays in the promotion of certain farming models over others. Through a feminist analysis of farming in the Baltic states, these authors reiterate the geopolitical practices entailed in the political framing and the everyday practice of family farming. They view local, national, and supranational development through the lens of the small family farm as an agricultural production unit that both reflects and influences changes in power relations. They explain how gender roles on family farms were constituted throughout Baltic history dating to Medieval times and reconstituted through war and demographic change in the twentieth century. The region's long history of instability has fortified the resilience and national importance of local farms, emphasized most recently when Russia's attack on Ukraine stoked fears of food insecurity. Ultimately, their paper corroborates the co-constitution of family farms and the state and the implications of these geopolitical dynamics for gender, land, and labor.

In the United Kingdom, Calo and Corbett (2024) critique how new entrant farmers are subjected to normative views

of farmers as individualistic and self-reliant. This vision—central to the family farm—undervalues social reproduction and creates an environment of “predatory inclusion” (Taylor 2019); wherein the goal of new entrant policy is promoting homogeneity of farming units. As Calo and Corbet (2024) argue, despite seeming apolitical, new entrant farming policy is instead imbued with values that “preserves a productivity model of agriculture,” which fail to address “the fraying social relations that have led to precarity in the rural sector in the first place.” By attending to the very logics that drive the desire to maintain rural community vitality, future new entrant policies could be redesigned to support alternative structures that attend to economic and social reproduction on farmers rather than assuming the former must be prioritized over the latter.

To explore alternative models of farming, we turn to Raj’s (2024) analysis of rural queer agricultural participation in Portugal. Through a case study of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Raj (2024) details how a collection of producers (farmers and food producers who managed activities) and co-producers (the local consumers who pay pre-harvest, receive produce, and participate in work activities) strengthened economic and social ties among queer and cis-gender/heterosexual community members in agriculture. Despite queer inclusion being an implicit rather than explicit part of this CSA, queer members developed a sense of empowerment and belonging through their involvement as producers and co-producers. Nevertheless, the CSA remained comprised of relatively social and economically privileged individuals with interests in artisanal production and consumption and localized decision-making practices. Through this analysis, Raj (2024) illuminates how non-traditional structures for agricultural production, such as CSAs can offer new pathways for farm viability, inclusion of gender and sexual minorities, and strengthened regional food systems and rural communities.

Finally, Leslie et al. (2024) forcefully assert that the tendency to accumulate infrastructure through the family farm model results in systematic disadvantage for farmers who fall outside of the mold, including farmers of color, LGBTQ+, and women. They argue that a “treadmill of infrastructure accumulation” supports farmers already holding land and wealth while producing a bifurcated path of “high labor and low productivity” for farmers who do not enjoy family-based and intergenerational wealth. The implications of their work are broad, considering that farm viability, sustainable production practices, and land justice considerations are widely harmed by cultural and legal systems that undermine and inhibit infrastructure access for non-traditional farmers.

Conclusions

Returning to Ahmed’s (2019) question, “What’s the use?” of certain words, we have suggested that academics, policy-makers, and practitioners use the family farm terminology in three primary ways: celebration, reform, and abolition. Celebration, most apparent among major international development organizations, details how family farms, defined broadly as peasants and smallholders, offer solutions to issues of food production and sustainable development. Like the celebratory approach, reformists note the positive socio-ecological outcomes that family farms offer. But reformists also place greater emphasis on the economic and social hardships that family farms face and the need for policy and programming to intervene in the challenges associated with this model. However, a reformist approach does not question the family farm as the ideal model of agriculture. Abolitionists reject the family farm model as the solution to socio-ecological issues in the agrifood system and see this model as perpetuating multiple forms of inequity. Each of these approaches elucidates how various actors, from academics to practitioners, approach issues in the agrifood system.

As Ahmed (2019) notes, “To open institutions up that have functioned as containers, you have to throw usage into a crisis; you have to stop what usually happens from happening (209).” The articles in this special symposium, along with the critiques of the family farm through reformist and abolitionist approaches, suggest the need to throw the usage of the family farm ideal, terminology, and model into crisis. To further borrow from Ahmed (2019), academics and practitioners usually use the family farm terminology and model as an aspirational ideal. By using marriage and biological relations as *the most important indicator* of a farm’s contributions to society and the environment, academics and practitioners overlook a variety of the structural issues that prohibit these farms from implementing practices such as paying workers livable wages and building soil health. Given, for example, in the U.S., the dramatic variation in family farm characteristics raises serious concerns about the ability to draw connections between this model of ownership and aspiration outcomes (Hoffmeyer 2020). Instead, using categories such as acres, farm sales, reliance on off-farm income, sustainability metrics, certifications, labor standards, or other more specific measures of on-farm practices offers a more systematic way to analyze if and how certain farm characteristics influence outcomes.

As this special symposium throws the institution of the family farm into crisis, we need new research to provide the pathways for transforming agriculture and attending to the goals that are presumed, by many, to come from the family farm. For example, Carlisle (2014) calls for a “critical agrarianism,” which includes “land-tenure models that explicitly

value public environmental and social goods” because a “critical mass of private property owners with a strong land ethic can never be enough” (4). Exploring alternative land tenure models such as those of “critical agrarianism” offers one approach to taking alternative models of organizing the home and farm seriously. These many include empirical studies of collective ownership and farming as commons. Nation states invest heavily in the family farm model (Calo and Corbett 2024; Mincyte and Bloomberg 2024; Rosenberg 2016); however, alternative farm models must work to function without such support. Taking seriously alternative models works to separate the moral values attached to “family” farms and allows for data-driven results regarding social and ecological outcomes.

Second, the family farm, as the name demonstrates, presumes a harmonious interaction between household and business, production and reproduction. As feminist and labor scholars have for decades highlighted, this has never been the case. As such, we need additional research on topics related to labor. Such studies could include the many different models of reproductive labor that provide empirical support for the non-inevitability of the patriarchal heteronormative family farm, such as polyamorous, queer, intentional community, and Indigenous farms, among others. We also need more research on the labor conditions and lived everyday experiences of migrant waged laborers employed on the smallest family farms, which tend to be the most remote, under-regulated, and precarious. Third, more research that “studies up” by examining the discourses, actors, and political effects of the family farm discourses that celebrate or gently reform the term, as de-naturalizing discourse is a first and necessary step to dismantling the political and economic structures it helps to sustain.

Acknowledgements Partial support for this project was provided by the Wisconsin Dairy Innovation Hub. This work was also supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Multistate Research Project #PEN04796 (Accession #7003407) titled, “Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors.”

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