Race and Ethnicity from the Point of View of Farm Workers in the Food System

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Organizer and activist Nelson Carrasquillo provides an analysis of the growth of the agricultural sector in the United States, from the inception of slavery up to and including the current obstacles to fair wages and fair treatment of modern-day farm workers.

“La mona aunque se vista de seda; mona se queda.” (Even when a monkey dresses up in silk; it’s still a monkey.) —Popular saying

Working at CATA (Farmworkers Support Committee) since 1992, it was important for me to understand the policies that made it so difficult for farm workers to be organized in unions. Of approximately 1.5 to 2.5 million farm workers in the United States, fewer than 50,000 had labor contracts, indicating an intentional effort. So in order to represent farm workers, the first order of business was to understand the context and circumstances of the agricultural system and to explain why farm workers are poor people of color and migrants.

Knowing that this country went to war over the issue of slaves whose primary function was to be used as workers on plantations represented an obligatory reference point for looking at the present-day circumstances of farm workers. Is the current agricultural practice related or similar to the plantation system? If today’s legal and regulatory framework is designed
to enhance the treatment of workers, empowering them with dignity and respect, does this mean workers are to have adequate and safe living and working conditions? Would they receive a living wage? Or would they be treated as commodities?

These issues, not fully being resolved, acknowledge deep-rooted reasons for today’s treatment of farm workers. In other words, within the food system, the racial and ethnic composition of farm workers reveals a direct relationship to the circumstances that prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century and led this country to war. With emancipation, plantation owners realized that it was cheaper to pay wages than to own slaves, increasing their profits.

The food system has evolved and changed to what it is today, with common denominators that are present in this process. The element of profit is considered to be the principal element that has influenced the way the food system works.

We propose that profit is the main driver in enabling a food system that is grounded in the plantation system. The purpose of this system is to maximize profits to the producers and the merchants who distribute the food to consumers. Underlying this is a system of racial privilege, for as the principal beneficiaries, farmers are in their vast majority white, and farm workers, the tool that enables the system to work, are generally people of color.

The Composition of the Farm Workers Community:
CATA (Farmworkers Support Committee)

In 1992, I was recruited by CATA for the task of restructuring the organization to ensure and enable its ability to represent the interests of Puerto Rican migrant farm workers in the eastern United States. Following an assessment of the reality of the fields, I soon realized that there was a changeover in the farm-worker labor force; there was an increase in Mexican workers, as more were hired by farmers of Mexican origin. In conversations with farmers at the time, we discovered that the principal reason for this increase was that Mexican workers were thought to be more amenable to the control of the crew leaders, the supervisors, and the farmers themselves.

As a result, we concluded that this transition was irreversible and that CATA needed to change accordingly. Our perspective shifted from a Puerto Rican-based organization to a farm-worker organization.

During this evaluation process, we talked with Mexican farm workers at farm labor camps about why they had come over to the East Coast. Most of them indicated that they felt they had no choice but to immigrate north to the United States. They could not earn a living in their home communities and had heard that there was work in the fields. They would make significantly more money, earning enough to cover the needs of their families. They were willing to accept the risks of leaving their home country because anything was better than the slow
death of desperation that they were experiencing. Moving north was scary but it gave them the opportunity to do something to change their lives.

There is a fundamental difference between the Puerto Rican farm worker and the Mexican worker; first are the issues of citizenship, transportation, and unemployment. In terms of similarities, both groups believed that there was very little they could do to change the working conditions, which in essence were the same for both groups. That spoke to the sense of powerlessness over their working conditions. In both situations, economic necessity was and is their driving force.

This demonstrated how those suffering economic and social hardships in their home countries are easily taken advantage of and submitted to unfair working and living conditions. This illustrates how one ethnic group was used against another shows the systematic effort to implement practices that would benefit the farmers.

Farm workers in the United States are estimated to be a population of about 2.5 million, the majority of whom are undocumented. They are mostly young migrants from Mexico, with significant numbers of indigenous origin.

When looking at reliable sources for census information, the Census of Agriculture of the Department of Agriculture and the Farm Labor Survey (FLS) of the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) report that hired farm workers, including agricultural service workers, decreased in numbers from 1,145,000 in 1990 to 1,009,000 in 2006.

Divide and Conquer

Through the existence of CATA, from 1979 to the present we have changed from a mostly Puerto Rican-led farm-worker organization to a multiethnic farm-worker and low-migrant worker organization in reaction to the hiring practices of farmers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Our membership in the 1980s was made up mostly of Puerto Ricans who were working the fields in southern New Jersey as seasonal migrant workers through the Clearance Order System, a substitute mode of recruiting workers based on the old Bracero system. Eventually, the numbers dropped to mostly workers (Puerto Rican and Mexican) hired locally by crew leaders.

Puerto Rican workers used to get minimum wages, transportation costs, housing, bonuses, and unemployment benefits. Workers hired through Crew Leaders/Labor Contractors would get piece rate up to minimum wage and housing. Today, the majority of farm workers in our region are undocumented, indigenous workers from Oaxaca and Chiapas in Mexico and from Guatemala. They get paid by the hour, with no housing provided in most situations.

It is our experience that those working the fields are migrant workers, and, with the exception of Puerto Rican farm workers, they are undocumented and indigenous noncitizens. We
haven’t had any experience or knowledge of African Americans, European Americans, or Asians in significant majority numbers looking for jobs as farm workers. There are Jamaicans and Haitians, mostly from Florida, who have either permanent residence or are citizens. In those circumstances where there are non-Latino workers, they are mostly in supervisory positions, acting as crew leaders or doing specialized work.

We assert that the farm-worker composition in our region is mainly composed of migrant people of color, who are undocumented, have limited education, are mostly non-English-speaking and extremely vulnerable, with minimal protections and knowledge of their rights. We also assert that this shift builds on the uncertainty and insecurity of the farm-worker communities by pitting them against each other. The Puerto Ricans against the Mexicans, those with papers against those without, and indigenous against all others. In other words, as workers came in they would be subject to pressures that pitted them against each other, with the end being an increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

We also assert that this shift builds on the uncertainty and insecurity of the farm-worker communities by pitting them against each other.

The Emergence of the Food System in the United States: The Plantation Model

As work developed in CATA and we became familiar with the agricultural practices, we realized that the availability of cheaper labor is what drives food production. The legal and regulatory structure emanates from how the practices conform to the interest of farmers. To understand this, we looked at farming practices during the colonization period of the United States in the seventeenth century. To the best of our knowledge, agricultural development in the Americas had its origins ten thousand years ago in Mexico/Oaxaca with rice and beans as its main staples. Four thousand years before the Common Era in North America, sump weeds, sunflowers/gourds and squash were being cultivated. During these years and until the arrival of the Pilgrims, there was active interaction between the whole region, as similar staples and practices were shared by the different communities.

We argue that this Native American culture of sharing was prevalent when the Pilgrims arrived in North America and that this was the reason why Native Americans supported them in times of need, enabling their survival in those crucial years. The Native American community welcomed and helped the Pilgrims, contrary to what became the reality for Native Americans and Africans in subsequent years.

The presence of slaves is documented at the beginning of 1624–29, when Samuel Maverick arrived in Massachusetts and owned two slaves. By 1664, in New Jersey, English proprietors offered to open land for agricultural production, giving sixty acres of land to any man who imported slaves.
We use the term *plantation* to mean an agricultural operation on which slaves were systematically put to work to produce marketable crops such as rice, tobacco, sugar, and cotton. With the arrival of the Pilgrims, the settlements were known as transplantations by William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth colony in present-day Massachusetts, and by the end of the seventeenth century the term *plantation* was used for the agricultural operations known as Plymouth Plantations. At the time, “plantation lands were owned outright, as absolute property, by the masters. This had two important consequences. First, it gave plantation owners an *incentive* to rationalize their operations to make them more productive. Thus plantations from the beginning were organized to produce as large a volume of marketable staples as possible” (Answers.com). By 1720, the Jamestown plantations grew tobacco for profit, based on their knowledge of organization based on private property and slave labor.

So by the end of the seventeenth century (in the Chesapeake area of Virginia and Maryland), tobacco was the main staple grown in plantations, originally using indentured servants but shifting by 1720 to the use of slaves in order to maximize profits. The basic structure for the food system as we know it today emerged.

The James Plantations were considered to be mid-sized, with about twenty to thirty slaves organized in gangs. The plantation owner was the master, who had unrestrained power to punish or banish slaves. He, therefore, had power over the life and death of a slave, which was slaves’ incentive to work.

Plantations in the South, South Carolina, and Georgia operated under the task system in which thirty or more slaves were assigned a task on a daily base, requiring minimum oversight. Plantations used slaves working in gangs, supervised by overseers or slave drivers. Slaves would work at a “grueling pace” and if they couldn’t keep up the pace, they were sold and replaced. The system was driven by huge margin of profits. During this era, middlemen, known as “factors” or creditors, emerged. They would sell slaves on demand, enabling masters to have quick access to them.

By the Civil War era, plantations operated for maximum profits, using slaves as their main work force. Plantations operated efficiently by using the gang system, as well as overseers who acted as supervisors and who answered to the master, who had the power of the life and death of the slaves.

**The Concept of Privilege**

Today, the term *plantation* is associated with slavery in the United States. Nevertheless, as a system it continues to be the main model that farms use in their operations. The values that prevailed during slavery continue to the present time. In a conversation, my father-in-law came close to describing the relationship of the master. As a youth, he approached his father for a pay raise in the store where he worked. His father-in-law’s re-
response was that he was given shelter, food, and work and therefore there was no need for him to receive a living wage because he had all he needed.

This is an insightful illustration of what has been the perspective of ownership. The masters are “in control of life and death” on the plantations and have played an inherent role in the food-production system both in the past and today. The statement also represents how farm workers were perceived when the purpose of the food system was to obtain maximum profit from the slave who did the farm work on the plantation.

Since the Civil War, farm work transitioned mostly to sharecroppers who, in exchange for work, had access to land in order to grow their own crops. Those who did not have access to land worked for farm owners in gangs for a share of the final crop. The difference between this and slavery is that the farmers were not previously responsible for their housing. They were barely given enough pay for them to eat or afford clothing.

During the Reconstruction era, efforts were made to create space for ex-slaves to become productive members of society; one such effort saw the establishment of programs that would enable access to land. The creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau (1865–72) attested to this effort, which nevertheless faced fierce opposition from southern state legislators until President Grant ordered the Bureau to cease operations.

The Good Old Boys: The Emergence of the Food System

During the two centuries in which the United States consolidated its agricultural activity that we know as the food system, the distinguishing characteristic that emerged was that farmers were white and farm workers were people of color (mostly ex-slaves or freedmen). To reiterate:

- In 1624, landowners began using slaves in the colonies.
- In 1664, land was offered to slave owners in New Jersey.
- In 1720, plantations emerged for efficient and profitable farming operations; the system was based on using slaves as farm workers.
- In 1865, ex-slave gangs and sharecroppers emerged as a form of cheap labor.

The history of resistance to the Freedmen’s Bureau is representative of southern farmers’ influence in Congress. Their ability to promote legislation that would favor them facilitated the control and ownership of land and laws that would maintain that control. This resulted in agricultural practices based on the plantation system, where the master was the overlord. The workers organized in gangs in order to work at a grueling pace to increase the margin of profits.

By 1900, there were 5,739,657 farms in the United States; 86.4 percent of farm owners were white and their average age was fifty-seven.
By the turn of the twentieth century, the food system in the United States was well established with its main food production based in several key regions, where transportation lines were relied upon to gain access to food markets. The merchant class had consolidated its dominance and control of the pricing system. The majority of farmers were white and the farm workers were black in the southern states and Latino in the western states.

As it grew economically and socially, the United States was becoming a principal producer of staples. The food system was moving toward consolidating the plantation system, relaying in new mechanized practices and cheap labor.

The New Deal

During the 1930s with the establishment of the New Deal, the country had to cope with the Great Depression and needed to find new ways to resolve the economic situation. It is interesting that one result of the Depression was the increase in number of poor whites who became farm workers, displacing Mexican workers. This ended when the Depression finished, and in the beginning of World War II the country sought economic development that would ensure the well-being of the population. Thus, President Roosevelt through his New Deal legislation intended to create a safety net aimed to prevent most Americans from falling into poverty. However, farm workers and domestic workers were excluded from coverage in the National Labor Relations Act (1935) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938); this had a significant and disproportionate impact on African Americans.

Both of these legislative acts excluded a whole set of protections that would facilitate the process for workers to unionize as well as extend the minimum wage and overtime pay to farm workers. These exclusionary tactics were instigated by southern legislators who opposed forcing negotiations for the different pieces of legislation to be approved.

Among the negotiated agreements was the exclusion of farm workers from the Fair Labor Standards Act, which stands today. The exclusion at the time was intended to maintain the operational and economic viability of the plantations because its main staple, cotton, constituted the mainstay of the southern economy. This benefited farmers in the South, who relied on African Americans workers, and in California, where farmers used Latino workers.

In terms of the National Labor Relations Act, it again denied farm workers protections that would allow them to organize because proponents of the Act feared that the workers would engage in strikes, particularly during harvest times. Farmers as a class were opposed to any form of organization; as the International Workers of the World (IWW) attempted to organize white farm workers by calling for strikes at critical times during the harvest season.
World War II

We should note that part of this labor legislation was a result of the organizing efforts of the International Workers of the World with white farm workers. Nevertheless, for many white and African American farm workers, the solution was to move on to other regions for better working opportunities in other nonfarm operations. White farm workers moved to the West, and African Americans in the south followed the Great Migration to the North.

During World War II, the need for farm workers marked the beginnings of the Bracero program, bringing Mexican workers and Puerto Ricans to East Coast farms. This stage marked another realignment of the farm labor workforce, when an abundant and cheap supply of labor was readily available because workers needed to provide for themselves and their families. There was no intent or effort to provide or ensure that the farm workers would have living wages or access to protections. They did not have access to legal advice or counsel, and those that supposedly represented their interests were either government officials or representatives of the private contractors.

The Farm Workers Movement

As people realized that the Bracero program was built around systematic violations of the human rights of the Mexican farm workers, the program began to be phased out in 1964. Nevertheless, the country at the time was engaged in turmoil around the issue of civil rights, sparking an awareness of how minorities were being treated. This translated into the awareness of the situation of farm workers and enabled Cesar Chavez’s message to resonate, energizing a movement that had the potential to change the ways in which farm workers were treated.

The organization that would eventually become the United Farm Workers of America based its organizing strategy on bringing together supporters and allies to put pressure on farmers to negotiate contracts that contained protections for farm workers who suffered various abuses. As a result, the confluence of pressure from outside, together with the effort from the workers themselves, created a sense of power that spread across the nation. Truly, the effort had the potential to grow into a national movement with the possibility of forming a united front with a diversity of people at the national level.

The opportunity was missed, however, and the movement has yet to achieve the power necessary to negotiate or change the rules of the game. The efforts have brought social changes that are, at best, reformist; some aspects of the laws that affect farm workers have changed, but the relationships as a whole have not been redefined.

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Farmers: New Jersey Agricultural Activity

According to the 2007 Agricultural Census, there were 10,327 farms and about 25,000 farm workers either hired or under contract labor. In regard to farmers, who either rent or own the land, the vast majority are white. There are very few Latinos (2007 NJ agricultural Census/207 operators) and Asians as farm owners or renters, and interestingly, even fewer African American farmers (2007 NJ Agricultural Census/62 farms owned).

The composition of farms in our area tends to be smaller in size when compared to farms in other regions. In New Jersey, the main products are fruits and vegetables; there are nurseries and packing houses that are relatively new to the area. In Pennsylvania, we work mostly in the mushroom-growing areas where there are close and controlled environments, which technically defines the activity as horticultural as opposed to agricultural.

On the Farm

One of the challenges we face as a migrant farm-workers’ organization is how to protect farm workers from retaliation. Workers can be fired from their positions without due cause and are not able to seek redress. Even when they do so and get a favorable decision, time has passed to the extent that the original situation or the compensation obtained doesn’t pay for the suffering and loss of income the worker has incurred. Therefore, for most workers the option is to move on as quickly as possible to another job where they can continue to receive some pay for their labor.

This situation means that regardless of the farm workers’ migrant status, for most workers it is preferable to tolerate unfair working conditions for as long as they can or to move on to another workplace in the hope of finding better working conditions.

These represent normal practices for the treatment of farm workers in our area. Most farmers, when engaged in conversation with our staff, indicate that they treat their workers fairly on an individual basis, and problems are solved as they emerge. Those who contract workers through crew leaders deal directly with the crew leader. Overall, they have indicated that their relationships with workers are fine, but they complain of too many regulations and impositions by the government.
Enforcement of workers’ rights is limited in scope and effort by the agencies charged with the implementation and oversight of workers protections. Many agencies at the federal and state level don’t have enough staff to fully implement their mandates. Not having enough enforcement staff leaves no choice but to implement procedural agreements such as voluntary reporting as a means to achieve compliance. Violations that do occur reach the attention of enforcement agencies because workers seek support and are actively engaged in achieving solutions.

The bottom line is that the policy that defines the relation between farmers’ needs and enforcing protections of farm workers from abuses is one that balances the ability of farmers to do their harvest on a timely basis. This enables farmers who want to have their crops picked without the fear that workers will strike. The control of the farming operation continues to be the mainstay of the food system—lessons learned and applied in the plantation system.

H2A: A Contract Model in the Present-day System

In the agricultural community, this means moving to employ farm workers from different countries for temporary and seasonal work in agriculture. Known as the H2A visa program, it is in other words the renewal of Bracero program. Its implementation represents the principal means of bringing workers in order to become the principal workforce operating outside the legal framework of all other workers. Under H2A, when a contract is reviewed, the working conditions put the employer in overall control of the workers. They have to obey instructions; do the work according to specific demands, including the rate of work; they can’t complain; and they are forced to work for only one employer. If they are found to be lacking, they can be sent back to their home country without any compensation for their work. If workers have a grievance, they may be sent back. And by the time something can be done to help them, it is already too late. They lack access to legal services, and the list goes on with a long history of abuses to which workers are at risk.

The point is that these conditions are eerily similar to the conditions under which slaves lived and labored. Recruited by force in their home countries and made to work at a grueling pace with very limited recourse for grievances has created a system that the modern-day version of slavery.

The food system has come full circle.

A Flawed System

The food-production system is highly mechanized and, for the fruit and vegetables sector, highly dependent on labor. The international trade agreements such as are in the World Trade Organization, CAFTA, and NAFTA have set the groundwork for the food system to continue in its present form—that is, having a top-down marketing system, promoting the concept of the
bigger the better. For fruit and vegetable producers, the bottom line is that if any profit is left over, it has to be squeezed not from the market but from its operational cost. Among the line items that are under their control is labor cost.

The main farmer’s organization, the Farm Bureau, has consistently advocated for diminishing governmental oversight of farmers’ operations. Considered to be one of the strongest lobbying efforts in Congress as well as at the state level, it is the outgrowth of what has been practiced all these years since the inception of slavery as the mainstay of the food system.

What it means is that as a system that has operated for more almost four hundred years, change would require a catastrophic collapse, which is not sustainable. Change requires overcoming the premises on which it was founded, starting from the point of view of its workers.

A system that is grounded in the concept of profit, achieved by treating its workers as animals, is deeply flawed. It rests in a value system that treats people as commodities, using knowledge and science for the benefit of some over others.

That the driver for a food system is profit means that the human being is relegated to the role of consumer, a commodity. There is no concern for the health of the individual and no motivation to change the food system to one that values the Human Being as a whole.

In the profit-driven system, those at the top get their profits: the supermarkets get their profit from the top; the transporters get theirs from the top, the merchants of pesticides and chemicals get theirs from the top; while the farmers get theirs from the bottom. Profit thus comes from the workers, which is the only commodity that they control.

We believe that the food system anywhere should be grounded in the respect for life as a whole; that its values should be guided by those principles that guide the United Nations as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Nevertheless, what has taken centuries to come forth is an unstoppable mass. A total change of direction is required in order to achieve these goals. But then every action has a reaction and any journey begins with a first step.

In CATA, we recognize this reality and are making a conscious effort to lay out what is necessary for us to do. Workers are at the center of our mission, and as such are the principal actors in our struggle. Through our work in the Agricultural Justice Project, Food Chain Workers Alliance, and those that share our common interest we give form to this vision. It is a vision that sees workers, farmers, and poor people as part of humanity who are entitled to good and healthy food.

Works Cited

Du Bois Review
Social Science Research on Race

Du Bois Review is a peer-reviewed journal devoted to research and criticism on race in the social sciences. It provides a forum for discussion and increased understanding of race and society from a range of disciplines, including but not limited to economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, law, communications, public policy, psychology, and history. Each issue contains an editorial overview, invited lead essays, original research papers, and review essays covering current books, controversies, and research threads.

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