

Willing (White) Workers on Organic Farms? Reflections on Volunteer Farm Labor and the Politics of Precarity

Abstract: Many young, university-educated adults these days go to work on organic farms as volunteers and interns, despite that this work is extremely demanding, painful, and has been historically demeaning. Through interviews and discussions with students, I have learned that many who participate in these ventures do so to travel, gain experience, and support organic farms yet rarely consider the impact of their voluntary labor on waged labor. I suggest that their interest in DIY experimentation more generally reflects different relationships to work than their middle-class parents enjoyed, as middle-class jobs become less desirable and attainable. I then juxtapose their chosen

precarity with the situation of migrant farmworkers who are valued for their labor but do not receive biopolitical recognition. I conclude this research-inspired thought piece by positing that young adults who volunteer on farms and engage in other acts of self-provisioning may indeed be engaged in a politics of work reconfiguration but not one of solidarity.

Keywords: volunteer farm labor, WWOOFing, precarity, necropolitics, work

A NOT UNCOMMON AMBITION OF young adults these days is to work on organic farms as volunteers and interns. Many do so through programs such as Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms/Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF); opportunities abound where I am located, as well. In the United States, most of these volunteers come from middle-class backgrounds, they are generally white, and they have grown up around or have been educated in progressive university towns. The San Francisco Bay Area and central coast of California, where I do much of my research and teaching, is a fountain of such interest, replete with deep foodie culture and histories of social experimentation. In the course of my teaching at UCSC, I have worked with many students who want “to put their hands in the soil” or otherwise hang out with farming and gardening. I have learned from countless conversations and papers that they seek unalienated labor, a chance to connect with others, and the opportunity to grow their own food.

I have an inkling about what makes *food* work so attractive. American foodie icons such as Alice Waters, Mark Bittman, and Michael Pollan have extolled going back to the kitchen as a way to reconnect with both the pleasures and health-giving properties of food. Waters, for example, rejects convenience discourses because they omit what Waters sees as meaningful work. Trying to save time by not cooking or shopping, she claims, misses out on “one of the few worthwhile pleasures in

life—not in getting away from work but in doing good work that means something” (cited in Biltekkoff 2013: 101). Enacting her vision no doubt enhances one’s status. Emma Maris (2014) has noted that the labor devoted to food preparation has replaced scarce ingredients as the way to indicate gourmet food. At the same time, it is an ideal that many find difficult to attain (Bowen et al. 2014).

As we also see in Waters’s statement, food work conflates with good work and even hints of philanthropy. As I have written (2008, 2011), the missionary practice of teaching others how to garden, cook, and eat has become a common mode of activism for those who want to effect social justice in food systems, albeit a mode that often reflects the desires of the givers much more than those of the recipients. Waters’s own biography in trying to align the city of Berkeley’s public schools, and now the University of California, with her own vision of teaching food further indicates a conflation of food work and philanthropy. (Here I allude to Waters’s imprint on the university’s Global Food Initiative.)

Yet, I have still wondered what exactly about *farmwork* is so attractive to these young people—especially when it is unwaged. After all, this work is extremely demanding, painful, and has been historically demeaning. How has it apparently become a source of pleasure, reward, and even status? And always cognizant of political economy, I have also wondered



FIGURE 1: WWOOFing in Hawai'i.

"POLITICS OF FOOD" (WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/HUWESTOAHU/12450430003/) BY UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII—WEST OAHU IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY ND 2.0.

about whether those who volunteer have considered the potential impacts of their unwaged labor on those who are relegated to doing farm labor for a living. What is the relationship between privilege and precarity in this realm of action? To begin to answer these questions, I interviewed several UCSC students about the meanings of volunteer farm labor for them. I did this as my contribution to a UC working group, funded by the Mellon Foundation, on Rethinking the Purpose of Work through the Pleasures and Displeasures of Food. What I learned confirms some of my suspicions about their privileged positionality, yet upon further reflection suggests some lines of flight, including their pursuit of creative ways to piece together a life. In that way I think these students' desires and trajectories open up much broader questions about the blurring of productive and reproductive labor, the meaning of precarity, and how living the precarious life works as politics in a very uncertain world.

All of those I interviewed were pursuing voluntary farmwork "for the experience," and to some extent to learn new skills, including those that could not be attained in formal university training. These are motives that other researchers have identified for nonwaged farmwork (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006; Mostafanezhad 2016; Schugurensky and Mündel 2005). These were skills they would not necessarily include on their resumes, although with today's emphasis on "service learning" would make for feathers in their caps nonetheless (Cody 2016).

Several mentioned that they hoped WWOOFing, in particular, would give them the ability to travel very cheaply, a finding noted by MacIntosh and Campbell (2001), as well. None expected to be very good at farm labor, and none expected to do it for a living. They were fully cognizant of the privilege of dabbling in farmwork as a way to enrich their own lives and, for that matter, that it required considerable social and economic capital (Ekers et al. 2015).

In terms of the pleasures and pains they would experience, some (the men especially) were excited about the idea of engaging in physically demanding labor. In that way, their desires were reminiscent of masculine hobby work, which is often productive and physical, but performed at a self-determined pace. Others viewed the labor they would provide as a necessary trade-off for the other benefits they would receive.

Surprisingly, I found that few had seriously thought about the implications for paid labor on the farms they had worked or would work (see Gray 2013 on this point). None had worked side by side with migrant farmworkers or were even aware of their presence on the farms they had or would work—even if they were in regions where migrant farmworkers are a mainstay, such as California. When I pressed, a few mentioned that they could see how voluntary farm labor could possibly negatively affect wages or morale for waged workers.

I was also curious about how they saw this work in comparison to other work in the food sector. Although a couple of interviewees had worked in restaurants, they did not see farmwork as comparable, and none would consider volunteering in a restaurant. Neither would they consider volunteering on a conventional farm. They had not really reflected on the subsidy they were effectively providing to the organic farming sector, despite that having nonwaged labor is one of the primary motivations for farm hosts of WWOOF farms (Cody 2016; Ekers et al. 2015; McIntosh and Campbell 2001).

This subsidy, by the way, has not gone unnoticed by conventional farmers, who, in California and Oregon, have reported “informal” labor arrangements in the form of internships or apprenticeships as violations of state and federal labor laws. Small farmers have paid some steep fines for this practice and so it is diminishing in California (Alcorta et al. 2013). One of the criteria for determining if such work is illegal is whether it has the potential to displace waged workers. For their part, the interns do not expect to be covered by labor laws, as they see themselves as learning from the experience more than contributing to the viability of the farm. Their physical separation from waged workers reinforces a sense that their role on the farm is distinct and perhaps not deserving of remuneration. Nevertheless, their inattention to the subsidy they provide and how that might reverberate in the so-called formal economy sheds some light on similar blind spots regarding the so-called sharing economy of Uber and Air B&B: many users do not think twice about how they may be contributing to the deregulation of waged work and health and safety standards through purchasing services that are cheaper precisely because they are casualized.

Despite these real issues of unwitting exploitation of self and others (Perlin 2012), arguably this phenomenon reflects that young adults these days are developing much different

relationships to work than their middle-class parents enjoyed. Perhaps they are responding to a postwar Fordist, suburban way of life that may no longer appear desirable. Writing on the centrality of oil for making that other way of life possible—oil was important not just for the roads and cars but also the energy-saving household machines, and even the food and modes of provisioning food—Huber (2013) argues that the essential Fordist postwar bargain (for the white middle class) was a rote and unpleasant job for a good home life. The sphere of social reproduction became where freedom was experienced and where meaning was made, making for a clear separation of “life” and “work.” So, in wanting meaningful, even if unpaid work, these young people are effectively rejecting that separation—and that bargain. In wanting to embrace muscle power, and perform what was once considered drudgery (not only through hard work but also through, for example, bicycle transportation), they also are rejecting (or at least suspicious of) reliance on cheap energy and automobility.

Or perhaps they are recognizing that the old middle class life would be attainable if they did want it. Opportunities for volunteering and interning are proliferating at a time when professional jobs are becoming scarcer—at least outside of the tech sectors—creating a sort of white-color precarity. Unfortunately, many employers take advantage of labor market conditions by offering unpaid internships as stepping-stones to real jobs, opportunities in which, of course, only those who can afford to forego income can participate (Perlin 2012). Many of my students wonder whether they will ever have a steady income, much less professional employment.

Whether by desire or necessity, many of my former students are piecing together their livelihoods: working in less than professional jobs (often related to food!), pursuing artistic endeavors, and doing a good deal of DIY as both pleasure and to develop quasi-survival skills. Their interest in survival skills is not incidental: In a class several years ago, I noticed many of my students were knitting or had brought their homemade kombucha. I asked them at the time about their attraction to DIY practices, and they admitted that their interest was both proto-anarchist and in preparation for the apocalypse. (All of a sudden I felt that I was the most optimistic person in the room!) In the context of these sorts of uncertainties, if not fears, self-food provisioning provides a number of solaces: sociability, sharing, and a better chance of having something on the table come what may.

What, then, are the politics of piecing together a life with DIY and other pursuits that erase boundaries of production and social reproduction? In writing about the growth of casual and informal work, Michael Denning (2010: 80) refutes the idea that

waged labor is the norm from which capitalist life has veered. As he puts it, “the fetishism of the wage may well be the source of capitalist ideologies of freedom and equality, but the employment contract is not the founding moment. For capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living.” For him, the “the informal economy precedes the formal, both historically and conceptually.” In that way the realm of social reproduction, including household food provisioning, is not the relic other of real capitalist production but its basis, suggesting that defining human worthiness through participation in wage labor concedes too much to capitalism. Anna Tsing (2015: 20) similarly sees precarious living as the norm, as the “center of the systematicity we seek.”

In offering a capacious idea of what does *not* count as work, Denning also suggests that “the wageless life” exists not only for so much of the world’s extreme poor (Agamben’s [1998] “bare life”) but for many others. In a similar vein, Guy Standing (2011) has coined the term “the precariat” to refer to “the multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development.” Among the precariat, he includes the “millions of frustrated educated youth who do not like what they see before them.” If we follow Tsing’s (2015:2) definition of precarity as a “life without promise of stability,” which depends on “noticing what is available,” then, indeed, these students are part of the precariat.

So, I want to suggest that for these students there is also a kind of politics, albeit perhaps only an imminent one, in seeking unalienated, material labor or in refusing (or not prioritizing) waged work. In *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks (2011) challenges the presupposition that work, or waged labor, is inherently a social and political good. Writing in a similar vein as Dunning, Weeks notes that we have accepted waged work as the primary mechanism for income distribution, as an ethical obligation, and as a means of defining ourselves and others as social and political subjects. Weeks argues for work refusal and proposes a post-work society that would allow people to be productive and creative rather than relentlessly bound to the employment relation. Growing and preparing food would no doubt be a central activity in such a society, since a nonwage economy would no longer make workers a commodity and therefore no longer make food a commodity. Many of these young people are experimenting in this kind of living.

And yet . . . I can’t help but juxtapose their situations and desires with those of the strawberry pickers who are the objects of my primary research these days. Their work is arduous. Paid

primarily on piece rates, these farmworkers pick while bent over and when their boxes are full they literally run through the fields to get their boxes weighed and tabulated, only to start again. They are routinely subjected to a cocktail of chemicals, as well.

As mainly undocumented workers they have little ability to contest or improve conditions in their workplaces. Neither bare life nor classic waged workers, they work in these conditions out of economic necessity, indeed take the risk of crossing the border out of economic necessity. As Seth Holmes (2013) puts it, not earning a livelihood poses the much larger risk. For these workers, and many others in farm and food work today, the labor conditions are no basis for romanticization, notwithstanding the pride they may take in their work, given the substantial skill involved in truly arduous farmwork (Bardacke 2012; Holmes 2013).

So what strikes me is that these farmworkers are also part of the precariat. Yet, they obviously have a very different relationship to waged work and precarity than my former students and WWOOFers—so much so that Standing’s capacious definition of the precariat seems to fall apart. In that light, it may be useful to engage recent work on surplus populations and disposability. Collard and Dempsey (2016), for example, differentiate those who are “officially valued” for their labor, even waged, but are otherwise of little consequence biopolitically—in Foucaultian thinking they do not count as part of the population deserving of protection. These “necropolitical subjects” are generally racially marked subjects who are useful as laboring bodies but whose futures are not protected precisely because of the existence of surplus populations (McIntyre and Nast 2011). Many food and farmworkers, not only those working in California strawberry production, are such necropolitical subjects.

In contrast, the privileged precariat, as we might call the students and WWOOFers, are inversely valued. That they are biopolitically recognized is evident in the security and protection they receive from, for example, remaining state safety nets, legal and regulatory protections, and relatively friendly policing. (They are not let to die, in Foucaultian terms.) And it is arguable that their biopolitical privileges make it possible for them to refuse capitalism. At the same time, they are of little use as waged workers—particularly in farming! This suggests an important distinction between biopolitical precarity and livelihood precarity. Biopolitical precarity, that experienced by farmworkers, is much more useful to capitalism, as it makes for more compliant and efficient workers.

These distinctions are by no means static, though. As it happens, strawberry growers are now faced with a labor shortage, thanks to the tightened border that once served them so well. Consequently, they are paying much more attention to field conditions to attract workers (Guthman 2016). If the current

political climate against undocumented immigration continues, existing workers' and their children's lives could come to matter even more. Growers would then need to do more to protect workers, for instance with better pay, working conditions, access to health services, and perhaps less toxic exposures. In other words, workers may come to receive biopolitical recognition.

As for the privileged precariat of educated, middle-class (white) young adults, only time will tell if their precarity and their purposeful blending of work and leisure will continue to be a choice or if their various state and familial safety nets will fall away. One thing seems clear, though: their voluntary presence on farms does little to bring about biopolitical recognition for traditional farmworkers, other than remind employers that paid employees are more reliable and better trained. So the young adults who today volunteer on farms and engage in other acts of self-provisioning may indeed be engaged in a politics of work reconfiguration, but theirs is not a politics of solidarity. 

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