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Title: Leaver Agriculture

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2/2/2019--In the marvelous book Ishmael, which my students in Law and Philosophy read, Daniel Quinn points out that settlement and agriculture was known by indigenous peoples who lived sustainably within their areas. (Weren't the Iroquois an example of that?) People calls these people Leavers.

But the question has always been whether this model is of any use to us--Quinn's Takers.

There is now a model of the kind of agriculture that a Leaver might practice in our society. You can see it in the writing of California farmer Mike Madison that I ran across in a review by Verlyn Klinkenborg in the New York Review in the September 27 issue--Green and Pleasant Land (locked on the New York Review webpage).

The normal farmer mantra is kill everything but the crops, says Klinkenborg. And the average farmer is a complete slave to the likes of Monsanto--seeds are leased. But there are other ways to farm.

Here is a flavor of Madison's farming, with some quotes from Madison.

The point of all these lists and calculations is to help measure Madison's efforts to keep his farm in balance with the world. "It is instructive," he writes, "to draw a line around the perimeter of a farm and then to measure the movement of materials (or energy) across that line, onto and off the farm." By this standard, conventional farms—heavily reliant on petroleum-based chemicals, fossil fuels, and leased seeds—are sinkholes of consumption. Madison's goal is to make the farm operation as self-provisioning as possible, so that the farm supplies as many of its own requirements—energy and fertility, for example—as it can. This, of course, is one of the basic measures of sustainability. So is the "psychological well-being of the farm family," a standard you'll want to keep in mind while reading This Blessed Earth.

In America—thanks to its abundance of land—there have always been two kinds of farmers: movers and improvers. Movers were the ones who farmed out the fertility in a patch of ground and then moved along to the next patch. This is more or less how America was settled. Improvers were the ones who did everything they could to preserve and increase the fertility of their soil. The intensity of the debate over these methods reached its peak in the early nineteenth century.* In the long run, the improvers faded from the discussion, especially after World War II and the introduction of chemical fertilizers. The movers continue to move, but in a different manner these days. When farmers ran out of new land, they simply mined their way downward through the fertility of eroding layers of farmland until they reached the place we are now.

Farmland, instead of being a carbon sink, has been forced to surrender its carbon. Iowa's once-black soils are now "a washed-out tan color from loss of organic matter." All that lost fertility is replaced annually by injections of anhydrous ammonia, which is toxic to soil organisms and slowly acidifies the soil. You could argue that modern agriculture has brought about the most

wholesale ecocide on the planet by killing the astonishingly rich microbial life of the soil. It's worth drawing up another analytical model of the kind Mike Madison employs. Ask, simply, where soil is being replenished with organic matter—cover crops and manure, for instance—and where it is not. What you end up with is a perfect map of the division between conventional, large-scale, industrial agriculture and small-market farms. A map like that would also provide a stark reminder of how colossal the scale of conventional farming really is when compared to small, artisanal farming, something that's easily forgotten when you're shopping at the farmers' market.

Madison believes that “farming is not a perversion of nature, but a natural development in our planet's evolution.” There is a lot of optimism lurking in that thought. Anyone who can write “I expect to still be farming at age 80” is an optimist at heart, no matter how cautionary or skeptical he often sounds. In fact, I would say that *Fruitful Labor* may be the most optimistic book it is possible to write that also contains this sentence: “We are a flawed species unable to make good use of the wisdom available to us, and we have earned our unhappy destiny by our foolishness.”

It turns out that James Madison had a Leaver perspective. Read this last paragraph.

Madison's fundamental argument about the deep ecology of farming is one that another Madison—James Madison—would have agreed with. In May 1818, while Cobbett was still living on Long Island, the former president—an improving farmer—gave a speech to the Agricultural Society in Albemarle, Virginia. He said something that has become almost unsayable in the world we inhabit now—unsayable at least by the sitting president and his environmental and agricultural appointees. “We can scarcely be warranted,” Madison said, “in supposing that all the productive powers of [Earth's] surface can be made subservient to the use of man, in exclusion of all the plants and animals not entering into his stock of subsistence.” It is truly painful to leap ahead two hundred years and realize that one of Mike Madison's reasons for continuing to farm is this: “In an increasingly unstable world it is important to keep the farm as a refuge for family and friends in times of economic collapse and social disarray.”