

Sustainable Agriculture and Social Justice: A Conversation with Dr. Cornelia Flora

Interview Conducted by Gabrielle Roesch-McNally

JCTP: Could you share how you came to work in sustainable agriculture and rural sociology?

Dr. Flora : When I was in high school, the only agriculture I knew was the irrigated alfalfa and the grazing cows and horses on the eastern side of the sierras. Growing up on a research and development Navy base, I would have been a physicist, but I was a girl. Women were not engineers, or physicists, or chemists. Sociology seemed the closest discipline in terms of a gender-appropriate science. I assumed there were laws about human behavior just as there were laws of thermodynamics. I really liked statistics and math, which justified sociology as a science. I became a rural sociologist after I transferred to Berkeley. I knew if I was going to do research somewhere, it had to include mountains and forests around natural resources and rural community issues. I took the one rural sociology course they had at Berkeley and learned a great deal. I didn't know much about food systems then and I was not all that interested in agriculture, but then I went to Cornell, where I thought I was going to study South Asian population issues. I knew I wanted to work internationally, and I also knew I wanted save the world, thinking that would happen through population control.

When I got to Cornell, it was Latin American Year. The library's South Asian collection was not as extensive as the one at Berkeley, and lots of interesting people were doing Latin American research. I had a fellowship with the National Defense Education Act through the International Population Program, where Joe Stycos, the Director, had excellent Latin American contacts. My first research project in Colombia was mobility aspirations of working class mothers for their newborns in Bogotá, Colombia. However, I was really interested in social movements. It was the time of Vatican II and the Theology of Liberation with its preferential option for the poor. While in Colombia, I wanted to find out what was happening in terms of how people were mobilizing. I often visited poor barrios in Bogotá. The only people I saw organizing were the Pentecostals. They were the people who were mobilizing the poor.

I was interested in social justice, in people speaking for themselves. I was convinced that social justice happened because poor people were mobilized to demand it. I grew up in a home where my mother had a diverse group of people over to the house (this was not the case for the mothers of my friends). Her heroes were Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi. She was one of the few professional working mothers in my group, and her advice to me was to always attend your professional meetings and to be on time.

We, as a family, were very concerned about issues of social justice, both immediate and collective. This was part of what we were on earth to do. I was and am very religious; religion means you work to make life better for everyone. I was at Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement and the anti-Vietnam mobilizations; it was a very exciting time. I found out that politics were more important than I thought. Working on behalf of social justice is who we (Jan and I) are. I believe that our personal lives should reflect our values and so should our research.

Jan, my husband, was from a farm in Kansas; so, we started to get into the agricultural discussions at meeting of the Rural Sociology Society. I got involved in agriculture in terms of structures of production and its relation to class-based mobilization. There are lots of really interesting questions that one can ask about sociology and social change within that framework. I began doing farming systems work through other contacts I had made through working with sustainable agriculture and rural development. Through these linkages, Jan and I applied together for a joint position with the Ford Foundation. We flew from doing field research in Kansas to New York City to interview as program officers for Agricultural and Rural Development in the Andean Region and Southern Cone of Latin America. I eventually got to start the women's programs because of my interest in social justice and was able to work all over South America. We worked with women's groups in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship groups because no one took them seriously; so, scholars/activists/feminists could do field research with them. My job was to figure out what the scholars were doing and what I could pitch to the Ford Foundation in order to move the money to the women and the projects they were engaged in. This gave us this huge foothold in Latin America to do agricultural systems research. Farming systems was one of the first holistic ways of looking at farming, and we were also trying to privilege the farmers' perspective and their voice, understanding that the voices differed by gender.

With our applied experience, the research of our grantees, and our own research, we began asking such questions as: What does inequality in landholding mean for people and places? What does mistreating the land mean? What does leaving people (social inclusion) imply for what happens in a place? So, a lot of our research was on these major issues.

JCTP: Looking back on your career and now going forward in your career in sociology and sustainable agriculture, how would you characterize the changes you have seen in terms of how issues of social justice have been addressed in the field?

Dr. Flora: I think Rural Sociology, when we entered the field, was in an empirical phase where scientists were testing, in my mind, boring questions. With the sociology of food and agriculture, many people were interested in that because they came from farming backgrounds and they were very concerned about what was happening on the ground. We began changing the questions we asked. I taught the first women studies class at Kansas State University, where I had to explain to my colleagues that we called it “Sociology of Women” because all the other courses were, in fact, the sociology of men. As a feminist scholar, you are obligated to think about social justice, and not just to think about middle-class White women. This notion of being involved comes from the feminist movement and feminist scholars who worked hard to keep each other honest. It is really important to find allies outside your institution and build a network of colleagues who will support the work you are doing and the questions you are asking.

JCTP: *In your opinion, how is social justice linked with food systems and agricultural sustainability? Are they interwoven or mutually exclusive?*

Dr. Flora: They have to be interwoven. We have, for so long, separated food from agriculture and, therefore, there appears to be a separation of food justice and agricultural sustainability. I heard Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack say that we don’t grow food in Iowa; we grow industrial inputs. Maybe if we grew more food and didn’t sacrifice food for industrial inputs, the land and water would be healthier, the people would be healthier, and our communities would be healthier. We need to keep saying that food *and* agriculture is important. Social justice will only be a component of sustainable agriculture if we continually bring it up. We have to keep it front and center in our minds because it is so easy to fall back on reductionist research, which is easy to get funded and to get published.

When I first started to work in sustainable agriculture at Kansas State, we included “socially equitable” as a criterion. But the USDA changed that to “socially acceptable,” begging the question of acceptable to *which* social groups? By looking at the social aspects of sustainability as public opinion rather than social equity, it becomes very easy to dismiss it as a “values thing.” Sustainable agriculture needs to have social justice as one of its three pillars. But, unless we keep social justice front and center, it will not be part of the broader dialogue on agriculture and food systems. Perhaps there will be wonderful things done for the land, we will have some farmers economically secure, but we will have a whole lot of poor people who cannot eat healthy food. We need to measure environmental, economic and social sustainability, but right now, we are not measuring these things; we assume that if it is economically viable, then the other elements are taken care of.

You have to measure social equity because what you measure is what you do. I feel very passionate about this. You can have things that make a lot of money for farmers that follow all the Best Management Practices (BMPs) that are ultimately horrible for the environment but worse for people. There is not an automatic correlation between social and environmental and economic sustainability. Getting one element of sustainability right will not guarantee the others.

It is critical that the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University has a social justice component now because unless we are mindful of social justice issues, they will be forgotten, at least in the sustainable agriculture conversation. We can irritate people in our very own institutions by bringing up these uncomfortable issues, but we are obligated to do it because we cannot assume that it will automatically be part of the dialogue. That is the trickle down theory all over again but masked as good environmental practices. The economic and environmental advances will not trickle down unless we make very overt efforts to make sure that happens.

JCTP: Over the next ten years, what do you consider to be of utmost importance in terms of social justice work in the academy and beyond?

Dr. Flora: We have to recognize poverty and inequality; we have to recognize that poverty is not just money. Very important practices are now beginning, such as helping people grow their own food, rather than feeding the world. It is important that we empower and re-skill people in how to grow their own food and how to prepare that food. As a culture, we have been purposefully de-skilled because that sells product and capital can be accumulated by the few. We can empower people by building community. We need to be vigilant about the myth of “cheap food.” The answer to poverty is not cheap food, but rather, livable wages. Working for a wage should not be the only thing you do; we must build community through school gardens and reinvigorating food into all we do. People are empowered to eat food with dignity. *Food at First* here in Ames is a great example of this. There is no means test, and a broad group of people share in the gathering, preparation, serving and eating of that food. We also need to pay attention to policy; we have many anti-poor policies that affect agriculture, too, including food stamps and various nutrition programs that are being cut.

JCTP: If you had unlimited funds for research in the realm of social justice and food systems, are there any particular projects that you think would be interesting that are in need of more empirical research?

Dr. Flora: One project we are working on is a beginning farmer project by finding ways that people who want to go back to the land can do that despite the serious challenges that face them. Many of these new farmers want to do more alternative agriculture in the midst of industrial commodity production. The other issue that I am interested in is – how do we start to change food deserts into food oases? How can we find ways so that the poorest people in food-deserted areas have access to good healthy food? How can we grow food differently? In terms of food justice, we need to see where we have been effective in changing the dominant food system. We are better at changing animal welfare than human welfare. How do we get people concerned about the problems in the food systems, including hunger and obesity issues related to the broken food system? A lot of victories in the food system have been merely cosmetic. New policies at all levels must address social justice issues and help people, especially people in poverty, all along the food chain.

JCTP: What advice would you give to new professionals working in the field(s) of sustainable agriculture and social justice, who are passionate about doing social justice work but are fearful that this work might affect their career trajectory?

Dr. Flora: We were advised in graduate school not to be activists – that it wouldn't be good for our careers –but we did it anyway. What mattered to us is that these things get done. It is hard to advise people based on what we did, as the context is different today. Find allies who are willing to speak out to support your work. As you address issues of social justice, find groups who will support you, especially when you get criticism from your institution. This is also good advice because you will be more effective if you have allies in the community. I would never tell you not to engage in social justice work, but, when you do so, find others to work with and build a broad base of support.

I would share the advice my mother gave me. Attend your professional associations and attend other professional association meetings, too. Get a social justice group together to support the work you are doing. At the same time, you must do research and publish it in good places, both professional journals and the popular press. Write about social justice. Find the journals that want to address issues of

inequality. There are a lot of good journals on sustainability now that are willing to publish good research.

You need to publish because it counts towards getting tenure and a job, but you also need to publish so people can learn what you are doing and thinking. That is the reason you publish. You publish so people can know what you found out. Publish or perish is trite. Publish so you can get to people who don't know what you are doing, who may want to address social justice in their work but don't know how. People write to me because of what I have written, which helps us to start networking. Building networks to work toward change is the reason to publish.

JCTP: What would you say has been the biggest challenge for you in doing social justice work and how did you overcome it?

Dr. Flora: My biggest challenge has been my own innate laziness. I prefer to write and read, and I don't mind giving talks, but I am probably not as good an organizer as my husband, Jan, is. I have never let the university be a barrier. Volunteering with my professional associations and publishing early and often has helped me to be legitimate at my institution. Another piece of advice is to volunteer in your professional associations. Volunteer and become active in the professional associations because that is another source of support, a network that you can depend on. Volunteer for the social justice-related activities in your professional association.

JCTP: How do you sustain yourself and defeat burnout?

Dr. Flora: Burnout has never been an issue because I am always doing new stuff. Energy, as I get older, might be a bit more of an issue. I probably need more sleep than I used to! Eat right and exercise and get a lot of sleep. Keep connected and be involved in groups. I always feel like we could do more, but I don't let that be a discouragement. So, you keep going because you believe that, with allies, you can make a difference. Burnout, if you've got the right support network, should never happen. You will be having too much fun to burn out.

JCTP: Who would you say inspires you, and are there books and scholarship that you return to from time to time that help sustain you in your work?

Dr. Flora: Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* is a great one. What really sustains me is going to the borders of my discipline. I like to go back to Max Weber, a few things of Emile Durkheim, but I really like reading history and different takes on history. I like religious history because if you want to study social movements, then religious history is so helpful. Religion helps us to understand what was important at that time period and why. That *is* sociology. I like to look at old things in new ways.

JCTP: *It sounds to me like one of the things that keep you going is that you have cultivated an early love for what you do and you are constantly excited. What you do doesn't sound like work, but rather, like constant learning.*

Dr. Flora: I think that is it. We are so privileged that we got paid to do what we love to do. So few people have that privilege. So we have no excuse for not doing good things and for continuing to do so. You do the work because you enjoy the work; we love working with students whose intellects we admire. We are always learning, and I cannot imagine life without always learning new things. We have been so blessed with our students. I worked hard to teach students so that they would love the material and learn how to do this so that they could understand the work. Teaching is about helping people to understand how smart they are!