



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

ROLE AND STATUS OF THE FARMER

Harold F. Breimyer
Professor of Agricultural Economics
University of Missouri-Columbia

The first part of this paper will be built upon four central ideas:

1. That the role and status of the farmer must be a most important consideration in all policy for agriculture.

2. That role and status are not self-preserving. On the contrary, they are but pawns in the structural change in our food and fiber system.

3. Looking outwardly, that the issues are by no means so confined to farming as farm partisans are inclined to believe. The status question with regard to farmers is only a part of deep-seated concerns about the position of the individual human being in the kind of economy we are gradually forging—concerns that lead to unrest, alienation, and protests in many places.

4. Looking inwardly, that if the principle of democratic non-discrimination is to be extended to protect the farmer against threats arising from outside agriculture, it must apply with equal force within agriculture.

PRESENT FARMER STATUS

Throughout most of history the men who tilled the soil and tended the herds held inferior status. The present position of farmers is of historically recent origin; and there is no cause to call it permanent.

The entire argument about status rests on democratic values. Those values are by no means a fundamental or intrinsic attribute of mankind. Except for brief interludes in ancient Greece and Rome and its gradual emergence in countries such as Switzerland, democracy dates only from the Enlightenment period of our era. Throughout all the rest of history the common thread has been the exploitation of the mass of people by a small privileged class. That class wanted assured income for itself and it held all others in subservience. Not until European peoples exploded into new lands of the Western Hemisphere and Africa and Australia, did land become so available and cheap that it became possible for the rank and file of farmers to gain freeholder status.

What democratic values underlie traditional agriculture? Probably

above all the right of self-determination. This means that the farmer's status shall be neither foreordained nor circumscribed; that through skill and effort he shall have an opportunity to develop his own destiny. Usually we attach conditions of his being able to own some property in the form of physical capital or land or both, and to enjoy the managerial autonomy afforded by access to a good market system. But it is more important to keep the conceptual values clearly in mind and not to begin with a bias associating those values with one particular role.

Those democratic values are also distinct from material or monetary considerations. Doubtless we all assume that protection of role and status is not incompatible with adequate income. Contrariwise, without minimum satisfactory income any nominal protection of status is empty of meaning. But most emphatically status is not defined in terms of income nor directly substitutable for it. In fact, I would insist that democratic values, far from being self-identifying with monetary goals, entail a cost.

To be sure, in various respects farmers and the framers of farm policy face practical problems of trade-offs between status and income. To assess the exchange ratio would take us into the murky subject of farmers' value scales, a subject too far afield for this paper. We will simply assume herein that in fact farmers do hold their status in high regard and will not relinquish it too cheaply.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

We now approach a crucial point in our argument, and a dilemma. What are the alternatives to the traditional structure? And what are the characteristics of each—how would they affect the role and status of the farmer?

The threat is not one of rolling back history to where farmers again are serfs or nomads, nor one of a more recent day, of the banker taking the land, forcing the farmer to become a crop-share tenant. Instead it is commonly said that farmers face the possibility of being absorbed into an industrial agriculture.

My own mental picture of the emerging economy is one of integration into vertical systems. We seem to be heading toward an empire concept of the economy, one composed of great organizations centralized through many stages. The crucial instrument of power lies in strategic control over some stage—usually access to the consumer but occasionally access to raw material.

Such an organization is highly complex. It rests on intricate

specialization—specialization of function, and therefore specialization of role on the part of human beings. Why has this economic structure emerged? What are the relevant questions to ask about it?

Let us lay quietly to rest the familiar term, technology. Forces at work in business structure today are not basically technological. Maximum advantages of economy of scale have long since been exploited. For interpreting current trends a more applicable idea is that ancient one, the struggle for power. In this regard what, we may ask, have been the historic roots of power? At various times, three. One has been control over ideologies of men, exerted through religious and political leaders, educators, and, in recent times, those who manage the access to mass media of communication. A second is military and police power. The third is control over scarce means of production. The critical resource for economic power was, in nomadic days, herds and flocks. In settled agriculture days it was land. At various times of technological breakthroughs, it has been technology. But technological invention is quickly duplicable, and technologically based power is transitory. Now, merchandising linked to control over communication seems to be a more important focus of economic contest.

Land remains a unique resource. Vital and nonreproducible, it is the opposite of technology. Land is sought for nonfarm as well as farm uses. Contemporary demand for land reflects an overvaluation resting heavily on intangible factors—speculation, income tax benefit, and, in the case of areas suited to specialty crops, monopoly of its control by “vertical-systems” firms.

These make it increasingly difficult for the ordinary farmer to own much land. In the historical sequence, land has not yet been superseded as a potential instrument of power and control. Our small-unit freeholding system has minimized that aspect of landholding but it remains potentially of devastating power.

HOW THE EMERGING ECONOMY WILL WORK

If we are moving toward a vertically organized economy, how will it function?

Parallels from the organic world may be appropriate. Each specialized unit in the intricate vertical-systems organization is of the order of a cell. It has its prescribed function. Its proper activation is essential to the life of the entire organism. Nor are its activities simple. The whole point of Galbraith's technocracy idea is that each such cell possesses unique expertise, and that expertise makes an entity of considerable moment.

In large measure the functioning of the economy can be described in terms of the behavior patterns of the various cells—cells acting individually and in combination. It seems obvious that the cells will take advantage of the potential power they hold by virtue of their selective skills and their essential role in the entire organism. They can make that power block more effective, obviously, if they can throw up fiat barriers to entry tighter than those derived from expertise alone.

The economy now emerging will be more of a bargained economy. Internal units will exploit their vested power as best they can. The tools of negotiation will be the familiar ones: publicity and protest and demonstration and stoppage. These are implicit; as I have said on many occasions, if we do not like them we should not build such an economy.

THE FARMER IN TOMORROW'S ECONOMY

My own values plus my guesses about where a vertical-empire economy will lead cause me to be apprehensive. I am virtually certain that extreme specialization of role leads to alienation, to a loss of sense of community. I am equally certain that an economy operating by mass power struggles will violate many of our precepts of equity. It will lead to increasingly inequitable distribution of income. The best hope for distributive equity lies not in that kind of economy but in one organized for intense competition at each horizontal stratum.

The economy now emerging will violate so flagrantly the goals we set for it that an increasingly direct involvement by government will be necessary. And what of the rights and privileges of the individual—that is, his role and status—within the cell to which he belongs? That is the biggest question of all, and the one about which we are most ignorant.

In the kind of economy I am describing the farmer, if he can still be called that, will take on the role and status that fits the cell in which he finally settles. An individual who by luck or pluck reaches administrative levels will enjoy the associated psychic benefits of power of command and the material ones of good salary plus lots of fringes. The individual of lower station will find his status more restricted. And his income will be governed by a combination of the effectiveness of his cell in bargaining, and the unemployment insurance and OASI and other security devices which are the hallmark of a modern industrial economy.

CAN ORGANIZED FARMERS RETAIN CONTROL?

Can farmers themselves, through their own organization, set up

and control vertical-systems organizations? Might giant farmer cooperatives control, in farmers' interests, the entire sequence from producing germplasm to retailing food and clothing to consumers?

They conceivably could do so. In no sense do I reject the possibility or question its merit. But I cast my analysis in more general terms, for two reasons: First, if the economy goes the direction I forecast, any defensive stand the farmers may take through their own cooperatives may prove to be only a delaying action. I respect the power of some co-ops; yet can they really stand up against an aggressive conglomerate which already has 100 corporations and is stalking more? Or, at the least, can they do so in the absence of more explicit assistance in public policy? And second, what assurance have we that super-cooperatives will preserve the role and status of the individual farmer any better than private corporations would? We can question whether the legal status of cooperative structure is a guarantee of the protection of the democratic values of the rank and file membership.

The cooperative question leads to my fourth thesis, namely, that apart from how well the role and status of the farmer may be defended against challenges originating outside agriculture, it also needs defense internally.

It will be detected that my own judgment leans toward respect for the values contained in traditional agriculture. The operating farmer enjoys genuine benefits that would be denied him as a minor member of an obscure cell in a giant vertical empire. Furthermore, the public interest may be served better by a system that keeps the unique resource of land in small holdings, thus scattering the returns to land ownership, an unearned income, among many small operators rather than concentrating it in a rentier class.

Granting all that, we still must ask: Have farmers tried to protect democratic values among all persons within agriculture as anxiously as they have protected their status against encroachment from without? We may doubt they have.

Have established commercial farmers, beneficiaries of a fivefold inflation in land values, shown concern for the role and status of other farmers who are about to be technologically displaced?

Have the same established farmers demonstrated hospitality to highly capable and well motivated young men who want to farm and lack only capital?

Have operating farmers generally sought to protect the status of

all other persons who labor on land, including even migratory hired labor?

Have farmer members of strong cooperatives remained willing to accept less advantaged members—or do they want to make a cooperative a privileged club, even so privileged as to put a price tag upon membership bases or quotas?

For that matter, within cooperatives has farmer control been an active, vibrant, effective principle, or has it been something that a small nucleus of leaders and managers proclaims at annual dinner meetings and disregards at all other times?

Do farmers who see a chance to reap a bonanza from selling their land for industry or residences try to assure a fair shake for those other farmers who depend for their living on what they produce?

Other similar conscience-pricking questions could be asked. I do not imply that the answer is invariably negative. I do suggest it may sometimes be so. And I insist that such questions must be asked—and answered—if we propose to deal seriously with the immensely important question of the role and status of the farmer in the food and fiber system of the future.

A POLICY ISSUE

Increasingly the farmer's destiny is not shaped only by the way he runs his farm business. As our communities become more rural-urban, the farmer will face another kind of role and status contest. I believe he will have to learn to accept zoning and land use control, and preferential assessments, and pollution regulations, in his own defense—though he may be slow to see them in that light.

Policies to protect the role and status of the farmer might be viewed in terms of more favoritism for the already pampered farmer. My argument is that there is nothing singular about giving such attention to the farmer. The role-and-status issue for the farmer is only one aspect of a similar issue that permeates the economy.

Moreover, it is a policy issue. But we are not ready for the policy stage. We have not yet been honest with ourselves about what the challenges are. We have not begun to formulate our goals concerning what kind of role and status for the farmer—or for anyone else—is to be sought.

Above all, we must recognize that role and status are democratic values. In policy choices for a food and fiber system of the future they deserve priority of consideration over material goals. If we do no more than accept that we shall have made progress.

PART III

*Where Will People
Live and Work?*

