The challenge to democracy III. The family farm in the machine age

Louis Bernard Schmidt
Iowa State College

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/bulletinp
Part of the American Politics Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/bulletinp/vol1/iss23/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa Agricultural and Home Economics Experiment Station Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bulletin P by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The Challenge to DEMOCRACY

III. The Family Farm in the Machine Age
George Washington’s Observations on the
Satisfactions of Farming.

The more I am acquainted with agricultural affairs, the better I am pleased with them, insomuch that I can nowhere find so great satisfaction as in those innocent and useful pursuits. In indulging these feelings, I am led to reflect how much more delightful to an undebauched mind is the task of making improvements on the earth, than all the vain glory which can be acquired from ravaging it, by the most uninterrupted career of conquests. The design of this observation, is only to show how much, as a member of human society, I feel myself obliged, ... to render respectable and advantageous an employment which is more congenial to the natural dispositions of mankind than any other.

I think ... that the life of a husbandman is the most delectable. It is honorable, it is amusing, and with judicious management, it is profitable. To see the plants rise from the earth and flourish by the superior skill and bounty of the laborer fills a contemplative mind with ideas which are more easy to be conceived than expressed.

I know of no pursuit in which more real and important services can be rendered to any country, than by improving its agriculture,—its breed of useful animals—and other branches of a husbandman’s cares.

For the sake of humanity, it is devoutly to be wished, that the manly employment of Agriculture, and the humanizing benefit of Commerce, would supersede the waste of war, and the rage of conquest: that the swords might be turned into ploughshares, the spears into pruning hooks, and, as the Scriptures express it, the Nations learn war no more.
The Challenge to Democracy

III. The Family Farm in the Machine Age

BY LOUIS BERNARD SCHMIDT

THE CONCEPT OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY FARM

The family farm is the most fundamental economic institution in American civilization. It has given character to the whole of American life. This is true of the family farm in all parts of the country. It has stimulated idealism, economic and social reform, nationalism and independence. It has strengthened democracy and individualism. The influence of the family farm in shaping the development of American social institutions hardly can be overestimated. The farm family has been regarded as characteristic of all that is good in family life. It has made important contributions to democracy and to representative government by putting democratic theories into practice on a large scale. The farm family makes democracy a truly national achievement in our country.

The importance of the family farm as a fundamental concept of the American way of life is based on two definite and interrelated assumptions: first, that the family farm, as conceived by the founders of the republic, is the cornerstone of a democratic rural America; and, second, that it is the tangible expression of a sound philosophy of agriculture without which we cannot have a sound nation. The family farm constitutes today, as it has in the past, the fulfillment of the hopes and the aspirations of millions of people.

The French philosopher, Voltaire, once said: "Define your terms and then I will be ready to talk with you." If more attention were given to this injunction it would contribute very materially to intelligent discussion and the re-

---

1This bulletin is third of a series on The Challenge to Democracy prepared by members of the History and Government Department, Iowa State College.

2Professor of History and Head of the Department of History and Government.
making of the modern world. What shall we say of the family farm? What is the meaning of this concept which is so deeply entrenched in American tradition and is so widely employed by agricultural writers?

It is said that the term, family farm, has "no precise meaning" and that any attempt to define this concept is apt to evoke contradictions from many quarters. This makes it the more imperative that the attempt should be made.

The most satisfactory way to arrive at the meaning of the family farm—and the same may be said of democracy—is to learn what recognized authorities have said and written about it. It is recognized that the size of the family farm depends upon the conditions of farming; that it varies according to the physical features of the land, the type of farming, the kind of people and the standard of living. It may consist of but a few acres (truck farming), of from 160 to 320 acres (corn belt farming) or of a number of sections of land (grain farming in the Great Plains). Some authorities urge that the family farm connotes the size of farm that will support the farmer and his family in accordance with the existing standard of living. Others hold that it is that size farm that will give full employment at productive labor to the farm family. Still others regard the family farm one of such size that the family does most of the work with some hired labor. Thomas Nixon Carver urges that the family farm "ought to be large enough to occupy the reasonable working time of the farmer and his family" by "the use of the best and most efficient tools and machinery known to the farming world," with ample power to use this equipment.

These definitions conceive of the family farm as a territorial unit of land operated by the farm family as an economic and social unit of society. The desirable characteristics of the family farm unit are private ownership and operation by the farm family; an investment of capital, particularly in implements, machinery and other equipment; a substantial income and a comparatively high standard of living. Thus defined, the family farm, like democracy, is an ideal deeply rooted in American history.
FROM OX TEAM TO FARM TRACTOR

American agriculture has undergone momentous changes since pioneer days. Farming has been transformed from a simple, more or less primitive, and largely self-sufficient occupation into a modern business organized on a scientific, capitalistic and commercial basis. This transformation has been so rapid and so far reaching in its ramifications and consequences that it has been properly termed an agricultural revolution. It did not take place simultaneously in all parts of the country nor did it affect all regions alike. The most rapid and widespread revolution in farming took place in the Prairie Plains and Great Plains regions which embrace the corn-livestock and wheat belts. What were the factors in this transformation? How have they affected the role of the family farm in our rural economy during the last 50 years? How have they affected the role of the farm family in the evolution of American democracy? These factors are fundamental to any consideration of the present position and prospects of the family farm in American democracy, but only brief mention can be made of them in this bulletin.

THE RAPID TRANSFER OF THE PUBLIC LANDS TO PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

The history of the United States is in a very real sense a record of the acquisition and disposal of a vast imperial domain of virgin land. The private ownership of small farms became the rule in the English Colonies and, except for the great estates of the Dutch patroons along the Hudson River and the large plantations in the South, it dominated the life of the nation to the turn of the present century.

The land Ordinance of 1785, founded on colonial experience, established the fundamental principle that the public lands in the last analysis belong to the people and that they “shall be disposed of for the common benefit” in tracts of sufficient size to provide farm families with a living and a home. This principle is inherent in the evolution of our federal land policy. It is expressed in the Home-
stead Law of 1862 which was designed to provide home­
steads for "actual settlers." Under this law an area eight
times the size of Iowa was transferred from public to pri­
vate ownership. The huge grants to the states and to the
railroads effected a further rapid disposal of the public
lands which were in turn sold at low prices to encourage
settlement. By the close of the century the transfer of the
public lands to private ownership was practically completed.
The number of farms had been increased from 2,044,000 in
1860 to 5,537,000 in 1900 and the number of acres in farms
from 407,000,000 to 839,000,000. In 1930, there were
6,289,000 farms in the United States comprising 987,000,000
acres of land. The greater part of this expansion in the
farming area took place in the Prairie and Great Plains
States which reported 2,779,999 farms and 635,000,000
acres in farms or nearly one-half of all the farms and two­
thirds of all the farm land that had been carved out of the
continental domain.

The passing of the public lands into private ownership
was accompanied by a number of significant changes and
tendencies that have characterized American agriculture
since the turn of the century. Among these we must con­
sider especially the rise of land values and the consequent
transition from extensive to intensive farming, the rapid
growth of tenancy, the decline of the agricultural export
trade and the reorganization of rural life.

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE LAST FRONTIER

The westward movement of population in American
history may be divided into two periods: first, the coloniza­
tion of the Great American Forest to about 1850; and,
second, the conquest of the Prairies and the Great Plains
since 1850. The first period is symbolized by the rifle, the
ax, the log cabin, the ox, and river transportation; the
second, by the covered wagon, the sod house, the windmill,
barbed wire, the horse, the harvester combine, railroad
transportation, the gasoline tractor and the motor truck.
During the first period the pioneers entered upon the stu­
pendous task of clearing 300 million acres of virgin forest
land for farming purposes. The second period presented a new and greater challenge to the pioneer: the challenge of the wide open spaces.

The Prairies and the Great Plains were occupied by native white stocks whose ancestors had pioneered on successive frontiers and by the Teutonic stocks of northwestern Europe which began to arrive in rapidly increasing numbers after 1850 and were readily assimilated with the native stocks in the American way of life. The occupation of these regions marks the completion of the westward movement; the close of the American frontier. In 1930, the population of the Prairie and Great Plains States numbered nearly 47 million, or more than one-third of the population of the United States.

THE MECHANIZATION OF FARMING

"The year 1850 practically marks the close of the period in which the only farm implements and machinery other than the wagon, cart and cotton gin were those which for want of a better designation may be called implements of hand production. The old cast-iron plows were in use. Grass was mowed with a scythe, and grain was cut with the sickle or cradle and threshed with the flail." Since that time many notable improved implements and machines have been introduced and widely adopted. The list is impressive and legion. The more recent introduction of power-driven machinery utilizing petroleum products and electricity is a significant feature of mechanization.

The topography of considerable areas of land in the Prairie and the Great Plains is well adapted to the use of farm machinery on a larger farm-unit basis than that practiced east of the timber line. The mechanization of farming in these areas has increased the productive efficiency of both land and labor; it has increased the size of farms; it has pushed forward the agricultural frontier; it has reduced the number of horses and mules which in turn has affected the increased demand for raw materials and industrial labor and decreased the demand for pasture, hay and grains; it has reduced the farm population, and it has introduced com-
petition with the older farming regions east of the Mississippi River which is destined to affect profoundly the course of agricultural reorganization and readjustment in those regions.

The further development in the mechanization of agriculture in the Prairies and the Great Plains is dependent on several factors: first, the adaptability of the various portions of the farming area to the practical and economical use of new implements; second, the extent and character of the demand for commodities whose production may be increased by the new machines; and third, the degree of success with which the machines fit into the present organization of farms and the type of financial and business organization necessary to make their use both technically successful and economically profitable. The question whether the horse or the tractor affords the most economical power on the family-sized farm has been the subject of a controversy which must be decided by the farmers themselves with reference to their own individual circumstances.

THE EXTENSION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES

The development of transportation and the mechanization of farming reduced the dependence on the urban centers on the hinterland and increased the influence of geography on agricultural production. In the era of pioneer self-sufficiency farming was diversified. Wheat and flax, for example, were grown on farms in nearly every locality to provide flour and linen for farm families. The introduction of improved modes of transportation made it possible for each section to devote itself more exclusively to the production of those commodities for which it was best adapted—the East to manufacturing and commerce; the South to cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, citrus fruits and rice; and the West to grain and livestock. The same forces made possible intra-regional specialization in farming, manufacturing and mining, which gave rise to metropolitan economy. The influence of geography was increased and economic
sectionalism became a permanent influence in American history.

THE MIGRATION OF INDUSTRIES FROM THE FARM TO THE FACTORY

The distinguishing feature of farm life in the pioneer period was its economic self-sufficiency. There was virtually no market for farm products; consequently no goods could be purchased from the outside. Each farm was "an economic microcosm," producing for itself practically everything that it consumed: food, clothing, furniture, linens, soap, candles and a great variety of minor articles essential to the farmer and his family. The transfer of these industries from the farm to the factory is the most significant aspect of the transition from self-sufficient to commercial agriculture.

The industries that have been transferred from the farm to the factory may be classified into four groups: food products; textiles and clothing, including boots and shoes; tobacco; and a number of minor products. The food industries include meat packing, flour milling, the manufacturing of dairy products, the canning of fruits and vegetables, the preparation of preserves and pickles and the production of bread, pastries and confections. To these have been added a long list of packaged products, the raw materials of which come from the farm. The transfer of the textile, clothing and boot and shoe industries from the farm to the factory has been studied chiefly from the standpoint of the industrial revolution in the United States; but it should be considered also from the standpoint of the agricultural revolution. The transformation of farm products by industrial processes into goods ready for the consumer constitutes perhaps the most significant aspect of the transition from pioneer self-sufficiency to the commercial stage in agriculture and industry. Farming becomes specialized, depending upon the factory for the products of industry, while the factory depends upon the farm for approximately 40 percent of the raw materials of industry.
THE GROWTH OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN MARKETS

The rapid urbanization of population made possible by the introduction and development of the factory system provided an expanding domestic market for the food and the fibers of the farm. The application of science and technology to agriculture, however, gave rise to an annual surplus production of wheat, corn, pork, beef, cotton and tobacco which exceeded the demands of the domestic market and for which there was an expanding market abroad. The effect of this development was two-fold: first, it subjected the agricultural system of the western European countries to a severe strain of competition which compelled large numbers of the rural population to abandon farming with the result that they either migrated to the industrial centers or emigrated to the United States; and, second, it further stimulated the production of these products. The rapid expansion of these exports during the latter half of the nineteenth century was followed by a marked decline in wheat, corn, pork and beef exports between 1901 and the World War. The forces contributing to the reduction of these exports were the tariff policies of Germany and France; the competition of Argentina, Canada, Australia and Russia; and the growth of the domestic market which was able to absorb the surplus at prices remunerative to the farmer. The World War stimulated production of these staples which continued to the Great Depression and gave rise to the problem of the agricultural surplus and the agricultural adjustments inaugurated under the “New Deal”.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AGENCIES FOR THE PROMOTION OF SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE RELATING TO AGRICULTURE

The rapid disposal of the public domain after 1862 soon brought the nation to the end of the free land era when rising land values made it necessary for the farmer to change from extensive to intensive methods; and the transformation of agriculture from the pioneer into the commercial stage brought the farmer into closer relations with the business world. The new conditions thus created broad-
ened the farmer's outlook and awakened him to a realization of his educational needs and opportunities. This period also witnessed the rise of a new generation of farmers who were ready to abandon primitive methods of farming and adopt scientific methods as soon as their utility was demonstrated. Agriculture, thus liberated from the fetters of custom and tradition, was prepared to enter upon a new era of development. This led to the creation of the following agencies for the promotion of scientific and practical farming: (1) the United States Department of Agriculture, all the secretaries of which, including four from Iowa, have come from the Middle West since this office was elevated to Cabinet rank in 1889; (2) the state departments of agriculture supplementing the work of the federal department; (3) the land grant colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts with their threefold functions—teaching, research and extension; (4) farmers' organizations with their economic, political, educational and social functions; and (5) the farm press, with its journals, papers and magazines, which has been of inestimable importance as an agency for the promotion of scientific and practical farming.

THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND ACTION OF FARMERS TO SECURE AND MAINTAIN FOR AGRICULTURE AN EQUITABLE PLACE IN OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM

The history of American party politics from the beginning of the national period to the present is essentially a record of the conflict between agrarianism and what for want of a better term may be called commercial, industrial and financial capitalism, the roots of which go back to the colonial period. This struggle underlies the conflict of political principles represented by the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian systems which have dominated American politics. Agriculture was the predominant industry down to the Civil War. This was reflected in the political as well as the economic and social life of the nation, despite the considerable influence wielded by merchants, bankers, lawyers, speculators, shippers and manufacturers. Agrarianism was in control of the government. After the Civil War,
business enterprise was in the saddle and agriculture was on the defensive. Farmers as a class fell steadily behind the business men economically and socially. As grievances accumulated the "embattled farmers" inaugurated a series of movements for economic and social justice; a crusade for a legislative program designed to safeguard and advance the interests of agriculture and insure to the farmers a fair share of the national income. The ineffectiveness of these efforts and the growing disparity in the situation of the farmer provides the background of the agrarian revolt of 1932 and the launching of the "New Deal".

WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE FAMILY FARM?

This question goes to the very heart of the farm problem in the Corn Belt. Will the family farm remain the dominant type of farm business organization? Or will it fail to meet the demands and make the readjustments required by the new industrialism? Will it give way to corporation farming, applying the methods of large business concerns to the tasks of farming with the result that the rural community composed of owner-operator farmers will essentially be lost? Or will it decline towards the present levels of Southern and Eastern Europe? What is the true objective toward which we should direct our efforts if we are to maintain a sound agriculture without which we cannot have a sound nation?

There has been a great deal of discussion since 1920 concerning "the passing of the family farm" and the coming ascendency of the "corporation farm" as the dominant type of managerial unit in agriculture. W. E. Dodd thinks the farmer is headed toward "peasantry," whatever that term may be taken to mean; while L. M. Hacker writes with journalistic flourish that the farmer is doomed to a wage-slavery under a capitalistic system which is destined to submerge the family farm. Henry Ford urges part-time farming in connection with "the factory system" as a solution of the farm problem. These sweeping judgments are not founded upon an adequate understanding of the farm problem in the United States.
THE FAMILY FARM AS A HOME

The chief obstacle to the development of a sound agriculture on a more enduring basis is the fact that the commercial aspects of farming have been given too much prominence. The value of the farm as a business has been emphasized at the expense of the value as a home. Farming as a mere business enterprise with only commercial objectives may be, in most individual instances, very disappointing. It usually tends to be overdone. The fact remains that the highest rewards of farming are not economic but social. President Farrell of the Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science observes that:

Adversity is impressing large numbers of farm people with this fact. Thus it is laying the foundations for the acceptance of a rural philosophy that seems likely in the end to prevail. This philosophy holds that the chief objective of farming is not to accumulate monetary wealth but to promote human happiness in the countryside; that the farm should be regarded primarily as a home and only incidentally as a business enterprise.

When financial savings accumulate, as they usually do in time on a farm dominated by this philosophy, they are expended not for more land or other facilities for increasing production, but for conveniences, comforts, and beautifications; for books, labor-saving devices, education, bathtubs, music, pictures, rugs, trees, flowers. This rural philosophy leads not to continuous expansion and the idolatry of size and numbers, but to persistent moderation; to a method of working and a way of living that exemplify genuine temperance.

While the purely business aspects of farming are supplemental rather than primary, there must be reasonably business-like procedure; and that procedure must be in tune with a long time program for the development, conservation, and enjoyment of both the physical and the human resources of each farm.

The family farm constitutes the primary objective of a sound philosophy of agriculture. This objective can no longer be secured by the laissez-faire methods that characterized American development to the turn of the century. A well-conceived, long-time plan of procedure must be formulated and put into effect. This program should give due consideration to the immediate needs of the farmer, but these needs should be conceived in harmony with a long-time program for the preservation of the family as the keystone of a democratic rural America.
The advantages of a program of this kind are: the preservation of the family farm as the dominant type of land ownership; the retention of a good farm in the same family from generation to generation; a greater stability of tenure, insuring a more satisfactory social life and providing a better basis for cooperation; the improvement of the rural community; the gradual lifting of the great burden of debt which would reduce the pressure to produce the maximum volume of such groups; and the consequent lessening of the tendency to over-production.

Any consideration of the role of the family farm in our national development involves, of course, the problem of tenancy. It should be noted that 42 percent of the farm families do not own their farms; they are tenants. Tenancy in itself may, however, be either good or bad depending on the conditions under which tenants lease and operate their farms. How then should the problem be treated? Should we endeavor to bring about its virtual elimination or recognize its place in our rural economy? The wiser course of procedure lies along two lines of endeavor—one leading toward a better balance between owner-operated farms and tenant-operated farms, and the other leading toward an improvement of the status of the tenant farmer. It may be observed that “If landlords and tenants can be induced by enlightened self-interest or required by law to abandon certain vicious leasing customs and if security of tenure and incentive for protecting and improving leased property by tenants is provided, then tenancy can advantageously retain its place as a rung in the American agricultural ladder.” Tenancy should be a stepping stone from which the competent and enterprising farmers may advance to the ownership of the farms they operate and not a condition from which there is no escape.

COOPERATIVE INDIVIDUALISM
AND GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our nation has advanced to a point where we must modify the philosophy of individualism that has dominated American thought in the past. American agriculture, if
it is to maintain its important position in the national economic and social system, must realize that the time has passed when the individualism of pioneer days is sufficient to overcome any difficulties that may be met. Farmers as a class can no longer succeed by their own unaided efforts. In earlier days the things which made for success or failure were largely in the control of the individual farmer. Today other factors beyond the control of the farmer contribute to the success of a farm enterprise in ways undreamed of 50 years ago. Formerly the man who handled his resources efficiently was a successful farmer. If he was industrious he was assured of success. Today even the most thrifty, efficient and industrious farmers may fail through no fault of their own. Forces have been set in motion that require social control. The individual alone cannot deal effectively with the larger forces.

The "rugged individualism" of the pioneer period played its part in the colonization of the west. Individual initiative and resourcefulness were developed in response to the needs of a frontier society. Laissez-faire has had its day. This does not mean the end of individualism, for democracy means liberty and the opportunity for everyone to rise to the highest and best of which he is capable. Individual effort is recognized as the major factor in success. A philosophy of life is next in importance. Political action and governmental responsibility complete the order. A higher form of individualism must be developed. This is "cooperative individualism."

The problem of an agricultural society can no longer be left to chance. For solving these problems, the prevailing "economic fatalism," the notion that "nothing can be done," that the course of economic events is inevitable, must give way to the idea that the actions of society can and do affect profoundly the course of events; that intelligent action modifies the direction in which economic forces work themselves out and that society can modify to a considerable extent the effects of economic forces by making it possible for individuals to adjust themselves to these forces more easily and quickly.
CONCLUSION

The basic principle of a sound agriculture without which we cannot have a sound nation is "the wide-spread private ownership of the land" for the ownership of the land by farmers is "the ultimate assurance of freedom, of democracy, and of scientific progress." Economic security is the foundation of freedom, and freedom is the foundation of democracy and a condition essential to the progress of science. Of this, then, we may be certain, that both private and public action are necessary to secure a land utilization that will preserve the family farm and individual initiative as the characteristic features of American agriculture.