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THE FAMILY FARMS IN THE UNITED STATES: SOCIAL RELATIONS, SCALE AND REGION

Abstract: Family farms are one of America's cultural icons and an important element of American farming tradition. However, their definition is neither clear-cut nor unambiguous; as indicated by the authors of this article, the role and significance of family farms are different for all currently used definitions. Comparing and contemplating the definitions specified by the USDA and UN-FAO, as well as the concepts put forth by American organizations, e. g. the National Family Farm Coalition or Family Farm Defenders, the authors point out sizable differences in numbers and basic characteristics of family farms. These differences result from factors related to scale of production, extent of land ownership and tenancy, as well as various social and regional influences. The two latter categories encompass issues affecting mid-sized farms (agriculture of the middle), the significance of income from extra-agricultural labor for the family farm budget, the role and importance of hired labor, and the characteristics and extent of land tenancy. The authors stress the importance of family farming in maintaining the vitality of local communities and food security in the US along with its role in protecting biodiversity and the environment. The closing part of the article focuses on addressing US rural policy, which should count protecting family farms among its key goals.

Key words: family farms as an American cultural icon, problems with definitions, unique characteristics of mid-sized farms, extra-agricultural income, protecting family farms

INTRODUCTION

The family farm is an iconic image in U.S. culture, an important element in American agrarianism. In a 'pure form' the family farm has, however, proven elusive from the start. In place of feudal lords, aspiring colonial family farmers found bankers, landlords, locally or globally monopolized input and commodity markets claiming access to portions of the fruits of family labor, if not exerting partial control

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over the autonomy of these aspiring entrepreneurs [Mooney, 1988; Mooney and Majka 1995]. Nevertheless, despite the 'hidden' subordination of the family farm to both local and global elites, the image and aspirations of family farmers stuck in the cultural imagination. Perhaps this framing was amplified in part by the real possibility that across a life cycle one might move up the so-called "agricultural ladder" to achieve some level of independence. However, ever-expanding scales of production and capital requirements often meant the next generation might have to begin again, or scramble to stay in place on what Cochrane (1979) called the "technological treadmill". Though always swimming against the stream, the agrarian ideal held that family farm was good, wholesome, to be preserved (even if those same farmers were often simultaneously ridiculed by urban dwellers as backward, simplistic "hicks"). Still today, agricultural policy must often be framed as a defense or promotion of family farming, even as its actual effects continue to erode the position of the family farm (see, for example, [Environmental Working Group 2014; NCFF 2014]).

The present analysis tries to dig beneath this cultural imagery to consider, with some basic empirical data, the current state of the family farm in the U.S. We will proceed by assessing the role that scale of production plays in this matter. Then we will consider the social relations of production that might facilitate or impede the (re)production of family farming. We must also take into consideration the significance of regional variation in a nation that is geographically more diverse in history, politics and culture than is often recognized.

DEFINING FAMILY FARMS

Discussions about family farming nearly always begin (and sometimes end) with debate about definitions. In order to guide the data presentation in this paper, we must introduce some definitions. We utilize the categories under which the best and most recent data are gathered by the U.S. Census of Agriculture, which is conducted every 5 years. Although we will focus on the 2012 Census, we will draw some comparisons with previous censuses in order to establish some trends. However, we should note that the Census historical trend data must be treated with some caution given changes in definitions and changes in prices. We will also supplement our analysis with other data, such as USDA surveys.

While recognizing that there is *no hard and fast definition of the family farm,* Hoppe and Banker [2010: 2] note that USDA's Economic Research Service currently defines the family farm as: *any farm where the majority of the business is owned by the operator and individuals related to the operator by blood or marriage, including relatives who do not reside in the operator's household. Non-family farms include any farm where the operator and relatives do not own a majority of the business*. Under this definition, MacDonald [2014] finds that 98% of U.S. farms are family farms, accounting for 85% of production. While such a definition and finding might be useful for political purposes, for purposes of scholarly analysis, such a definition is of little analytical utility as it lacks discriminatory capacity. Hoppe and Banker [2010: 1 further break down family farms by scale of production: small family farms

(less than $250,000 gross sales) and large-scale family farms (more than $250,000 gross sales). This apparent bifurcation and elimination of the "agriculture of the middle" by definition is partially rescued by a second level categorization within each of those primary categories. This establishes, within the small family farm category: low sales farms (less than $100,000 gross sales) and medium sales farms ($100,000 to $249,000 gross sales); and within the large-scale family farm category: large family farms ($250,000 to $500,000 gross sales) and very large family farms ($500,000+ gross sales).

TABLE 1: Farms by Gross Sales: 1996–2012
TABELA 1. Farmy wg sprzedaży brutto: lata 1966–2012

Farms by size class (gross sales): 1996–2012			
Category	1996	2012	Percent Change
Less than $50,000	74.0	75.6	+1.6
$50,000–$249,999	18.1	13.2	**-5.0**
$250,000–$499,999	4.8	4.6	**-0.2**
$500,000–$999,999	2.1	3.2	+1.1
$1,000,000 or more	1.1	3.5	+2.4

Source: 1996–2012 USDA Agricultural Resource Management Survey.
Źródło: 1996–2012, USDA Agricultural Resource Management Survey.

In contrast to USDA's emphasis on business ownership in their definition, the UN-FAO defines family farming as *...a means of organizing...production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including women's and children's* [UN-FAO 2014]. This FAO definition emphasizes the role of labor and tends to more closely align with American social movement organizations that seek a defense of the family farm that also tend to emphasize the significance of labor and management. Family farm advocacy groups often take a position that emphasizes labor input and decision-making autonomy over scale. The Family Farm Defenders (retrieved, 2014) organization writes: *While many government agencies have their own definition of "family farm" that is often tied to size or income for the purpose of distributing subsidies or qualifying for programs, a better definition would encompass who does the bulk of the work and who makes farming decisions*. Similarly, the National Family Farm Coalition (retrieved, 2014) defines the family farm as *A family farm is not defined by size, but rather by the fact that the family provides the vast majority of the labor and management decisions*.

Based on a special survey, distinct from the Census, the USDA-ERS calculated share of production by commodity type under both the USDA and the FAO definitions of family farms. Figure 1 shows variability with respect to definitions of family farming with fewer farms qualifying as family farms under the FAO definition. This also shows considerable variability with respect to commodity group.

It is important to note that these figures are for share of total production, not the percent of farms. Thus, for instance, the large gap in measurements in the dairy

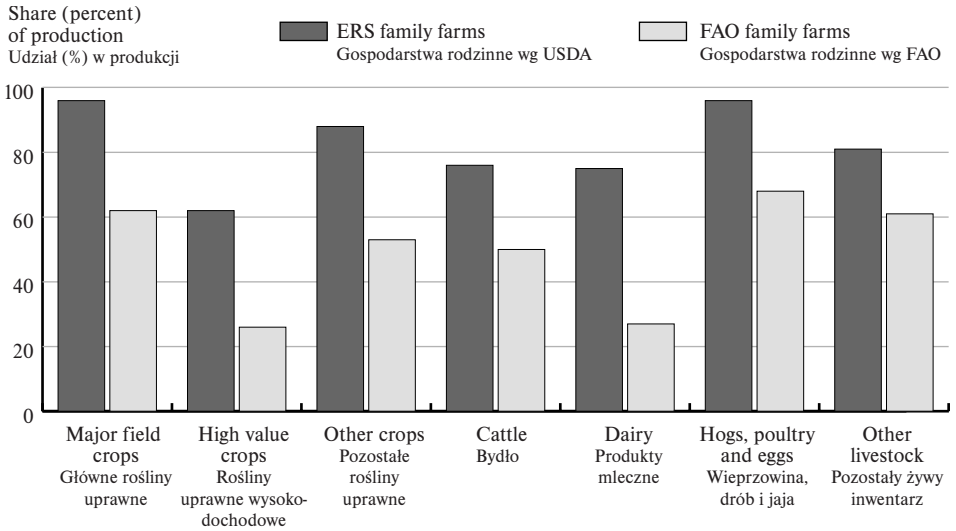

FIGURE 1. Comparison of U.S. Family Farms by USDA and FAO Definitions

RYSUNEK 1. Porównanie znaczenia rodzinnych gospodarstw w Stanach Zjednoczonych, wyróżnionych wg definicji USDA oraz FAO

Note: Major field crops are corn, cotton, soybeans, and wheat; high value crops are fruits, nursery, and vegetables.

Family farms dominate major field vrops, and hogs, poultry & eggs.

Uwaga: Główne rośliny uprawne: kukurydza, bawełna, soja, pszenica. Rośliny wysokodochodowe: owoce, sadzonki, warzywa.

Gospodarstwa rodzinne zdecydowanie dominują w produkcji głównych roślin uprawnych, wieprzowiny oraz drobiu i jaj, najmniejszy udział mają w produkcji roślin wysokodochodowych.

Source: USDA, Ekonomic Research Service, using data from the 2011 Agricultural Resource Management Survey, Version 1.

Źródło: USDA, Ekonomic Research Service, using data from the 2011 Agricultural Resource Management Survey, Version 1.

sector reflect small numbers of very large family farms that depend on hired labor (such as in California or Florida) but account for a relatively higher proportion of production than the large number of smaller family dairy farms.

We will proceed by looking at some data drawn from two general and current perspectives on the issue of family farming. These roughly approximate sociological analysis of social inequalities that focus on either social class (relations) or social strata (gradations).

One approach starts with scale of production. This body of scholarship (often of an interdisciplinary nature) has increasingly moved toward an examination of the so-called "agriculture of the middle". This analytical maneuver moves scale (usually measured in acreage or sales volumes) to center stage. The social relations of agricultural production are decentered insofar as no particular social relationships are implied by this position in the stratification of production hierarchy grounded largely in market situation (access to land, output to markets). Interestingly, the 'ag of the middle' literature does tend to emphasize the same values and norms, or what we might call the same functions, as hold sway in the arguments for family farming

[Kirschenmann, et al. 2008]. Family farming may be what Kirschenmann, et al. [2008] call *scale-related", it is not "scale-determined*. Holding a position in the "middle" sized categories is analytically distinct from family farming. Conceptually, the middle may be held by operations constructed by any number of sets of social relations. The correspondence of the family farm to the agriculture of the middle remains an empirical question.

Another approach begins from a view of social relations. This approach digs beneath the USDA definition to uncover 'hidden' relationships in terms of "owner" and "operator" by examining social relations that impinge on full and independent ownership as well as complete control over the operation (labor/management) of the farm. This calls attention to the family's internal dynamics as well as to its external relationships. This leads us to interest in the role of tenancy, the use of hired labor, dependency on credit, off-farm employment, and contract production [see Mooney, 1988]. Space precludes full examination of all of these, but we will point to the impact of some of these in the erosion of that 98% family farming figure.

The USDA definition does take, as a point of departure, some consideration of *social relationships* by identifying "majority" ownership of the farm by people related to the *"operator"*. This begs many questions about the sociology (social relations) of family farming. First, is simply the qualification of "majority" owner that opens the door to variable levels of non-familial participation. Further, it may well be that a family heavily in debt to a bank may consider themselves to be majority owners. Similarly, the meaning and significance of debt may vary in relationship to the operator's age or life cycle effects. This definition gives no consideration to the matter of contracted production nor to dependence on off-farm employment to sustain the overall household economic position. One suspects too that an "operator" may well be an owner who may depend more on the labor of non-family members than his/her own labor or that of family. We might also note that gross sales is also an inadequate measure of assessing scale between different products as it glosses over the variable cost of production (capital investments, labor time) by commodity.

Having considered these approaches to the examination of the family farm in the U.S., we must also be aware of tremendous regional variability in U.S. agriculture. Different regions face different opportunities and threats, strengths and weaknesses. Thus, in terms of family farm policy we must emphasize that "one size does not fit all".

FARM RESOURCE REGIONS

USDA-ERS [2000] has recognized this regional variation with the development of "farm resource regions". Figure 2 maps these regions.

We will refer to these regions to discuss some of the variation in scale and social relations in U.S. agriculture. The 2012 Census of Agriculture identifies farms operated by a family or individual, as defined by USDA NASS in terms of "legal status": Family or individual (sole proprietorship), excluding partnership and

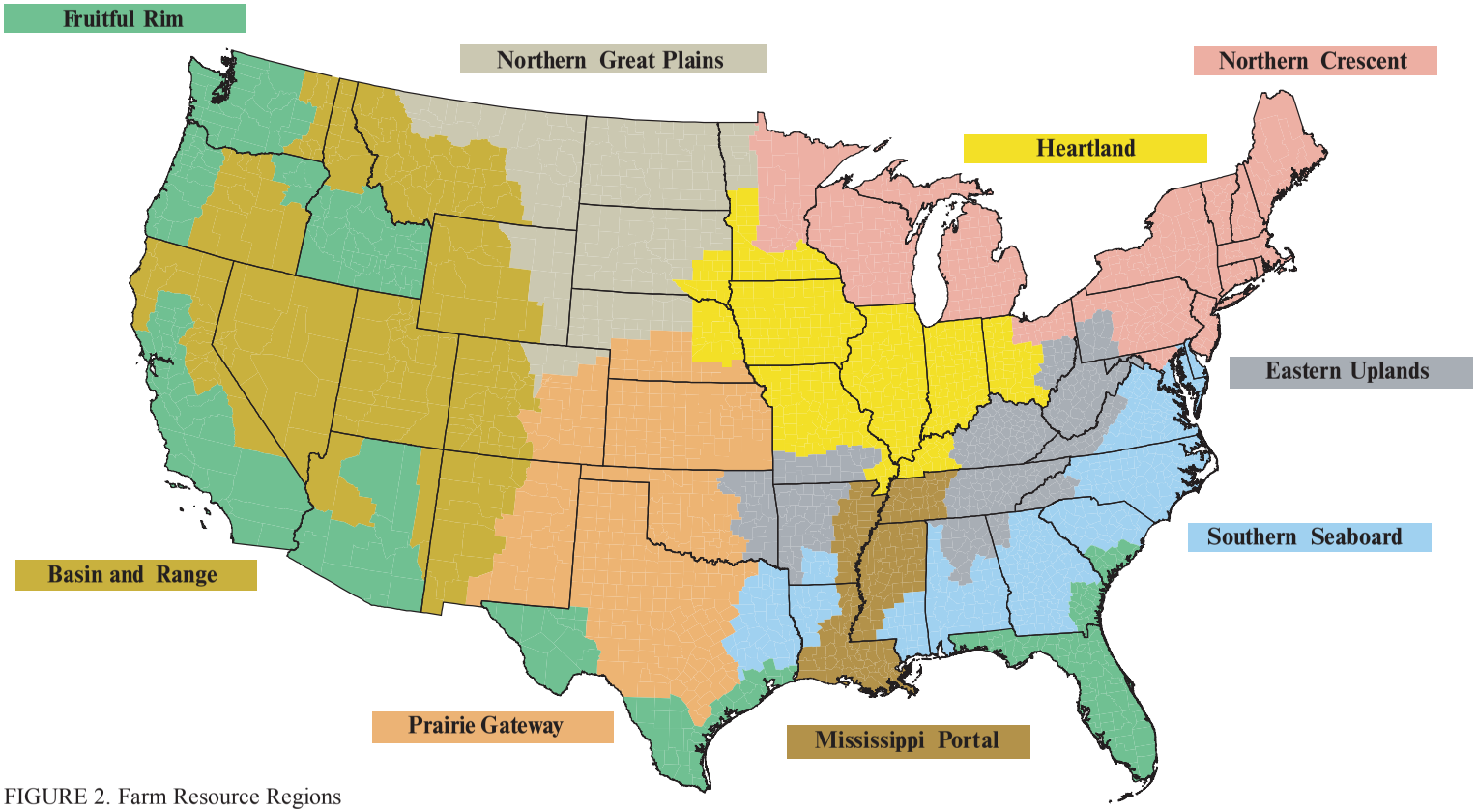

FIGURE 2. Farm Resource Regions
RYSUNEK 2. Regiony zasobów rolniczych

Source: 2012, USDA Agricultural Resource Managment Survey.
Źródło: 2012, USDA Agricultural Resource Managment Survey.

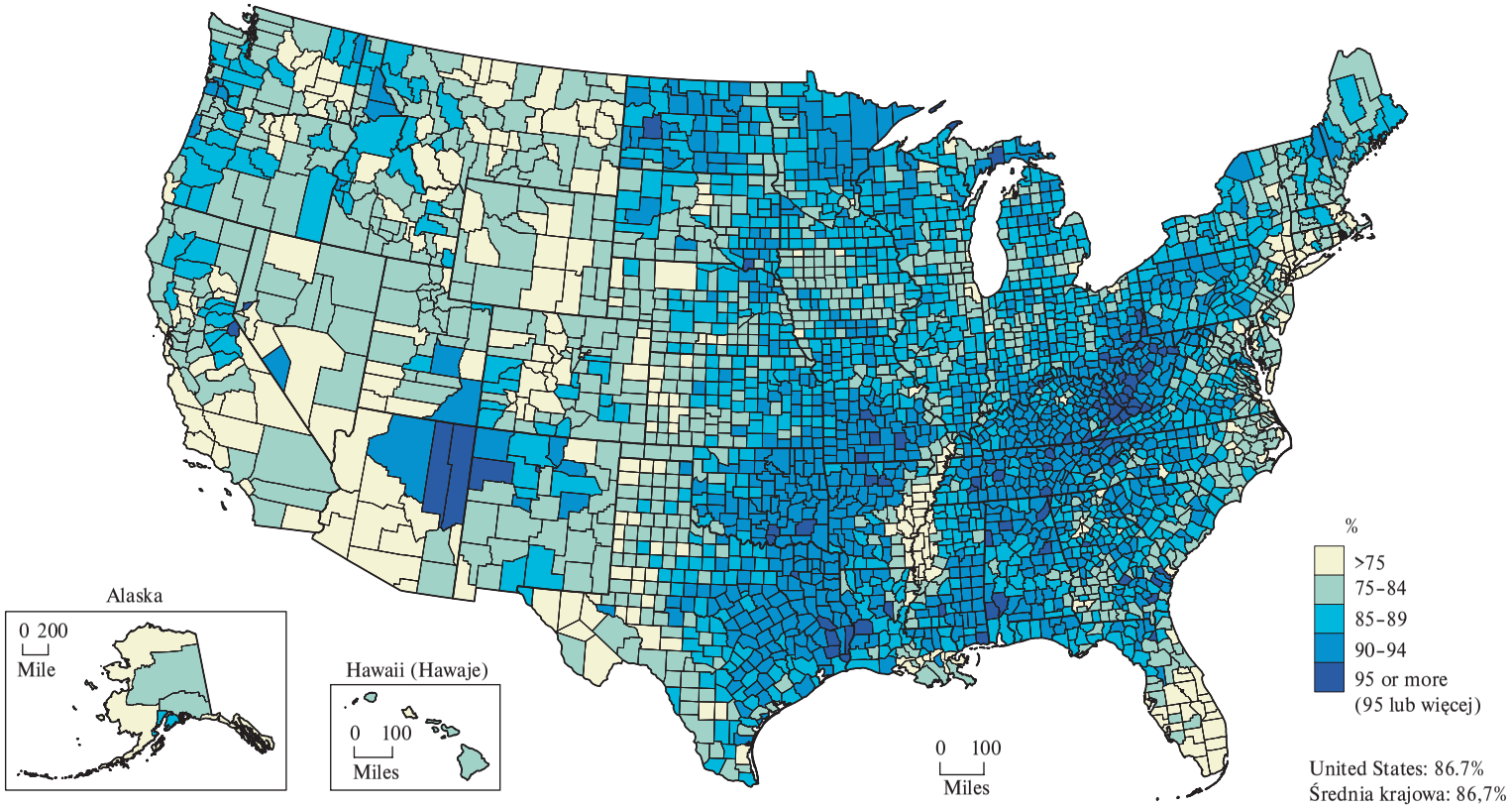

FIGURE 3. Percent of Farms Operated by Family or Individual, 2012
RYSUNEK. 3. Odsetek gospodarstw prowadzonych przez rodziny bądź osoby fizyczne, 2012 r.

Source: 2012, USDA Agricultural Resource Managment Survey.
Źródło: 2012, USDA Agricultural Resource Managment Survey.

corporation. Figure 3 shows that the places that have the lowest percentage of such farms: the Mississippi Delta (or Portal); much of the Fruitful Rim, especially southern Florida and California; and the Basin and Range. We should also note that even these counties with lowest percentage of family farms are only less than 75%. Only 5% of U.S. farms are corporations. We note that some "family owned and operated farms" might hold the legal status of "corporation" insofar as it may provide particular tax benefits.

SCALE

Variation in size by acreage is mostly a reflection of geographic, historical conditions and especially commodity mix and makes it very difficult to discern much about family farming. Measures of size by gross sales does not necessarily correspond with size by acreage unless one holds commodity constant. An acre of oranges has a much higher value than an acre of wheat.

In the 1990s, analysis of the "agriculture of the middle" was indicating growth of small farms (less than $50K) and largest (over $500K) with a diminishing of those (though still the majority) in the middle. This growth in the smallest categories was enough to reverse a long-term trend and to increase the total number of farms between 1992–97 which happened again between 2002–2007. However, many family farm advocates are wary of the increase in the total number of farms because the middle-sized family farm (seen as the mainstay of family farming) continued to lose proportionate ground in this polarization process. Kirschenmann, et al [2008] write: *the mid-sized farms are the most vulnerable in today's polarized markets, since they are too small to compete in the highly consolidated commodity markets and too large and commoditized to sell in the direct markets*. Table 1, based on USDA ARMS study shows the concerns about the agriculture of the middle: the losses over 26 years by the lower middle categories. The year by year data show the $50K–$250K category to be the most volatile as well as losing the most over the time period.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

Off-Farm Farm Income. For many years the majority of farm household income has derived from non-farm sources. Zulauf [2013] estimates that even among the $250,000 + farms non-farm income constitutes 25% of *household* income. The recent Census indicates that the heavier concentrations of principal operators reporting farming to be their primary occupation includes the Heartland, the Northern Great Plains, portions of the Fruitful Rim, the Mississippi Portal, and portions of the Northern Crescent that have strong dairy traditions. However, that data does not tell us if another family member is working off the farm which a strategy that has become quite general where possible. Off-farm income is often contingent on variable opportunities in different regions (less opportunities in Great Plains) and to some extent, on labor demands associated with commodity mix (dairy regions) and farm size.

Tenancy. The heaviest densities of full tenancy are in the Mississippi Delta's intensive cotton/soybean region as well as the corn/soy belt across Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. Land values in these regions have increased tremendously during growth of biofuel sector. While numbers of full tenant farmers decreased in the U.S. between 2002–2012, the amount of harvested cropland by full tenants increased in the U.S. and in many states such as: Mississippi, Kansas and Kentucky.

Hired labor. Dependence on hired labor is particularly strong in the Fruitful Rim and other regions that have a history of fruit and vegetable production such as eastern Wisconsin and western Michigan. These data are somewhat problematic in terms of assessing the relative proportion of family to hired labor because the measure includes family members who are paid, which can be a tax advantage.

Another way to assess the impacts of social relations as well as other regional variability is to examine production costs of specific inputs as a percent of total costs of production. Some regions and commodity mixes have a higher percentage of production costs going to labor, others contribute more to interest or rent, some depend more on chemical inputs as a proportion of their overall costs. We emphasize this to reinforce the point that a "one size fits all" policy toward family farming will not be effective across regions. Environmental policy might impact North Dakota farmers more than Utah or North Carolina farmers because of considerable discrepancy in dependence on chemicals. Farm labor policy might impact Washington State and New York more than Iowa or Kansas, the latter having relatively lower investments in hired labor. Policy that affects land values might impact states where rent or interest is larger part of expenses (Iowa, North Dakota) than North Carolina or Kansas.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

As noted above, whether scholars and activists approach this question in terms of scale, "agriculture of the middle", or in terms of social relations, "family farming", they tend to share similar concerns, values and interests about the impact of the changes taking place. We draw here largely from Kirschenmann, et al. [2008] who effectively summarize many of these concerns in their essay *Why Worry About the Agriculture of the Middle?* We supplement this with claims made by the National Family Farm Coalition in their policy advocacy role. Among those concerns are claims that the eclipse of the middle or of family farming will have negative environmental consequences. The argument is that large farms and extra-familial influences will not be able to provide the stewardship of the land that is both possible and incentivized by mid-sized family farms. Particular attention here is to the soil and its relationship to water resources (e.g., pollution and flooding). If we understand correctly, an argument is also made that competitive markets function more effectively with a larger number of actors making decisions based on a diversity of conditions. Diverse conditions give rise to diverse decisions and thus a protection against the development of mono-cultural values that parallel the mono-cultural production of crops. Such conditions are more likely to give rise to innovation.

Another concern often expressed is for the 'hollowing out' of rural communities. Large numbers of mid-sized farms, it is claimed, provide opportunities for other local businesses to thrive by sales of farm inputs as well as other services. It is claimed that concentration of farming and vertical integration with distant owners or corporations' internal supply chains will bypass the local economy. Reflecting long standing claims about rural America, land ownership by members of the community is said to give those members a greater stake as citizens in the community. The famous study by Goldschmidt [1946] of two differently structured California farming communities is often cited in reference to this threat to the vibrancy of rural community and its social capital.

More recently, the attention has turned to concerns about food quality and food security. This is framed with claims that very large farms cannot easily provide a diversity of foods, nor foods with particular qualities. It is argued that only the smallest farms can reasonably accommodate the growing direct marketing sphere of farmers markets and community supported agriculture programs. The middle is left with capacity to respond to market signals but without the infrastructure to engage with that market. This framing also seeks greater resonance by portraying broader public goods, such as accessible open spaces, wildlife habitat, cleaner air, a more diverse landscape, etc. Food security claims are made that diverse, decentralized agriculture will be more protected against rapid diffusion of epidemic disease and pests as well as a post-9-11 concern that concentrated agriculture is more vulnerable to terrorist threat (not perhaps in terms of creating hunger or death, but in terms of severe economic losses.)

WHAT IS TO BE (UN)DONE?

Ray and Schaffer [2008] argue that policy to facilitate or protect the middle sized farm sector must be policies that reward those skills and resource advantages that midsize farms hold over both smaller and larger farms. They claim that these are management skills, flexibility and adaptability. It is argued that there are specialty markets that are too small for large farms and too big for direct marketing niches. In some cases, the farm to institution (school, hospital, restaurant) movement often finds inadequate supplies of local/regional products. These are said to be opportunities. Another development is the creation of regional "food hubs" for aggregating production from small- and mid-size farmers within a region. In some cases, these markets also require the development of the technical infrastructure for transporting and processing farm products. Regional-level meat processing facilities are beginning to emerge in some areas to meet these specialty markets. Some of these markets might best be addressed by cooperative enterprises of mid-sized farms addressing regional needs and providing "identity-preservation" through branding associated with a particular locale.

Arguments are made for developing 'value chains' linking midsize farmers with midsize, regional processors, distributors, and retailers. These arguments often focus on regional development and claim that consumers want 1) to eat locally or 2) to eat

a product identified with a particular region (even if not local, or within that foodshed), i.e., "food from somewhere". The claim is that the family and midsize farms are additionally threatened by blockage to intergenerational transfer of land assets. Increasing land values in many places are putting land ownership beyond the reach of the next generation of farmers who will be saddled with unsustainable debt or permanent tenancy. The financialization of land is lending once again to its value as a speculative asset, driving price beyond its productive value (similar to 1970s prelude to 1980s farm crisis, though the speculation is driven by different mediating mechanisms). Commodity policy that pushes grains for biofuel development exacerbates this problem.

Many (e.g., [Environmental Working Group, 2014; National Family Farm Coalition, 2014]) argue that agricultural policy disproportionately benefits the largest producers of certain commodities and that if this policy were undone, midsize producers could enter a more competitive market. It is argued that such policy also disproportionately benefits the biofuel sector that disadvantages food consumers (nearly half of the U.S. corn crop now goes to ethanol), is not energy-efficient, and drives land prices beyond the reach of the next generation of farmers.

Family farm advocates call for public research institutions to devote more resources to technology and knowledge tied to interests of mid-sized farm/family farm interests. This is a long time complaint that can be traced back to Milo Reno and the Farmers Holiday Movement of the Great Depression and to Jim Hightower's populist analysis of agriculture, more recently.

In recent years, a segment of the family farm population has found a political and cultural opportunity, from the increasing interest in eating healthier foods and local foods both of which have been popularly associated with family farming, or are at least disassociated from "industrial agriculture".

Kirschenmann, et al, [2008] make the point that large firms will continue to pursue and find ways to produce these "differentiated products". Thus, to capture those markets midsize farmers may also need to be ever vigilant, creative and responsive to the market that wants to *have a conversation about the food they are buying*. They quote Ken Taylor, founder of the Minnesota Food Association: *People who live in urban communities for the most part don't want to get their hands dirty but they surely want to shake the hand of someone who does* [Kirschenmann, et al, 2008; 16].

U.S. agricultural policy has long lacked a coherent, integrated structure, instead being largely constituted by a patchwork of policies toward various commodities, dependent on the political strength of commodity groups and their representatives. No single policy will "fix" the diverse array of problems facing America's family farmers. However, an anchoring of food and agricultural policy in a substantial, rather than nominal, commitment to independent ownership and operation of "family" farms might begin to lend some coherence and integration to this policy. This would seem to be more in accord with the values of a significant component of America's food producers as well as consumers who are ever more interested in their food purchases.

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GOSPODARSTWA RODZINNE W USA: STOSUNKI SPOŁECZNE, ROZMIARY I RÓŻNICE REGIONALNE

Streszczenie: Gospodarstwa rodzinne są jedną z ikon amerykańskiej kultury oraz ważnym elementem amerykańskiej tradycji agrarystycznej. Jednakże ich definicja nie jest do końca rozstrzygająca ani jasna. W artykule autorzy wskazują, że rola i znaczenie gospodarstw rodzinnych zależy właśnie od przyjętej definicji. Rozważając i porównując definicje formułowane przez Ministerstwo Rolnictwa USA, Organizację ds. Wyżywienia i Rolnictwa Narodów Zjednoczonych oraz koncepcje proponowane przez działające w USA organizacje, takie jak: Krajowa Koalicja na rzecz Gospodarstw Rodzinnych czy Obrońcy Gospodarstw Rodzinnych, autorzy wskazują na zasadnicze rozbieżności, jeśli chodzi o liczbę

i podstawowe charakterystyki rodzinnych gospodarstw rolnych. Rozbieżności te są rezultatem czynników związanych ze skalą produkcji, zakresu własności oraz dzierżawy ziemi, jak również rozmaitych uwarunkowań regionalnych i społecznych. W ramach tych dwóch ostatnich kategorii wskazuje się na kwestie związane ze szczególnym charakterem tzw. średnich gospodarstw (*agriculture of the middle*), jak również na znaczenie dochodów uzyskiwanych przez rodziny rolnicze z pracy poza gospodarstwem, rolę i znaczenie najemnej siły roboczej oraz charakter i zakres dzierżawy ziemi. Autorzy podkreślają ponadto znaczenie rodzinnych gospodarstw rolnych dla utrzymania witalności społeczności lokalnych oraz bezpieczeństwa żywnościowego USA, a także ochrony środowiska naturalnego i zachowania bioróżnorodności. Ostatnia część artykułu skupiona jest na postulatach pod adresem polityki wobec obszarów wiejskich w USA, której istotnym celem powinna być właśnie ochrona rodzinnych gospodarstw rolnych.

Słowa kluczowe: gospodarstwa rodzinne jako ikona amerykańskiej kultury, problemy definicyjne, szczególny charakter gospodarstw średnich, dochody pozarolnicze, ochrona rodzinnych gospodarstw rolnych