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Why Defend Proprietary (“Family Farm”) Agriculture? A Soliloquy

A minister friend of mine recently raised penetrating questions about what is happening in the make-up of U.S. agriculture. “The takeover of family farms and ranches by company and/or corporate giants,” he wrote, “I judge for the most part to be a negative value.” He then asked, “Why is it taking place?” followed by, “What is being done to counteract it?”

The second question is answered easily: almost nothing. In fact, institutions that might be expected to offer a defense are often allied with the takeover. This is true of some colleges of agriculture; of cooperatives, as in cooperative credit; and even, on occasion, of the USDA.

I am one of the few agricultural economists who defend traditional market-oriented agriculture and regret its demise. I have written and spoken on the subject for thirty-five years. I have also predicted that it will not survive, primarily for the reason that the people who have most at stake are divided among themselves and essentially impotent.

This column is a personal testament.

The issue is entangled in terminology. The structural disintegration of agriculture now underway is commonly referred to as its “industrialization.” The term is a clever coinage. It exploits the favorable image attached to industrial technology. But it is a deceitful term, because the issues that hold so much meaning have less to do with the mechanics of production than with how human beings fit into the system. How

does the giant corporate structure that is now taking over the industrialization of agriculture bear on the welfare—the dreams and goals—of its human participants?

I disagree with the many agricultural economists who subscribe to the idea of Economic Man, who is said always to put money making first. The normal person is not that. Once the basic needs for living are met, every human being seeks to pursue his or her aspirations for a good life, which extend to not only family and community, but also to the opportunities and satisfaction value involved in making a living.

Why are we losing our traditional proprietary agriculture in which the farmer is both worker and risk-taking investor/manager, and who connects with agribusiness suppliers and outlets not subserviently but via buying and selling? My first response is that the reasons usually advanced are unconvincing. Our agriculture has not failed to supply consumers with an abundance of good food. Our farmers have not been slouches in adopting the latest technology. Maybe we should ask whether farmers have been delinquent in protecting soil and water. They aren’t as innocent as they like to claim, but mega-hog farms surely are no better; and biotech soybeans, immune to herbicides, can readily lead to more groundwater pollution.

Proprietary farmers are being displaced for one reason above all others: they do not fit into the corporate business pattern that is taking over an ever-

larger part of the U.S. economy. The revamping has recently reached agribusiness. It is merchandising-oriented, enormously large scale, and intensely systematized. It’s hierarchial, run from the top down.

My bold language is that the kind of economy we are drifting into amounts to a reversion, a throwback, to the feudalism from which our European ancestors escaped to the “Colonies.” Europe’s feudalism was agrarian; that now emerging is industrial.

Our reshaped economy will remain productive enough to bear its enormous managerial and merchandising costs. But except for the corps of managers, a privileged group, the corporate structure will be dwarfing to the human spirit. In much of agriculture the man or woman on the land or in the feedlot, whether employed or contractually integrated, will not be an imaginative innovator, but a faithful follower of written instructions. It is likely that many of the wage workers will be migrants.

In a summary word, my argument in support of traditional proprietary agriculture is itself a question. In the business structure now emerging we will still be well fed. But in the dispossession—the lowering of status—of our highly educated cadre of responsible farmers, and in being enveloped in corporate bureaucracy, what is gained? ■

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