

SOCIOLOGY AND THE FARM CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

American agriculture is once again in a very serious financial crisis. Information pertaining to this crisis is readily available from a variety of sources. The print and electronic media have widely covered it with both human interest stories as well as broader national and regional level figures. Even Hollywood has provided several successful films portraying the tragedy of the loss of independence and dignity that coincide with the failure of a family farm. The USDA has published a stream of data on the sorry state of U.S. agriculture, though these often conclude with optimistic expectations for 'next year.' The General Accounting Office (G.A.O.), too, has provided analyses of the crisis (1986a, 1986b). Finally, data are also available from analyses done by local states: surveys by state departments of agriculture, by Colleges of Agriculture, or by activist groups.

Given the availability of such information, I will not repeat the litany of facts and figures of the crisis here, but will instead point to two apparent failures of this literature. First, though much of the literature provides a good deal of statistical detail, it lacks grounding in theoretical frameworks that might explain the crisis. We might expect and accept this from government agencies, activist groups, and economists. In fact, we might even expect it from sociology, but with respect to the latter we need not accept this poverty of theory. The second, perhaps related, failure of this literature is its inability to generate widespread interest in the crisis among either the general population or the broader sociological profession. This paper is addressed to these issues. Let us consider the latter problem first.

A FARM CRISIS? AGAIN?

The apathy of the general public to the American farm crisis has recently been explained by Lyson (1986) as a consequence of three interrelated factors. First, the social gulf between farmers and the rest of urban America restricts interaction and, thus, knowledge of and interest in the problems of U.S. farmers. Second,

the lack of correspondence between retail food prices and farm income implies that at this primary intersection of agricultural and non-agricultural worlds, the most dramatic fluctuations of farm income and well-being have no significant impact on the urban consumer. Finally, Lyson suggests that media coverage of farming has perennially overloaded the public with negative imagery, portraying agriculture as always going from one crisis to the next.

While Lyson's analysis makes sense of the general public's lack of interest in the farm crisis, this paper is concerned with sociology's relative indifference and rural sociology's belated response to the farm crisis. A discipline that is usually eager to examine, if not exploit, crises of any magnitude, sociology seems to have only very recently discovered the current crisis of American agriculture. The following pages suggest some possible causes of this relative neglect, then provide an overview of the various approaches to the problem which the discipline has, in fact, brought to bear on the crisis, and finally, closes with a critical assessment of the potential which certain sociological traditions have for understanding, explaining, and/or ameliorating such crises.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER?

Perhaps sociology's relative indifference and belated interest in the farm crisis is already explained by Lyson. Most sociologists, after all, live and work and shop for groceries in urban environments, have little direct contact with farm populations, and witness the seemingly endless news and human interest stories of farm failures, floods, droughts, pests, etc. As a 'practicing' sociologist, I don't want to believe that Lyson has explained us along with everyone else. We are supposed to share a perspective that puts us 'above' the layperson's view of the world, a perspective that also allows us to see 'beneath' the surface phenomena to deeper structures. While the sociological imagination should alert us intellectually to the onset of crises, we also have more immediate interests in crisis. Indeed, crises are our bread and butter, our opportunity to acquire research grants. Crises are our chance to tell the world: "I told you so." Our introductory texts, especially those for the study of "Social Problems," throw the term 'crisis' around quite readily, presumably to make students aware of the urgency of mastering the course and of the importance of sociology. Perhaps, like Lyson's media coverage of agriculture, we have been too quick with the term. Upon examination of several introduction to sociology and social problems textbooks including

one that was subtitled: "Society in Crisis," I could find no definition of the concept 'crisis.' Webster (1977) provides a number of definitions suggesting "turning points;" "decisive moments;" "an unstable or crucial time;" "a state of affairs whose outcome will make a decisive difference;" and, more specifically, "the period of strain following the culmination of a period of business prosperity when forced liquidation occurs."

Under these more general definitions, it is easy to see why sociologists might be late to recognize a farm crisis. Governmental and academic publications replicate the mass media in continuously presenting agriculture, and agricultural policy, as being at a critical juncture (a 'crossroads' being, perhaps, the most popular imagery). The most significant recent contribution to this was former Secretary of Agriculture Bergland's publication of *A Time To Choose* (USDA, 1981) just before this particular crisis began to manifest itself more clearly. When scholars examine this literature they find agriculture and society currently posed before the two roads that diverged in the immediate post-World War II period; or did they diverge in the Great Depression? Or was that choice made in the demise of the Populist movement? Or at the time of the Civil War? Or perhaps in the War of Independence from British colonialism? Or the Enclosure Movement in England?

If every cloud has a silver lining and every problem poses an opportunity, then this obfuscation of agricultural crisis should be no exception. Indeed, this perpetual 'crisis' itself reveals a structural basis that sociologists, with any sense of history, should recognize. The 'choice' is always between further and more intensive capitalist penetration of agriculture and some vague, semi-socialized (e.g. cooperative or state-subsidized) defense of petite bourgeois production.

So why has sociology come late to this crisis? First, there seem to be fewer and fewer such persons who do have the sense of history that would reveal this structural character of the crisis, at least few who let such a sense of history interfere with their professional work. Second, the institutional separation of sociology and rural sociology has probably impeded the ability to recognize the crisis. The theoretical and conceptual tools available to 'regular' sociologists as means of analyzing crises tend to be filtered out of the agricultural colleges where the practical 'application' of rural sociology takes priority.

Generally, the sociological scholarship that attends to the present crisis originates in the land-grant college system and in the institutionalized sub-discipline of rural sociology. Some of this work has functioned to bring together rural sociologists and

agricultural economists with both parties benefiting from the interaction. Rural sociologists needed assistance in analyzing the economics of the crisis. Agricultural economists have usually seen rural sociology as limited to dealing with the error term in their regression equations. Now that the residual itself needs explanation and as they, along with the bankers, stand accused of leading farmers to this crisis, some agricultural economists have discovered family farm production to carry both a rationality that is not always dominated by short-term profit-maximization as well as a common-sense knowledge that, unlike the common assumptions of economist's models, commodity markets are not characterized by perfect competition. To some extent, rural sociology itself, living in the shadow of agricultural economics, has had to learn the former lesson (that some farms operate with non-capitalist rationality) from anthropologists (e.g. Salamon and Davis-Brown, 1986).

Some of the work being done is simply gathering data about the crisis. This is in line with the long-standing tradition of rural sociology to initiate response to any problem with a survey, though most of this data confirms similar data published by USDA.

I must not be too critical here, for this does, in fact, appear to be changing. In the late 1960s and early 1970s severe criticisms of rural sociology's abstracted empiricism threatened the very base of the subdiscipline by questioning the theoretical status of the concept, 'rural' (i.e. rural is a geographical, not a sociological concept). This coincided with: 1) Hightower's indictment of the land grant college complex which concluded that the bulk of the meager research funds given to rural sociology amounted to the "useless poking into the behavior and life styles of rural people" and to "sociological bullshit" (1973:56), and 2) a general increased interest in and awareness of Marxian theory in sociology as a whole, especially as applied to issues of imperialism and underdevelopment. In the mid to late 1970s, perhaps partly due to the co-presence of rural sociology faculty studying 'Third World' development, this more critical perspective began to present itself here and there in the world of rural sociology and began to be applied to U.S. agriculture.

Heffernan's (1972) study of contract production and Stockdale's (1976) study of corporate misadventure in the New York sugar beet 'fiasco' provide early examples of research that suggested American farmers' vulnerability at the hands of corporate America. Buttel and Newby (1980) consolidated the increasing significance and power of critical approaches to the sociology of agriculture with their edited collection of critical

works, many explicitly Marxist, on the agriculture of advanced capitalist society. Indeed, rural sociology may have needed this discovery of Marxism and its emphasis on the relations of production in order to rediscover agriculture as a means of grounding itself empirically as well as theoretically. The onset of the farm crisis did, of course, spur this renewed interest in the sociology of agriculture. While those who took up this critical sociology of agriculture (still a minority within the sub-discipline of rural sociology) were likely not surprised by the onset of crisis, neither were they fully prepared to take up the task of publishing theoretical explanations of this particular crisis. Perhaps the earlier theoretical surge needed a little more digestion; perhaps many were caught in the complex task of observing and measuring the crisis; or even in organizing and advising those farmers fighting the crisis; but publication of specific applications of that critical theory has lagged considerably behind the farm crisis (e.g. Mooney, 1986; Bonanno, this issue).

This particular tardiness may be due, in part, to the lag-time of scholarly publication. Not until (Winter) 1986 did the journal *Rural Sociology* publish a special issue on the farm crisis. The editor notes "a certain amount of frustration" with the "plodding pace of publishing refereed articles" on a "'hot topic' such as the farm crisis" (Falk, 1986:iii).

Just as I do not wish to be too critical, I also should not be too kind. Much of sociology and rural sociology's belated treatment of the farm crisis relies on traditional approaches that, lacking a critical theoretical base, fail, in turn, to perceive the structural problems or advocate fundamental structural reforms, but seek instead to patch up those existing institutions which reproduce these crises. I see this kind of work as the target of Ostendorf and Levitas' (this issue) plea that we must take a side with either the powerless victims of the crisis or with the powerful who also claim our services through their institutions. This is, of course, the point which Becker raised long ago in his famous essay, "Whose Side Are We On?" (1967).

Another way of looking at sociology's relative neglect of this crisis is to contend that there is no 'crisis.' This view either parallels the mainstream economic literature by accepting the role of the 'invisible hand' of a supposedly competitive market as a just arbiter of who should farm, ignoring the significance of human values, or it inadvertently justifies both the media coverage and the 'crossroads' literature by assuming that it truly is in the nature of agriculture to be in perpetual trouble.

Somewhat ironically, this latter view seems most dominant among those sociologists who claim to be best-equipped to interpret crisis: the Marxists. Armed with a theory that assumes/anticipates the eventual disappearance of the petite bourgeoisie and simple commodity production, Marxists can observe the agricultural sector's embeddedness within this presumably archaic mode (or is it form?) of production and greet these so-called crises with reactions ranging from indignant resignation to inevitability to throwing out the welcome mat for the 'crisis' that will finally reduce the class struggle to the simple polarization which Marx promised. From this view then, each crisis is merely an acceleration of a process that is actually continuous. Thus, the increased rate of dispossession requires no particular attention. These farmers deserve no particular sympathy, since their fate is only later in arriving than those proletarianized over the last few centuries. Though the tragic effects of this on individual lives may be recognized, it is all a consequence of capitalism working out its historic mission, a mission that is drenched in the blood, sweat, and tears of all working people.

Some Marxists may even fail to sense the tragedy as they are inclined to view family farm production with contempt. Naively and inappropriately taking Marx's words out of context, they may view agricultural crisis as liberation from the "idiocy of rural life" (Pasley, 1986). Taking Marx's comments about a particular peasantry (French) at a particular time (19th century) and assuming its relevance to a 20th century commercialized, (over)productive, specialized agriculture with a broad application of science and technology by an educated (in the Great Plains and Midwest, illiteracy is an urban, not a rural problem) population connected to the world with telephones, televisions, radios, computers, and automotive transportation is questionable to say the least. To use Marx's historically specific comments as a means of welcoming and justifying the dispossession of direct producers of ownership and control of their means of production is to turn fundamental points of Marx's humanist philosophy on its head.

Murdock, et al. (1986), further address the question of why rural sociology has responded so weakly to the crisis. They compare three basic theoretical orientations around which the sociology of agriculture has (de)centered (adaption and diffusion, structural/critical, and human/ecological) and find that, "none of the perspectives, nor all of the indicators of these perspectives combined, provides an adequate explanation of variation in levels of debts relative to assets" (1986:426). This is a sad note indeed for rural sociology, but it does suggest a reason why rural sociology has

been so slow to recognize the crisis: it is theoretically unprepared for such a project.

Another impediment to rural sociology's dealing effectively with the crisis lies in the internal structure of institutionalized rural sociology. Those rural sociologists who are most familiar with the immediate problems of farm people themselves are, generally, the extension service personnel. Since these persons tend to specialize in the 'applied' tradition they are even more removed from overarching theoretical frameworks by which they might provide better explanations than theorists who are removed from the field. Perhaps even more important is the fact that extension personnel tend to be institutionally constrained to perceive and interpret the crisis on a community by community or county by county level. The county-level organization of the Extension Service means that their local contacts provide information and seek solutions/advice at that level. While this explains the popularity of the community development approach among these rural sociologists, it constrains the likelihood of more generalized and integrated responses. Not only are the policies that most strongly structure agriculture formulated at the federal rather than the state, county, or community level, but the ability of rural communities themselves to generate independent solutions to the farm crisis dwindle in direct correspondence to the seriousness of the crisis in that region. Where the farm crisis is worst, the resource base which might be mobilized is undermined. For example, where local rural banks do survive they often do so only at the cost of increasing subordination through correspondent relations with urban center banks, thus decreasing even the local banks' power and influence in redirecting community resources. Thus, this institutional structure impedes the capacity to theorize or to generalize from local conditions at the same time that such response is most needed since the crisis itself undermines capacities for practical local solutions. In some cases we find the incapacity of these sociologists to act at any broader level leads to falling back on coping with the crisis by organizing what seem to be group therapy sessions to help reduce the 'stress' of dispossession.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps sociology has, in fact, responded much like the lay person does when confronted with an overwhelming array of negative information which he or she is unable to integrate by means of some coherent theoretical perspective: i.e. political and ideological confusion, cynicism and apathy. Indeed, Mann (1970)

suggests that this is functional for the maintenance of an unequal, unjust social system. Under this line of reasoning rural sociology's relative inability to theorize the crisis is functional to its reproduction within the land grant system.

Consider the alternative: numerous scholars out 'in the field' engaged in Mills' directive to transform the personal problems of farmers into public issues, penetrating the appearance of individual mismanagement or the historical accident of one's poorly timed entry into farming and pointing to structural factors of our political economy that necessitate such crises. Such a synthesis of theory and practical (applied) sociology might readily begin pointing fingers at the State as well as its own colleagues, leadership, and benefactors in the land grant college complex. Such a synthesis might give effective guidance to the present motley crew of activist groups who blame the crisis on the broadest range of villains: from the Soviets to finance capital (sometimes even seen as conspiring together!); from federal agricultural (non)policy to the victims themselves; from technological development to the lack of it. In short, adequate theorization by rural sociology might yield a robust critique, transforming its institutional function of legitimation into a dysfunction, both for the powers that be in the agricultural political economy and then for rural sociology itself.

Perhaps Friedland (1982) is right. Critical analysis (the appropriate starting point as response to crisis) of agricultural structure is most possible outside the confines of the land grant college complex. Unfortunately, most such sociologists have presumed agricultural issues to be 'the business' of rural sociology and have not taken much interest in agrarian affairs. Yet this crisis provides fertile grounds for analysis by sociologists in many substantive areas and particularly for critical thinkers. Understanding and explanation of the crisis would particularly benefit from examination under the conceptual apparatus developed by the broader discipline to explain crises, particularly crises of accumulation and legitimation.

Harvey's (1982) work suggests great potential for dealing with crises in agriculture. His argument that the necessary place-specificity of devaluation causes crises to "unfold with differential effects across the surface of the plain" provides a "basis for understanding the processes of crisis formation and resolution within the space economy of capitalist production" (1982:394-95). Simultaneously, this work promises assistance in the more fundamental project of grounding the concept of rural in a theory of space. Equally needed are applications of sophisticated theories

of the State to explain the role of the State in these crises. Only with such explanation can we begin to discuss policy alternatives that permit a resolution to agricultural crises. Last, but not least, it is increasingly necessary to understand the social movements generated by this crisis. The unleashing of both socialist and fascist political ideologies by the crisis suggests not only an intriguing case for the student of collective behavior, but a potentially dangerous political extremism that must be understood. In these areas and many more, the farm crisis needs and deserves attention by a broader sociological scholarship.

Sociology, in general, should not be intimidated by the institutional separation of rural sociology for that may only be further reason to enter areas where rural sociologists dare not tread due to the constraints imposed by those very institutions. Neither should sociology neglect the farm population due to its relatively small size (3% of the population) for it wields a much greater strength than that in the economy (e.g. the production of food, control of land, international trade, purchase of industrially produced inputs, etc.); in the polity (due to the high levels of political participation and the volatility of the farm vote) and in the ideology (Jeffersonian democracy, agrarianism, etc.) of the U.S. The farm crisis presents the discipline with a challenge to its ability to explain social change and the role of agency vis-a-vis structure. The farm crisis presents an opportunity for sociology to apply its theory and knowledge to the resolution of a serious social problem and to advance the discipline in that process.

FOOTNOTES

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