

Rural America's Future A Question of Inevitabilities or Injustice?

A Presentation to the Granary Forum, July 8, 2000, Groton, South Dakota by NPSAS member, Karl Limvere

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Last weekend, the New York Times, finally took real notice of the plight of rural America. In a feature story, called "Booming Economy Skips Plains," Times reporter Peter Kilborn writes a descriptive eulogy of what has happened, or more accurately, what has not happened in rural America, while the rest of the nation's economy is booming.

He surveys the Great Plains from a story datelined, "Mountain, ND." For those of you have not seen a mountain in North Dakota, that is a small town in Pembina County at the northern reach of the Red River Valley in our state.

From this "Mountain" view, here is how he sees it: "Like towns of the West that turned into shells once they were stripped of their gold, new ghost towns are sprouting over much of the Great Plains." "In many of these communities, only a bar and a church hang on, along with a few homeowners who are too old, too poor, or too proud to move, or who simply prefer the solitude."

For this region of our country, "the nation's long run of growth and prosperity has blown right by." He notes that the "contraction is most pronounced" in North Dakota, one of only three states in the nation to lose population in the 1990s.

He describes conditions in Mountain, Ardoch, Pisek, Warsaw, and Whitman. "Main Street is dead. Silent at one end stands the old gray elevator. On one side of the street is an open lot, long cleared of its stores. On the other is an abandoned one-truck firehouse and a shut-down strip of three weathered, one story shops."

After reading this litany of rural depression and depopulation you wonder if this story shouldn't have been printed on the obituary page. Yet, Kilborn touches on one of the dominant news items coming out of our rural communities. He notes that "Funerals in many of these towns outnumber baptisms two to one. Accelerating a process that started decades ago with the mechanization of farming and the depletion of oil fields and mines, the livelier economy elsewhere has shunned investment in the towns and drained off the young to jobs and opportunity in Omaha, Fargo, and Pierre and beyond to Denver and Minneapolis."

When Mark Twain was on the lecture circuit, one of those mornings that he woke up to face the day after having given a late evening presentation the night before, he picked up the

local newspaper in the town that he was staying, and read that he had died. After rubbing his eyes to make sure he was awake and alive - having been an old newspaper reporter himself - he picked up his pen and wrote a letter to the editor. It went something like: "While I hate to disappoint my many friends and relatives and a host of other associates who would have willingly and very likely enthusiastically postponed all other entertainment to attend my funeral, after checking my pulse this morning, and finding one, I would have to suggest to the editor of your esteemed publication that the notice of my passing is somewhat premature." Sincerely Mark Twain.

Well, I hate to disappoint the masses huddling on the eastern and western shores of this nation who have been ready and willing to write off family farm agriculture and rural America as another great American venture of a bygone era. I want it to be known that I have checked the pulse of rural America this morning, and while it is not as strong as it once was, the pulse is still there.

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After reading the New York Times story, I also checked my blood pressure. Not surprisingly it was up. In fact, it is way up. To be honest, it hasn't been this high since a Fargo Forum editorial writer did a similar farewell to farms earlier this year. The Forum wrote rural America's obituary this way: "It's the same nearly everywhere, vast emptiness and loss, abandonment and collapse, peeling paint and broken glass, rust and weeds, a way of life succumbing to an awful inevitability."

In the New York Times article, Kilborn quotes an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City who is attached to the bank's Center for the Study of Rural America. With surgical precision and quantum physics certainty, this economist gets right to the heart of the matter. He says, "There is a sorting out going on. Across the vast sweep of the heartland, rural communities are not keeping up. The sad truth of the matter is that some are not going to survive."

If I were a patrolman on the highways of journalism and commerce, I would revoke the Forum's editorial license and I would suspend the learner's permit of this Federal Reserve economist for not being able to read the road signs of economic injustice. At the very least, I would also charge them with failure to yield. Based on my current blood pressure reading, I would likely also charge them for hit and run for running over the victims of this economic injustice.

Perhaps we should also consider charging both of them with leaving the scene of an accident for their failure to stop long enough to determine the cause of the situation and to give comfort and aid to these victims. What absolutely galls me, is that as so-called expert witnesses they have the audacity to accuse the victim of creating the causes of the injustices because they wouldn't keep up or change. Yet, these witnesses do not have clean

hands, nor are they serving as unbiased experts.

What is happening in rural America is not a matter of economic and technological inevitabilities. What is happening is fairly straightforward economic and political injustice. There is a vast transfer of wealth, resources, and ownership occurring as rural America is depopulated, devalued, and decapitalized, and demoralized. Now they want to debilitate us into acceptance of the injustices that have been imposed upon us by forces generally beyond our control.

It isn't that rural America and our family farms are less productive. It's not like the extractive industries, such as mining where the gold vein has been depleted. In fact, in terms of historical lines, we are producing more total agricultural commodities than we have in the past. And we need to. There are more mouths to feed in this world.

The land is still there. We have not abandoned farming. The land is still being farmed. The production is still there. But, we are losing farmers. And, farmers are losing control over their production. This is not about economic and technological inevitability. It is about economic power, and technological control, and the accumulation of that power and control into elite vertically and horizontally integrated structures of agricultural industrializers.

Agriculture is being industrialized and corporatized, while rural America is becoming the private fiefdoms and playgrounds of new economic baronies. And let's be honest and frank: rather than calling them robber barons, we have become trained to be polite and gotten accustomed to just calling it agribusiness.

The primary issue facing rural America is not the price of commodities, but the injustices and inequities in the marketplace that are determining those prices. Yes, in one aspect, the Federal Reserve economist was right. There is a sorting out going on out here. But the real story and the story that is not being reported very effectively is who is doing the sorting and who is getting sorted, and who is collecting the sorting fee.

The choice we face today in agriculture is the long-running battle between the widely dispersed, owner-operated system of agriculture that we traditionally call family farming, or an industrialized and corporatized system of agriculture.

This issue goes far deeper than the 1996 farm law, which in itself is an economic, social, and political travesty. If we are honest with ourselves, the 1996 Freedom to Farm law was just the latest of the culmination of a series of inadequate farm laws that have systematically destroyed any remaining semblance of agricultural pricing safety nets while consistently failing to initiate two critically needed reforms:

* They have failed to develop farm programs that reward good stewardship of natural resources. Instead, they continue to reward speculators in land, commodities, and natural and human resources.

* Most importantly, they have failed to target federal agricultural benefits to family farmers, which have constituted the great middle-class of American agriculture, but now are being shoved into the bipolar economy of the haves and the havenots.

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In addition, the 1996 farm law broke the social compact between American consumers and American farmers by both eliminating the farmer-owned food reserve system and severely capping the remaining strategic food reserves that would assure both adequate food supplies and the potential for a more stabilized pricing structure for both farmers and consumers. As a pastor, I would just quickly mention that might turn to Genesis and read a story about Joseph, the Pharaoh, and seven fat years and seven lean years.

To add insult to injury, in their collective wisdom, the majorities in Congress have been willing to spend whatever dollars it takes in agricultural disaster aid to not have to admit that the 1996 Freedom to Farm law is an unmitigated disaster.

Unfortunately, part of the price tag of this disaster aid has been that in return for helping family farmers a little bit, they have opened up the spigots to the federal treasury to feed the greed of the largest industrialized farmers in this nation. America's family farmers are barely getting subsistence aid at best, and most farm families still have to work one, two or more off-farm jobs to subsidize their farming habits. Yet their competitors among the industrialized, corporatized super farms of this nation are receiving a bonanza windfall of unprecedented dimensions. And all this has been done in the name of family farm agriculture.

This is a story that is just waiting to be reported. It will give the whole business of farm programs a permanent black eye when it is punched out on 60 minutes, 20/20, or Dateline. It will be very tempting to throw the baby out with the bath water. The baby in this case will be the family farm structure.

Underlying the farm bill debate is the question whether we are going to have a middle class in agriculture. There is great present danger for family farmers, who should be listed by our professors of structural economics as being on the critical list of endangered economic species. In applying ecological principles to our current economic systems, if family farmers do not survive can anyone in the great American middle class survive such a closing economic structure?

What does that predict for the future of rural America, and for all Americans, whether they

live among the huddled masses yearning to breathe free on America's coasts or on the Great Plains? This is not just about domestic farm policy, but more critically it is about foreign trade policy.

Don't kid yourself, globalization is not about whether the world is going to engage in various forms of free market economics. Globalization and trade will happen. The question is under what conditions will globalization happen. The question is whether anybody is going to have a voice in the governance of how it happens.

Is global commerce going to run governments? How is our government going to respond? More specifically is Congress going to accept its constitutional responsibility to "regulate commerce," both domestic and foreign, so that we the people can be assured of a "more perfect union, the establishment of justice," etc. etc. and "to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity?"

Just as an aside, let me share with you that 52 of the top 100 economies in this world are transnational corporations. For the most part, our nation's trade policy is to be both a doormat and a doorman for these same transnational corporations.

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One of the signposts of injustice that the New York Times article missed, (even though they reported it), was that the only new residents of one of these Northern Red River Valley towns were migrant workers from Mexico. The importation of labor to do the work of farming is one of the clear signs of industrialization. By standard economic definition, family farmers provide their own labor for their own farms.

Now for those who see industrialization of agriculture as the economic model for the future, just let me remind you of a seemingly forgotten fact. The Red River Valley bonanza farms, which were the epitome of the industrialized models of agricultural production of their time, were carefully studied and used as the models for the industrialized structures of Soviet collective farms.

Historically, industrialization in agriculture, whether it was the Bonanza farm, the Soviet collective, the Southern Plantation System, the Haciendas of the Southwest, or the barony where my grandfather was a serf, such industrialized forms of agriculture have only been able to survive because of their ability and willingness to exploit human, natural, social, and other public resources.

Industrialized agriculture is not more efficient. It is just more powerful. The trouble is that industrialized agriculture is not sustainable, economically, socially, environmentally or

politically (if we wish to remain a democracy). Rather than building community, it destroys community. Have we learned nothing from Walter and Ruth Goldschmidt and their classic study of the community differences between the California towns of Arvin & Dinuba? One was surrounded by the industrialized farm community. The other by family farm agriculture. The differences between the two were the differences of night and day in terms of healthy family communities and declining rural ghettos.

Let me underscore that comment, by emphasizing that the direction in which our economic structures are moving is not free enterprise, nor is it about economic efficiency. In our current globalization mode, our marketplace does not reward the most efficient producer. Instead, it is a marketplace where the successful players are the ones who can best transfer the full and true costs of production and consumption to those who have the least economic and political power at the expense of the environment and future generations.

The winners in this marketplace are no longer those that can best produce goods with the greatest efficiency, but rather it is those who can profit the most through the accumulation of economic and political power and its inevitable exploitation of human, natural, social, and governmental resources.

Is this the kind of marketplace that we are being asked to worship and to give our allegiance? In this growing system of globalized corporate mercantilism, the marketplace is becoming the all-knowing, the all powerful, and final arbiter of all human endeavor. For those of us who claim Christianity as our faith, we normally reserve such a hallowed place for God.

Now that I have mentioned God and have gotten him/her mixed up in politics, let me talk about the moral aspects of this debate:

- There is something fundamentally wrong when the bread that we break together in communion (the bread that for us in the Christian community is the very presence of the divine) - there is something wrong when this bread is a product of despair and economic and social devastation.
- There is something fundamentally wrong when the producers of food are unable to make a livelihood because there is inadequate commercial demand for their production in a marketplace in which they have no meaningful voice or power, and at the very same time hunger is still the most devastating disease on the face of this earth.
- There is something fundamentally wrong, when this nation is experiencing unprecedented economic growth and prosperity, and it is so intent in its pursuit of continued economic expansion that it cannot see or hear the injustices it is imposing upon those who are carrying the burdens of economic dislocation and devastation.

The reason we need pastors, and theologians, and moralists in this debate over agriculture and our economy is that we need somebody to once again remind us in very simple terms

that the economy was made for man, not man for the economy.

The trouble is that most economists and a goodly number of our politicians don't seem to recognize or care when we have crossed that fine line. That line is the difference between justice and injustice. It is the difference between democracy and any of the "isms" that you might choose to describe dictatorial rule. It is the difference between empowering humankind or overpowering humankind.

It is time to recognize injustice. It is time to resist the subjugation of American family farming into vertically and horizontally integrated industrialized structures. It is time to demand justice.

Rural America needs justice, it deserves justice, and it must have justice. There is no other choice. There is no other way.

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