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THE MYTH OF THE FAMILY FARM: AGRIBUSINESS DOMINANCE OF U.S. AGRICULTURE

By INGOLF VOGELER

Boulder: Westview Press, 1981. Pp. 352. \$25.00.

The Myth of the Family Farm is a testament to the fact that the past decade has witnessed a politicization of agriculture rivaling that of struggles over New Deal policy during the 1930s and over the Farm Security Administration and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics during the 1940s. Vogeler presents a radical—at times overtly Marxist—interpretation of this new era of agricultural politics. For him, the key concepts for understanding this new era are class, power, and ideology. Class analysis provides the central thread of *The Myth of the Family Farm*. Vogeler sees agribusiness as being the dominant class in agriculture—a class which is able to extend its economic dominance into political superiority over other classes and groups in society. However, despite the importance of class and power in his analysis of agricultural structure and politics, the key messages of this book revolve around ideology. The “myth of the family farm,” according to Vogeler, is that both farmers and urban people mistakenly assume that the family farmer remains the dominant socio-economic group in the agrarian class structure and in the political arena. Most importantly, the author argues that family farmers themselves are unwitting harborers of this myth, a phenomenon which he interprets as “false consciousness” of family farmers of the subordinate roles they occupy in the agricultural political economy. Vogeler argues that despite the fact that farmers are property owners, farmer subordination to input, marketing, and financial oligopolies makes their class situation similar to that of propertyless workers. Recognition of this working class position and farmer cooperation with working class groups, especially in labor unions and farmer-labor political parties such as the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota, are viewed to be the only possible long-term strategies to deal with the marginalization of the American family farmer.

In general, *The Myth of the Family Farmer* provides a convenient summary and realistic analysis of the U.S. agricultural system that is more comprehensive and empirically convincing than many earlier books in this genre.¹ The author’s pulling together of a wide variety of scholarly and popularized literatures, e.g., empirical research by agricultural economists, and the muckraking analyses by Jim Hightower,² respectively, makes this a useful volume for those concerned

1. See, for example, J. L. SHOVER, *FIRST MAJORITY—LAST MINORITY* (1977).

2. HIGHTOWER, *HARD TOMATOES, HARD TIMES* (1973).

with the dynamics of structural change in agriculture and with the reasons for heightened conflict over agricultural policy. However, the book is not without major limitations, and many persons working within the same analytical tradition (Marxism) will find that many of Vogeler's arguments are unconvincing or politically naive.

The essence of Vogeler's argument occurs on the dedication page where he calls for "a new populism in our lifetime" (p. vii). Vogeler contends, although implicitly, that the United States now faces the historic option of returning to a system of small, independent family farms by altering agricultural policy, restraining agribusiness oligopolies, and forming effective farmer-labor coalitions, presumably within the Democratic Party. Going back to such a system would maintain or increase efficiency in agriculture, minimize the exploitation of landless farmworkers, revitalize rural communities, and increase socioeconomic equity in the agricultural and rural sectors. These arguments may well be accurate, but the question remains whether such de-concentration of agriculture remains a viable political-economic option.

My own evaluation of these possibilities forces me to take sharp issue with several of Vogeler's claims. First, family farmers, perhaps regardless of the degree to which they are subordinated or exploited, are property owners and will likely maintain a petty bourgeois affinity with the interests of large-scale capital. Second, the very demise of the independent family farmer has crippled the ability of family farmers to form powerful political coalitions; farmers who have been squeezed out of business are no longer viable supporters of this "new populism." Third, Vogeler tends to exaggerate the inefficiencies of large-scale farming and the role of corporate farming. Banning corporations from farming will do little to address the key feature of concentration of sales and assets in U.S. agriculture—the rapid growth of petty capitalist or "larger-than-family" farmers. Finally, Vogeler both overargues the case that state policy has been formulated to disadvantage the family farmer and makes arguable assumptions that the biases of agricultural policy (including agricultural research) can be changed. Agricultural policy has not been neutral, but it should be recognized that state officials could not risk the wholesale demise of the family farmer because of the high unemployment that could have resulted. Also, agricultural policy will not be as easy to change as Vogeler would imply, essentially for the types of reasons that Vogeler himself effectively argues in Chapters 8, 9, and 10.

In sum, *The Myth of the Family Farm* is a worthwhile effort which unfortunately succumbs in its final chapter to a contradictory com-

ination of Marxism and neopopulism. Nevertheless, Vogeler has set a standard of broad scope and curiosity about the future to which future books in this tradition must be aimed. *The Myth of the Family Farm* will no doubt offend both neoclassical agricultural economists and most Marxists, but these critics will have to admire Vogeler's courage and the fact that he has asked the big questions about U.S. agriculture.

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