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Political and Economic Class Practices in U.S.
Farmers' Mobilizations: Continuities and Discontinuities¹

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Introduction

Carl C. Taylor's publication of *The Farmers' Movement: 1620-1920* constitutes one of the few attempts by a single author to review the history of farmers' movements in the U.S. More significantly, Taylor hypothesizes a continuity that links these various farmers' movements to one another. Indeed, Taylor (1953:2) contends that "the various farmer revolts have only been the high tides of a Farmers' Movement which is as persistent as the Labor Movement". Taylor's thesis stands out against a literature that is primarily oriented toward analysis of each episode of agrarian mobilization as a distinct, historical event. Taylor's thesis provokes "a framework of questioning" (Kasler, 1988) that generates important insights into the nature of social movements. Questions are raised about the role of "abeyance processes" (V. Taylor, 1989) and the class character of these mobilizations. The former concern with the abeyance process follows from considering the thesis of continuity. This latter concern with class analysis was, in fact, Taylor's initial interest. In concluding his history of farmers' movements, he wrote (1953: 492): "The first search was for an answer to that question: 'Are farmers a social class?' Taylor believed that the search for an answer to that question was "fruitless", given the social class theories of his era. More recent

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developments in class analysis and social movement theory permit us to reconsider Taylor's thesis of a unitary Farmers' Movement in the context of his prior question concerning the class character of American farmers. This undertaking also advances sociology's project of bringing class analysis to social movement theory. That task is, in turn, part of the larger project of breathing life into the inanimate structuralism characteristic of much class analysis, a problem that pervades much work in the 'new sociology of agriculture.'" Taylor's thesis inspires a sociological investigation of farmers' movements that steps back from the nuances of specific mobilizations and seeks patterns that transcend distinct historical conjunctures. The result is an analysis that is capable of discovering the perseverance of select mobilization strategies grounded in both persistent economic structures as well as in the agency embedded in the abeyance process.

Taylor's Thesis

The "labor movement" is often thought of as one continuous struggle of the proletariat against capital that dates back to the emergence of capitalism. Similarly, it is not unusual to think of a "feminist movement" that has a continuity traceable to the mid-19th century, or even to the Enlightenment. It is not unusual to consider the contemporary movement for racial equality or the "civil rights" movement to have roots in the struggles against slavery. Why then does it seem so unusual to speak of "a Farmers' Movement"? Why is agrarian revolt seen as a set of distinct episodes? While it is certainly true that Taylor's Farmers' Movement varies in the level of mobilization across time and space, the same is true of the labor movement, the feminist movement, or the civil rights movement.

Restricting his analogy to the labor movement, Taylor sometimes tended toward an economic reductionism. At one point, his hypothesis reads (1953:493):

Just as the various and varying struggles of laborers arose out of, and have always revolved about, the issues of wages, hours, and working conditions, and just as all these struggles combined constitute the American labor movement, so the various and varying struggles of farmers arose out of, and have always revolved about, the issues of prices, markets, and credits, and all these struggles combined constitute the American Farmers' Movement.

An economic reductionism suggests a great deal more continuity than might otherwise be the case. Political and ideological struggles tend to be seen as an abandonment of the Movement, rather than as strategic or tactical adaptations to a flexible opposition. Indeed, one might argue that it has been, in part, capital's superior ability to shift the struggle from one arena to another that has permitted its repeated triumphs over mobilizations of simple commodity producers. This understanding of political and ideological struggle as deviant detracts from comprehending the significance of an effective "movement culture" (McNall, 1988). A movement that aspires to transform the economy to the extent implied by Taylor's sympathies, cannot succeed at the level of economic practice alone, a coincident politics and ideology are necessary supports.

Frustrated by his inability to discover the "classness" of farmers with prevailing theories of class, Taylor's turned to a study of farmers' struggles. This facilitated his recognition of non-economic forces at work in the Movement. His conclusion contains a critical reflection on the thesis that softens his hypothesis, questions the solidarity of the Movement, but then rescues the thesis by pointing to a continuity of ideology. The hypothesis is refined (1953:495) by reference to the Movement as a "more or less organized" effort and by an equivocation as to whether the movement serves to "protect" farmers from the commercial-capitalist economy" or serves to help the farmer "catch step with it". In the reformulated hypothesis these seemingly divergent objectives are collapsed into a single movement. Taylor

(1953:497) suggests that "it probably cannot be said that this 'sense of group and solidarity' carries over from episode to episode." Instead, he posits a Movement that consists of a "chain of recurrent publics" (1953:497), a notion that seems to anticipate Zald and McCarthy's (1987) notion of movement "adherents". This solution leaves us with a concept of movement that also parallels Zald and McCarthy's (1987:20) broad use of the term to denote "a set of opinions and beliefs" in favor of social change.

Taylor then defends the thesis by arguing that it is a movement insofar as it has been "a continuous, and probably a progressive, adaptation to economic and cultural situations" (1953:499). In the end, this progress and continuity, is seen not as the adaptation of political practices or economic counter-institutions, but as the development of 'ideologies and philosophies which buttressed the farmers' opinions and sentiments about these conditions" (1953:499). For Taylor, the Movement is ultimately held together by ideology. Unlike most of the farmers' political and economic organizations, Taylor (1953:500) can argue that these "ideologies and sentiments did not arise anew with each farmer upheaval" but have existed "between episodes and are still in existence".² Taylor's reliance on ideology as the glue which holds the Farmers' Movement together parallels the predominant explanations of agrarian movements by his contemporaries, although Taylor sought to anchor the ideology in economic relations, rather than some peculiar agrarian psychology. This anticipates current tendencies to reinsert the significance of the "analysis" (Schwartz, 1976) or the "language" (McNall, 1988) or the "actor" (Touraine, 1988) in the study of social movements.

² There is irony in Taylor's contention (1953:500) that this Farmers' Movement "is not so much a social structure as it is a body of ideologies and sentiments about a continuing set of issues" and that it still exists. For at the very time of Taylor's writing the core of that ideology was being decimated in the post-war construction of a powerful new hegemony. Indeed, Taylor observed much of this assault first-hand in the purge of progressive-minded USDA personnel.

Evaluating Taylor's Thesis

An evaluation of Taylor's position that all episodes of agrarian mobilization are manifestations of a unitary movement directs attention to the concept of social movement itself. An operational definition could be chosen to either confirm or negate Taylor's thesis. Zald and McCarthy's (1987) broad definition of social movement as opinions favoring social change renders Taylor's position far more acceptable than such concepts as Lofland's (1985:22) which puts an emphasis on "a surge" of mobilization characterized by a "rapid rise" in numbers of participants. The former concept would likely find, at most points in time, some movement in such a diverse population as the U.S. farm population. Hence, it is hardly a rigorous test of continuity. The latter concept of social movement would simply negate Taylor's thesis by definition. (It would also preclude us from considering the labor movement or the feminist movement as unitary phenomena across time.) Avoiding an academic excursion into the field of social movements definitions, we might return to Taylor's original question "Are farmers a class?" but ask instead "Does agrarian mobilization in the U.S. have a class base?" The re-introduction of the class factor allows us to exclude those definitions of social movements which preclude the possibility that movements might span generations (as we would expect of class movements). Further, this question better captures the spirit of Taylor's inquiry and his analogy of the Farmers' Movement to the Labor Movement.

In McNall's recent (1987:223) linkage of social movement theory to class analysis, classes are grounded in the 'opposition to one another because of exploitation'. That is, one class "appropriates the surplus labor of another." While debate over definitions of social class is at least as dense as that of definitions over social movements, McNall's definition gives us that factor which is fundamental to most relational conceptions of class, i.e. exploitation of labor. However, examining the historical patterns of agrarian mobilization

demands that we break down this notion in somewhat more detail. The notion of class practices is useful in this endeavor.

Class Practices

Classes are not only constituted economically, but also politically and ideologically. Adapting Wright's (1981) more generic notion of practice to the conditions of an advanced capitalist social formation, we can analytically distinguish economic, political, and ideological class practices of farmers' movements and search for continuity within each level of practice. Economic class practices refer to the social relations which shape the transformation of nature into use values and exchange values. Political class practices refer to the reproduction or transformation of those social relations of production. Ideological class practices constitute the means of interpreting our lived or subjective experience of the social relations of production. Our concern is with class practices within each level, particularly the political and economic class practices associated with capitalist and simple commodity production and their articulation with one another.

Regardless of a basic relationship of economic exploitation, classes, as effective forces in history, must struggle at the political and ideological levels as well as at the economic level. McNau's (1988:179) historical examination of Kansas populism recognizes this trinity: "The farmer, then, was confronted with the necessity of struggling, simultaneously, on three different fronts: he needed to legitimate his ideology, argue for a modified economic system, and capture political power. When an uprising succeeds in mobilizing on all three fronts with some degree of coherence we can begin to speak of the development of a movement culture. In most specific mobilizations, or for the Movement as a whole, 'all of these struggles were bound together; failure on any front would lessen the chances for success in other areas' (McNall, 1988:179). However, the lack of integration of the three levels at any particular time only describes the absence of a movement culture

and/or the chances of success, it does not negate a possible class basis to the movement. The boundaries between instances of these various practices are not always clear. Indeed, the distinctions increasingly blur as a movement develops toward an integrated movement culture. The logic of each level of practice is submerged in its interdependence with the others. Successful integration of all three levels of class practice is difficult and rare. A conception of the Farmers Movement that demanded a continuity of movement culture would be rigorous indeed, perhaps too rigorous. The American labor movement would hardly meet this condition.

Clearly, the category "farmer" cannot be used to denote a class, since it merely describes an occupational category. Nevertheless, it is still possible that classes within the larger occupational category might develop movements to defend their class-specific interests. Our particular concern here is with those movements mobilized around a defense of the interests of simple commodity production, rather than capitalist or proletarianized "farmers". Simple commodity producers borrow beliefs about their interests and share repertoires of economic and political action with other classes of farmers. This is especially so at the fringes of simple commodity production (i.e. contradictory class locations) where articulation with the capitalist mode of production is more intense. The importance of this intersection increases with the extent to which farmers are mobilized by crisis, since crisis is usually generated at some point of articulation (e.g. rent, credit, labor markets, monopolized markets) with the capitalist mode. This increases the probability of non-class-specific practices in farmers' movements. We now examine a number of farmer mobilizations to assess the extent of this continuity.

Analysis

Twenty-one mobilizations of U.S. farmers, ranging from the mid-18th Century to the present, were examined with secondary, historical materials as well as interviews with activists in more contemporary movements. The

mobilizations selected for study included: the uprisings of tenants in colonial America, especially in the Hudson River Valley of New York, where antirentism continued into the mid-1800s; the Regulator Movement of colonial North Carolina smallholders and tenants seeking political equality with the planter class; Shays' Rebellion against creditors and the newly formed state (still operating under the Articles of Confederation); the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s against taxation of Pennsylvania frontier commodities; the post-Civil War Granger movement against monopoly capital, especially the railroads, but also engaged in experimentation with cooperative enterprises; the Northern and Southern Alliances of the 1880s and early 1890s that focused on cooperation and third party politics; the early 20th century American Society of Equity which originated with an emphasis on collective bargaining but increasingly turned to cooperation; the Farmers' Union which arose at the turn of the century to become a strong cooperative organization; the agrarian socialism of the southern plains, especially centered in Oklahoma in the early 20th Century; the Non-Partisan League which grew out of the Socialist Party to temporarily capture state power in North Dakota; the Farm Bureau, organized by USDA, the land grant colleges, the Chamber of Commerce, Sears, International Harvester, Chicago Board of Trade, certain railroads and finance capital as a means of co-opting socialist-minded cooperation in rural America; the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union of the 1930s that rose against the desperate poverty of cotton tenancy; the Iowa-based Farmers' Holiday Association of the Depression that sought to wield agrarian power through holding actions and boycotts; the U.S. Farmers' Association, which broke away from the Farmers' Union in the face of McCarthyism; the National Farmers Organization which arose in the Midwest in the 1950s to establish collective bargaining as a basis for farm prices; Rural America which combined agricultural and rural communities' interests in economic development and environmental protection in the 1970s; the American Agricultural Movement which threatened a production strike but primarily engaged in lobbying, penny

auctions, political protest and independent bloc voting in the late 1970s; Prairiefire, an activist group that grew out of the Rural Iowa chapter of Rural America, providing education about the 1980s crisis and services in the struggle against creditors; the National Save the Family Farm Coalition and the North American Farm Alliance, two coalitions of progressive farm groups that emerged in various states in the 1980s to deal primarily with the farm credit crisis.

While most movements include more than a single class practice, there is often a dominant level of practice as well as dominant tactics within the levels of practice. The repertoire of economic class practices yielded by these histories include: cooperative marketing, cooperative purchasing, cooperative production, boycotts, squatting, rent strikes, land trusts, holding actions, individualized participation in free market transactions, participation in state directed production control and marketing. Political class practices that have emerged include third party formation, independent bloc voting to influence a two party system, protest, lobbying, collective bargaining, alliances with labor, violence, regulation of monopoly, and squatters' associations. The dominant ideological class practices that have emerged include an agrarian fundamentalism (i.e. a belief that agriculture is more important than any other economic endeavor); a belief in free market competition; and a "producer ideology" (Mitchell, 1987:201) which holds that all value is the creation of human labor.

The broadest periodization of these movements suggests four periods: 1) a pre-Civil War period characterized by armed, often but not always riotous, conflict over the distribution of surplus value in the form of interest, rent or taxes; 2) a period from the post-Civil War to the Depression, characterized by the development of cooperation and third party formation or independent bloc voting; 3) a period from the Depression to the 1970s, characterized by mobilizations toward the goal of collective bargaining; and 4) the post-1970s, characterized by lobbying and disruptive forms of protest. The ability to

periodize these movements, already suggests a qualification of Taylor's thesis. Nevertheless, we can examine these periods more closely for continuities and discontinuities of economic and political class practices. Space will not permit the analysis of the complexity that characterizes the reproduction and transformation of agrarian ideological practices. That analysis is presented in (Author, 1990) where the three dominant ideologies mentioned above are examined in detail. Economic Class Practices. Class practices in the pre-Civil War period were dominated by political violence over the distribution of surplus value in the form of rent, taxes and interest. This derived from the underdeveloped cash economy of the agricultural frontier and farmers' inability to surrender surplus in the form of money to urban commercial centers (see, for example, Ellis, 1946; Mark, 1940; Powell, 1949; Slaughter, 1986; Szatmary, 1980). Perhaps the most common form of economic class practice in this period was simply to flee the landlord, creditor and/or tax collector and move further into the frontier.

In the post-Civil War to Depression period, there were sporadic efforts at boycotts and holding actions but these were subordinated to a more fundamental pursuit of cooperative development. The mobilizations in this period were engaged in the creation of purchasing and/or marketing cooperatives as a means of retaining greater portions of surplus. In the case of the Southern Alliance, this was not merely a confrontation with merchant capital, but also with landed and financial capital. At times, all three factions of capital were embodied in one person or family through the crop lien system (Barnes, 1984; Goodwyn, 1978; Schwartz, 1976). In the early 20th century, the cooperative movement became firmly institutionalized. Veterans of the Grange and Alliance combined experience from the past with the new prosperity that provided the initial capital formation so lacking in the late 19th century efforts at cooperation. Finally, the coupling of these opportunities with an increasingly powerful agrarian socialist influence in the Midwest and Great Plains pushed the state to facilitate formal cooperation as a means of co-opting this socialist

strength (Saloutos and Hicks, 1951). The creation of the Farm Bureau represents the culmination of this channeling of class practices by capital and the state. In this case, the economic class practice of cooperation was harnessed by the ruling class to structure cooperation so as to reproduce existing inequalities by tying patronage refunds to the volume of business transacted. Further, the selective economic incentives provided by a resource-rich cooperative organization permitted membership recruitment to a highly conservative politics and ideology, dictated from the higher levels of the organization (McConnell, 1953; Berger, 1978). In the farm depression of the 1920s, Republican administrations pushed cooperation as a means of preempting a return to more radical demands (Saloutos and Hicks, 1951).

In the period from the Depression until about 1970, innovation in economic class practices focused on the use of holding actions as a means of supporting the political class practice of transforming market relations toward forms of collective bargaining (Shover, 1965; Rowell, 1984; Walters, 1968). Cooperative class practices continued through this period, although the NFO began to reveal the extent to which cooperative enterprises had abandoned direct responsiveness to their constituency (i.e., their owners!) and adapted behavior remarkably indistinguishable from private sector agribusiness. Cooperative management often resisted NFO bargaining just as strongly as private firms.

Since the 1970s there has been little or no tactical innovation at the level of economic class practices, although elements within the North American Farm Alliance advocate land trusts (Author, 1990). The focus of American Agriculture Movement, Prairiefire, and the National Save the Family Farm Coalition, has been political. The cooperative movement has been marked by a continuing concentration that parallels private agribusiness. The collective bargaining movement seems to have reached a standstill, at least in the major commodities. The dearth of innovative economic class practices is strikingly similar to the frontier period, with increasing off-farm

employment replacing the escape to the frontier as an economic class practice used to struggle against monopoly capitalist domination of production and markets.

The variety of economic class practices characteristic of farmers' mobilizations diverges from the relatively constant focus of "the labor movement" on the labor union as the primary organizational form of struggle. To some extent this is a necessary reflection of the diversity of class opponents faced by farmers. The proletariat encounters the industrial capitalist (or their managers) in the sphere of production, i.e. the determination of wages, hours, working conditions. Agricultural producers may oppose finance capital in the banker, landed capital in the landlord, merchant capital in both purchasing and marketing, and industrial capital through the sale of labor power in non-farm employment. The relative diversity of this class opponent generates a diversity of forms of opposition.

Nevertheless, formal cooperation among simple commodity producers in the purchase of inputs and marketing of production does parallel the proletariat's reliance on the labor union. Struggles to develop the cooperative form of organization may emerge, but are made more difficult, where producers encounter unified combinations of landed capital and merchant capital, landed capital and finance capital, or merchant and finance capital. Schwartz (1976) has shown that the Southern Alliance, for example, found such class opponents in the crop lien system. Linkages to larger urban-based finance and merchant capital were revealed by organized attacks on local class structures. Cooperative ventures have been more successful where producers can isolate a particular faction of capital. Thus, cooperative forms obtained their initial strength in regions where merchant capital was divorced from both landed and finance capital, i.e. Middle West grain and dairy production (Saloutos and Hicks, 1951). Once established vis-a-vis merchant capital, (under early 20th century conditions of prosperity), the cooperative movement was able to use this resource base to challenge the domination of finance capital

and, in turn, landed capital by pushing for a cooperative credit system (Farm Credit System) that would facilitate owner-operatorship of farmland. Again, the state's acquiescence in developing this system was contingent upon political pressures exerted by more radical agrarian socialist movements. The economic resources established by successes in cooperative purchasing and marketing alone were probably insufficient to the establishment of cooperative credit.

The fact that farmers' increasingly resorted to tactical innovations such as holding actions, protest and lobbying in the Depression and post-Depression periods does not negate the significant role played by cooperatives. While both the absolute number of members and of cooperatives has declined, this parallels the decline of farm population and the concentration of cooperative enterprises through merger and acquisition. The absolute volume of farm cooperative business increased through the Depression and in the post World War II era. In the latter period, the cooperative market share of farm supplies has increased considerably, though with some variability by commodity and across time (USDA: 1984; Abrahamson, 1976).

In conclusion, the economic class practice of cooperation can be seen as a functional equivalent to the labor movement's efforts at unionization. Its persistence is at least as strong as the labor union movement and its variability in strength over time is certainly no less. This economic class practice can be divorced from roots in progressive socialist politics and ideology. However, the same charge can be leveled against the labor movement. In neither the labor movement nor the farmers' movement are unionization or formal cooperation sufficient conditions for creation of a 'movement culture'. Nevertheless, both forms of organization demonstrate parallels as moderately successful means of achieving immediate interests against their respective class opponents. Cooperatives also demonstrate the process by which subsequent mobilizations learn from mistakes, as well as successes, of past mobilizations. In both cases, veterans of past campaigns stayed on to inform renewed mobilizations. These

actors function as an important mechanism of cultural transmission from one mobilization to the next, but also serve as agents that bridge the historically varying structural conditions encountered by successive mobilizations. For example, the early founders of the Farmers' Union, Equity and Nonpartisan League were, as veterans of the Alliance and Populist movements, aware of both the opportunity provided by the relative prosperity and the danger of the partisan political mobilizations in draining the organizational resources of the movement (Barrett, 1909; Green, 1978). Similarly, the U.S. Farmers' Association carried a left-populist analysis through McCarthyism to the North American Farm Affiance in the crisis of the 1980s (Author, 1990).

Thus, continuity against variable structural conditions is provided by actors, the crucial resource in adapting mobilizations across time as well as space. Just as participants in past campaigns are resources to the next mobilization, so too, have movements often used movement actors who have migrated from elsewhere to return to their native region to expand the movement in adaptation to unique conditions of the region being "colonized" by the movement. Continuity in cooperation seems to be no less true for "the farmers' movement" than for unionization in the "labor movement." Yet both economic practices are clearly capable of compromising the politics and ideology of their respective classes in the absence of a movement culture that supports these economic practices with complementary political forms and ideological frameworks. We now turn to an examination of the political forms.

Political Class Practices

In the colonial and pre-Civil War period, property restrictions on formal political participation, led to political practices that often took the form of armed conflict. Such conflict was sometimes riotous. At other times it was highly organized, utilizing military skills acquired in the French/English War and the American Revolution. These conflicts were quite explicitly concerned

with the distribution of surplus. Challenges to the appropriation of rent developed in the colonial period in regions where attempts were made to establish large estates. New York's Hudson River Valley tenant revolts began prior to the Revolution and continued sporadically until the mid-19th century (Ellis, 1946; Mark, 1940; Kim, 1978). The colonial Regulator's movement in the Carolinas was concerned with political control over access to surplus in the form of taxes and fees (Powell, 1949). The Whiskey Rebellion (Slaughter, 1986) in Pennsylvania was also a struggle over the appropriation of surplus in the form of taxes. Shays' Rebellion focused on the appropriation of surplus value derived from the credit extended by local merchants as urban centers began to call in loans to these local merchants (Szatmary, 1980). These movements often began with lobbying and petitioning but violent conflict usually resulted in the face of an intransigent opposition.

The extension of suffrage and the closing of the frontier to flight from the ties of exploitative economic relations facilitated a shift toward increasing the political practices associated with voting. Depending on the regional competitiveness of parties, local mobilizations tended to focus on either third party formation or independent bloc voting to influence a dominant party. Such political pressure was, of course, tied to lobbying efforts. Alliances with labor were common to many of these movements between the end of the Civil War and the Farm Depression of the 1920s. While these alliances were unstable, they were also central to strong factions within the movements that came together under the Alliance banner (Goodwyn, 1978; Mitchell, 1978; McNall, 1988). That tradition extended into the Farmers' Union, which has maintained a sympathy with organized labor to the present (Crampton, 1965). The Nonpartisan League was born of Socialist Party personnel who were unhappy with the purist party program that precluded organizations of farmers, on the assumption of a structural antagonism between agricultural and industrial producers (Morlan, 1955; Saloutos and Hicks, 1951). The basis for maintenance of attempts at such alliance, was a producer ideology that saw

farmers and workers as commodity producers and viewed capital as their common opponent. The specific class opponents of these movements were the emergent forms of monopoly capital, both industrial (inputs) and merchant (grains and cotton). The Southern Alliance was also necessarily concerned with the appropriation of surplus in the form of interest through the debt peonage of the crop lien system.

The institution of cooperation in the 20th century led to further consolidation of lobbying as an effective political tactic, with cooperatives providing a financial and organizational resource base for such activities. Lobbying as a political class practice has been eroded by two factors: economic crisis and demographic decline. In the crisis of the Depression, the restricted flexibility of the opposition pushed lobbying toward protest and collective bargaining as political class practices, for example, in the Farmers' Holiday and Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. In the 1950s and 1960s, a declining farm population began to recognize the demise of its voting power and the National Farmers' Organization (NFO) emerged as a protest and collective bargaining movement. In the late 1970s and 1980s the American Agriculture Movement talked of a 'farm strike' and then of production control (Browne and Lundgren, 1988). Eventually new organizations like Prairiefire, and the member organizations of the National Save the Family Farm Coalition and the North American Farm Alliance directed more attention to the relationship with financial institutions as the credit crisis demanded immediate grass roots action to impede the wave of foreclosures and bankruptcies. The American Agriculture Movement provided an organizational basis for recruitment and networking among these newer organizations (Ostendorf, interview). This attention was focused on public (FmHA) and quasi-public or cooperative (FCS, FLB, PCA) credit institutions. These creditors played a stronger role in facilitating the overvaluation of farm land than commercial banks or life insurance companies (Amols and Kaiser, 1984). The public and quasi-public character of these creditors also made them vulnerable as a

political target, since in relation to them farmers had a voice as (political) citizen as well as (economic) credit market client.

Violence as a political class practice has occurred at many different points in time but is disrupted by periods in which the resource base of the dominant class permitted flexibility in response to farmers' demands. The extension of voting rights also diminished violence until a declining farm population in the post-World War II era eroded this resource. This demise facilitated a shift from political practices to economic practices, primarily holding actions in which violence against "potential beneficiaries" (McCarthy and Zald, 1978:23) is often exerted as an instrument of social control against the free rider. This decline of the voting resource has also facilitated a shift within the arena of political practice toward lobbying for "rural" issues, rather than strictly farm concerns. This tendency is related to the ideology of agrarian fundamentalism.

While not all of the farmer's movements under consideration have directly struggled over forms of surplus value appropriation, there is considerable continuity to this class practice. This is less so in the first half of the 19th century when the frontier provided a promise of relief from the burdens of class exploitation (with the exception of continued anti-rent mobilizations in New York). To be sure, landlords and financiers exploited farm labor during this time but the option of flight impeded the opportunities for, and necessity of, collective action. As with economic class practices, this continuity is also disrupted by the diversity of forms in which capital presents itself to agricultural producers. The political response to exploitation by finance capital may demand different specific practices than the response to exploitation by landed or merchant capital. But at a level of abstraction, the movements share a common antagonist, i.e. capital.

The question remains whether or not an ideology is shared across time such that participants recognize a common struggle against this more abstract form or whether the concrete experience leads to distinctions of

struggles against landlords from struggles against bankers or merchants, etc. In the absence of such an abstraction at the level of ideology, struggle is likely misdirected against immediate opponents in the market rather than the real beneficiaries of exploitation, the capitalists into whose "cash boxes...the more or less unearned gains flow" (Weber, 1978: 931). What ideologies, if any, are present that permit the development of an analysis that reveals a class basis to the economic and political problems of the farmers' everyday life? Unfortunately, this important question is beyond the bounds of the present analysis. I have taken up this issue in detail elsewhere (Author, 1990). Quite briefly that analysis uses Snow and Benford's (1988) adaptation of frame analysis to conclude that while agrarian fundamentalism demonstrates considerable persistence and experiential commensurability, it does not by itself, lend to the perception of class-based antagonism. The development of class consciousness is, rather, distorted and obscured by its focus on a status differential. Similarly, the free market ideology cannot directly enhance class consciousness. Indeed, the farmers' lack of experiential commensurability with respect to competitive markets tends to invert this ideology into an "injustice frame" (Gamson, 1982) that is then fragmented into two critical frameworks: an anti-state intervention ideology and an anti-monopoly capital ideology. The complexities of this inversion, fragmentation, and subsequent realignment of free market ideology make it difficult to argue for the continuity of this ideology as an effective analysis guiding farmers' movements. Only the producer ideology has the consistent material basis to provide continuity between various movements. The producer ideology, capable of abstraction and generalization to diverse historical conditions, repeatedly finds fertile material conditions and other complementary popular ideologies across a long time span. The producer ideology, in what Rude (1980) calls its "derived" or theoretical form (i.e. the labor theory of value), has broad historical and regional applicability by claiming relevance to class society and surely U.S. agriculture has never been without class. Further, the interaction of the

producer ideology with agrarian fundamentalism or the inverted, critical forms of free market ideology can create potent frameworks inspiring mobilization around specific analyses.

Conclusion

This inquiry began by recalling Taylor's contention that there is a unitary farmers' movement that is the equivalent of what we more generally recognize as the labor movement. Taylor's prior interest in the question of the class character of U.S. farmers strongly influenced the direction of this investigation of his thesis. Our conclusion begins with a caution against overemphasizing the class character of the labor movement. By and large, the American labor movement has accepted the basic class relations of capitalism, choosing to struggle over more 'immediate interests such as wages, working conditions, job security, etc. rather than "fundamental class interests" (Wright, 1978). While Taylor draws the analogy to the labor movement with inferences to its class character, that analogy also carries the limitations of labor's lack of a coherent movement culture, though such a subculture may exist.

The Movement is historically divided by a fluctuating dominance of political and economic practices. This too is no different from the labor movement where political resources are sometimes of greater usefulness than economic resources. Taylor is perhaps partially correct in attributing the unity of these diverse practices to ideology. The ideologies discussed above, have often interacted to yield potent frameworks capable of linking variations in economic and political strategy.

Working against the formation of a Farmers' Movement is the relative absence of any potent ideology claiming that theirs was an inevitable future. Indeed, their experience was the opposite. As soon as the weight of feudalism was overthrown, the promise of a hegemonic simple commodity production was overtaken by capitalism. Simple commodity producers enjoyed a belief moment of hope in the New World but even Jefferson's vision was

probably more wishful thinking than reality. That vision found itself in a continuous struggle against history as tenancy and indebtedness continued to dominate agriculture, while the ranks of the proletariat swelled and competitive capitalism gave way to monopoly capitalism.

The Movement is again divided by its articulation with the capitalist mode of production. At any given moment, the diverse points of articulation (e.g. rent, credit, contract production, off-farm employment, the use of hired labor) between simple commodity production and the capitalist mode of production generate differential economic, political and ideological practices. The internal stratification of simple commodity producers also facilitates a diverse array of practices. Similarly, the constant transformation (expansion, development of productive forces, stagnation, crisis and renewal) of capitalist social formations requires continuous adaptation of class strategies and tactics as well as the analyses that inform such practices. Each mobilization takes on a distinct character that is derived from historically specific interactions between the economic, political and ideological levels. These are, in turn, contingent on the constantly changing articulation between simple commodity and capitalist production. All of these conditions pose striking impediments to the likelihood of our finding continuity in the class practices of simple commodity producers in their struggles against capital over any extended length of time. Indeed, we find a variety of responses. Yet, there are some threads of continuity. Within many of these movements there has been a coherent core that shares in the vision of a cooperative economics and a democratic politics. This continuity is held together by a producer ideology and grounded in the material relations of agricultural production that tend to render exploitation apparent, rather than obscure. This coherent core has rarely, if ever, been dominant in particular farmer's movements. It forms, rather, a movement subculture that provides a thread of continuity to episodes of mobilization. Each mobilization varies in the extent to which it is receptive to this subcultural core. The resilience of this core rests on: its material

grounding in continuous forms of exploitation; its internal coherence in that each level supports the others; its relative compatibility with a similar core in the labor movement; and its incompatibility with monopoly capitalism.

In conclusion, it may be wise to qualify this limited support for Taylor's thesis. Historians, with their attention to historical specificity, are sure to be offended by what may seem a neglect of the details that render each movement a distinct episode. In begging their forgiveness, I remind them that in assessing two and a half centuries any continuity is rather surprising. Further, it is only the comparative continuity of the labor movement to which this assertion of a Farmers' Movement must measure up. That movement, too, has considerable variability. In short, farmer's movements are not the completely isolated events that is implied by the literature. Knowledge of the past is embedded in the person, the organizations and the culture at the economic, political and ideological levels and has effects on the analysis that is brought to bear on solving the problems of the present moment. This analysis has tried to recognize the differences between movements in their historical specificity, but has also strived to recognize similarities and patterns in an attempt to balance the literature's emphasis on the peculiarity of each movement.

Taylor's notion of the Farmers' Movement is most useful as an ideal type. That involves constructing a set of rational economic, political and ideological practices of the average of farmers in a particular class situation, what we might call a "propertied producer". That is, after all, very much the way in which our understanding of the labor movement is actually constructed. We can then proceed to examine the ways in which this ideal typical "farmers' movement" will be crosscut not only by status variation and broader political processes but by changes in the development of the modern capitalist social formation with which this production articulates. This permits a recognition of the historically and regionally specific character of a class practice. For example, the holding actions of the NFO in the 1960s and the holding actions

of the Equity in the early 1900s reflect quite different opportunity and resource structures; fewer farmers, more immediate and visual media coverage, "telephone trees" for rapid mobilization of pickets, etc. At the same time, the positing of a common element to these movements facilitates a "framework of questioning" (Kasler, 1988) that points to structures and patterns that might otherwise be neglected.

Verta Taylor's (1989:761) notion of abeyance process refers to: "a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in non-receptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another." This helps not only to counter the "immaculate conception" views of farmers movements but also suggests an intriguing and challenging area of relatively unexplored turf for both historians and social scientists. By raising the question of continuity between mobilizations, Carl Taylor's notion of a Farmers' Movement suggests many opportunities for examining the abeyance processes that transmit and adapt economic, political and ideological practices during those periods of retrenchment which the traditional approach tends to view as "non-events". Indeed, V. Taylor adapted the notion of abeyance in a similar search for continuity in the women's movement.

We rather habitually and uncritically refer to THE labor movement, THE feminist movement, THE civil rights movement as though they are real unitary phenomena. Agrarian discontent, however, is rarely referred to as THE farmers' movement. At the more concrete level of analysis, of course, none of these movements appear uniformly in time and space. They all adapt to changing historical and divergent socio-cultural conditions. The ideal typical approach elevates the study of farmers movements to a framework of questioning enjoyed by our understanding of the labor movement as a continuous phenomenon. Taylor's provocative analogy of the farmers' movement to the labor movement serves as a useful point of departure for investigating the class character of agrarian social movements in the U.S.

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Mooney: Political and Economic Class Practices in U.S. Farmers' Mobiliza

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