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**Ideological Currents Of The Rural Crisis:
The Farm, Small Town, And Rural Peoples' Conference**

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Introduction

The rural crisis of the 1980s plowed a deep furrow across the economic, political, cultural, social, and psychological landscape of the Upper Midwest. Rooted in the financial problems of farmers, the crisis rippled not only through farm families but also into the region's small towns (Buttel, 1989; "Farm Crisis," 1986; Ginder et al., 1986; Heffernan and Heffernan, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1990: 3-13). Responses to the crisis were many and varied. Some people, although in actual numbers only slightly greater than the previous fifty years, followed perhaps the most traditional response to rural crisis and fled in search of work to more prosperous towns and cities (Buttel, 1989: 59-60; Cordes, 1986; "Farm Numbers," 1986; Rosenblatt, 1990; Satterlee and Goreham, 1985; Waterfield, 1986: 5-7). Others formed organizations of the political left and right, like the National Save the Family Farm Coalition, the North American Farm Alliance, the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, the Posse Comitatus, the Farmers Liberation Army, and the National Agricultural Press Association, to protest conditions (Browne, 1988: 66-88; King, 1985; Malcolm, 1985a; Scholer, 1985). Still others, more tragically, turned inward, falling into emotional and physical health problems, sometimes even taking their own lives and those of family, friends, and business associates ("Farm Loan Aide," 1986; Heffernan and Heffernan, 1986; Langham, 1988; Levitas, 1985; Malcolm, 1985b; Malcolm, 1985c; Robbins, 1986).

One response to the crisis, a reaction from the educational institution of the rural community, emerged in the form of the Farm, Small Town, and Rural Peoples' Conference (FSTRPC). Faculty members of the University of

South Dakota at Vermillion hosted this day-long conference on January 31, 1986, to address problems stemming from the crisis.¹ The FSTRPC's theme was "Perspectives on the Farm Crisis." William Janidow, the governor of South Dakota, and Tom Daschle, the congressional representative of South Dakota, provided keynote addresses, and sixteen other regional leaders spoke. More than four hundred area farmers and town's people attended ("Farmers Caught," 1986; Murphy, 1986; Heeren, 1986). Regional news media supplied extensive coverage of the conference. The NBC affiliate from Sioux City provided periodic live coverage as did South Sioux City radio station KWSL/KGLI. Other television and radio

The FSTRPC provides a unique opportunity to explore the thoughts of the regional leaders concerning the rural crisis. This paper examines the conference's content, relying on transcripts from the videotapes, to gain a sense of how leaders in the Upper Midwest conceptualized and responded to the crisis. From the transcripts of the FSTRPC, a number of different ideological strands are isolated. These ideological strands emerge from the leaders' differing economic, political, and social vantage points. The leaders, of course, diverge on specific points about the crisis, but they also share a kind of consensus. Where they disagree and agree reveals much. Before turning to examine the thoughts of the leaders, a theoretical discussion is provided.

¹ Barbara Johnson, Associate Professor of Social Work, Department of Social Behavior, The University of South Dakota, and I (then Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Social Behavior, The University of South Dakota) acted as co-coordinators for the first FSTRPC. A second conference entitled "Small Town America: What Is Its Future?" was held on October 24, 1986, and a third "Working in Rural America: Employment, Underemployment, Unemployment!" on January 29, 1988. The University of South Dakota and the Chamber of Commerce of Vermillion, South Dakota, sponsored this trilogy of conferences. Stations and newspapers from Sioux City and Sioux Falls sent reporters. The University of South Dakota's Department of Mass Communications videotaped the entire proceedings for preservation as an historical document.

Ideology: Theoretical Considerations

The regional leaders voiced their ideological conceptions of the rural crisis during their talks at the FSTRPC. Theoretical insights concerning ideology are supplied so that the conceptions of the leaders might be comprehended. Ideology, for this paper, is a socially constructed, class-based, but imperfect pattern of information which individuals use to understand their world. As Clifford Geertz (1973) observes, ideology provides "a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes . . . (216)." And, he adds, "it is through the construction of ideologies, schematic images of social order, that man makes himself for better or worse a political animal (218)." Ideology is a kind of prefabricated pattern that explains the human world, and, in particular, a means by which individuals can rationalize their economic, political, and social world. The leaders during the conference offered somewhat different understandings of their world as they discussed their ideas about the rural crisis. The FSTRPC acted as an arena in which the ideological conceptions of the leaders were exchanged, elaborated, and modified, and where they struggled for an unspoken but shared consensus.

The regional leaders' highly similar, although somewhat different, conceptions of the crisis, which are based primarily on their varying class positions (including not only work but also life experiences), make clear that ideology is not an independent force, but rather that productive forces play a key part in shaping such conceptions. And, in a reflexive and secondary way, ideological conceptions, in turn, shape productive forces. Ideology, as a result of this interplay, comes to guide the world of human ideas (Gramsci, 1971; Marx, 1978). The understanding that emerges from ideology is imperfect because it reflects the specific way, based primarily on class location, in which individuals come into contact with productive forces.

The understanding that arises out of ideology is additionally imperfect because it reflects not only the differential power of class position but also leadership roles. Almost 150 years ago Karl Marx (1978: 172) noted "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas ...". The ideological conceptions of the regional leaders at the FSTRPC are ultimately a reflection of their highly similar, although in certain particular respects different, class positions and leadership roles, and, still at an even more fundamental level, their relationships to national, even global, level productive and ideological forces.

The FSTRPC reveals that class struggle (i.e., class-based conflict between the leaders as well as with the audience in attendance) is played out in the ideological arena with the dominant class and its supporters (comprised of the national and global political-economic leaders, who were not in attendance but whose ideological conceptions permeated the conference, and regional leaders present at the conference) achieving ideological supremacy over the subordinate classes (regional farmers and workers. Antonio Gramsci (1971) explains that the problem is to understand how the dominant class establishes hegemony (i.e., ideological control). He argues hegemony is achieved as the subordinate classes come to accept the dominant class's conception of the world as common sense through a kind of hegemonic consensus. But this process, Gramsci points out, is never complete, and there is always the possibility that through class struggle counter-ideologies will emerge. Such struggle takes place during the FSTRPC when the regional leaders exchange ideas. Ideological positions are carved out that reflect the specific class positions of the regional leaders. Conventional ideological conceptions that support the political-economic status quo are articulated, but so too are at least pieces of emergent counter-ideological conceptions. The FSTRPC nicely reveals the often very subtle interplay of conflicting class-based interests.

Louis Althusser (1971) generally agrees with Gramsci's theoretical contentions, but adds an important insight when he suggests that the state, especially through schools, is the prime structural mechanism for the protection of dominant class hegemony. The schools, Althusser contends, not only replicate productive forces but perhaps more importantly, at least for the maintenance of class-based order, replicate ideological conceptions. Putting the importance of the school in perspective, Althusser comments, "the School today [is] as 'natural,' indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our contemporaries as the Church was 'natural,' indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago (148)." While Althusser in his work seems to be referring to the role of secondary and primary schools, his insights are equally applicable to role of the university. If Althusser is correct about the contemporary school, then examining the FSTRPC, as a site of class conflict and the creation of class-based consensus in a critical institutional setting, becomes all the more important. This paper now turns to explore the thoughts of the regional leaders who attended the conference.

The FSTRPC: An Arena For Class-Based Ideological Consensus

The FSTRPC is an arena where ideological conceptions are voiced. This arena provides a place in which ideas could not only be heard but also mixed into new combinations and assimilated into the consciousness of individuals. When the newly combined ideas are assimilated the result is either hegemonic consensus, in which those gathered come to accept the dominant class's ideological vision, or the emergence of counter-ideological directions, in which those gathered develop new ideological conceptions to challenge and move beyond the status quo. This struggle to establish ideological consensus can be seen in the FSTRPC. The speeches delivered at the conference overwhelmingly supported the status quo, but from time-to-time an idea was tossed out that challenged conventional conceptions. No single speaker provided a call for a wholly new direction. This should come as little surprise,

for ideological change takes place gradually with a new idea surfacing here- and-there in response to changes in the situation of productive forces.

The occupations of the leaders at the conference, using the theoretical model of class structure of Erik Olin Wright (1978) and a further elaborated version, as it specifically pertains to agricultural producers, by Patrick H. Mooney (1988), place them mostly in contradictory class positions -- neither capitalist, petty capitalist, nor worker. Wright and Mooney concur that these contradictory positions, although not necessarily permanent, may be lengthy in their duration. Those holding contradictory class positions between capitalist and workers are the three politicians, two bankers, two professors, two farm organization professionals, one grain elevator manager, one state job-training specialist, and one state mental health worker. Others holding contradictory class positions between petty capitalists and workers include three farmers all of whom are chronic debtors. None of the leaders could be categorized in the contradictory class position between capitalist and petty capitalist. The one attorney and one small businessperson are petty capitalists, while the one news reporter is a worker. None of the leaders might be classified as a capitalist that is, enjoying control over production and extracting surplus value from hired workers.

The fact that fifteen of the eighteen leaders may be identified as holding contradictory class positions perhaps in part explains the pattern of their individual histories of active participation in their communities as well as their ideological orientation. Sociological literature indicates that persons in such conflicted positions (often identified as middle or upper-middle class), especially those who enjoy a more desirable occupation, higher income, and more authority and prestige, have a reputation for participation in community affairs (Kerbo, 1991: 291-92; Rossides, 1990: 410-12). The conflicted position of the leaders is also revealed in their speeches in which they frequently identify ideologically upward with the capitalist class. Jurgen Habermas (1975, 1984) and Wright (1978, 1985) point out that persons in contradictory class

positions regularly identify upward with large-scale capitalist owners and top-level corporate executives, but their incomes and life styles are those of workers.

Perhaps the best way to understand how the formation of ideological conceptions take place is to explore key differences in ideas among the leaders speaking during the conference. So what important divergences emerge among the leaders? They fall into three categories: (1) definition of the crisis, (2) causation of the crisis, and (3) direction of solutions. Each of these categories is disputed during the course of the conference as the leaders present their own ideological conceptions.

Many persons and the media in the region noted a "farm crisis" in the period between 1984-86. The most obvious manifestation of the crisis was the displacement of farmers. Farmers were losing their farms and leaving in sizable numbers. In response to this situation, I decided to create the FSTRPC. Relying on my own ideological conception of the crisis, which was based on my insights from a contradictory class location (between capitalist and worker) and as a native Southern Californian who had lived in Vermillion, South Dakota, for little more than one year, I selected the conference title "Perspectives on the Farm Crisis." This seemed like a natural theme, but it actually reflected my limited understanding. While many of the leaders stuck to the theme and none of them commented that it might be inappropriate, some broadened the ideological possibilities by referring to a "rural" rather than a "farm" crisis. Joan Blundall, consultation coordinator for the Northwest Iowa Mental Health Center, best summed up this broadened conception when she stated "I don't talk anymore about the farm crisis. I stopped that about a year and a half ago. I talk about the crisis in rural America" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

Those leaders who referred to a "rural crisis" argued that it extended well beyond the farm and threatened to take all of the United States into an economic downturn. Leland Swenson, a local banker, the president of the

South Dakota Farmers' Union, and South Dakota state senator, commented "this is not just an agricultural crisis, but a crisis for all rural America. Communities are suffering consequences just as severe as agricultural producers" (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Bev Strom, a farmer and activist in South Dakota, noted 'one out of every five jobs in America is related to agriculture. Therefore, we can no longer say the farm crisis is a farm problem, but [it] is also a small town and business problem. As the farmers leave the farm they go to the city. Where do they find work? Do they only increase welfare lines?' (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). And, Tim Johnson, state senator of South Dakota, observed "we're seeing an unraveling of the fabric, and it isn't just the farmers and ranchers and small businesses, it's main street and its small schools and its small churches" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). While I provided a theme for the FSTRPC that focused on the farm, many of the leaders provided a broadened ideological conception through use of the notion of a "rural" crisis.

Significant ideological disagreement among the leaders concerning the causes of the crisis was apparent. They provided a wide range of ideas with little overlap in their individual explanations, except that they all agreed that in some way the crisis was a product of political-economic problems. No consensus emerged from any discernible group of the leaders. Perhaps this lack of consensus resulted because there had been little previous opportunity for the leaders to meet and forge a common position. Causation of the crisis was certainly a matter that begged for movement toward ideological consensus, but none surfaced during the conference. From the varying notions of the leaders, five main causes can be distilled.

First, one reason that emerged was that the crisis had resulted from shifts in the United States and global economy. Governor Janklow devoted forty-five minutes to explaining how such shifts had adversely affected American farming (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Alton Hansen, vice president for Terminal Grain Corporation, however, perhaps best summed up the situation when he commented "our [company's] business is related to global agriculture.

...We die when you [the farmer] die. . . . If prosperity is to return to agriculture, we must regain our share of the world market" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

Second, another explanation provided was that the crisis was historically nothing new, but rather stemmed from usual economic transformations that eliminated some jobs while others were created. Harlowe Hatle, professor of sociology at the University of South Dakota, pursued this line of reasoning using an analogy. He asserted the "family is in the path of a fast-moving train" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). The fast-moving train being the process of transformation that historically pushed family farmers out of agriculture.

Third, still another reason presented was that unfavorable federal government policy decisions concerning agriculture had done much harm to rural America and precipitated the crisis. Farmer Bobbi Polzine, a leader of the activist group Groundswell, stated "I am convinced the government is trying to dismantle the family farm system. The federal government doesn't seem to care" (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Representative Daschle added "we [the federal government and the farmers] have a "cheap food" policy. The new farm program is a bankruptcy blueprint etched in stone" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

Fourth, an additional explanation offered was that government and multinational corporations, including ones involving agribusiness, were in collusion, and had caused the crisis through instigating policies that adversely affected the rural economy. On the government-corporate role in the crisis, State Senator Tim Johnson stated "we've been witnessing a massive shift from government as the instrument of farmers and ranchers who don't want a handout to government as an instrument of multinational corporations and agribusiness conglomerates" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

Fifth, a final reason argued was that internal colonialism had caused the crisis as business-led urban areas sucked the wealth from rural ones. Herbert Hoover, professor of history at the University of South Dakota, charged that because of what he called colonialism, or what perhaps more

accurately might be identified as internal colonialism, farmers have always had an unfavorable balance of trade. If your personal accounts with the world are unfavorable, you're bound to go under' (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

While the leaders disagreed on the specific causes of the rural crisis, they did seem to share the notion that their problems were rooted in the political economy. One might expect that such an understanding would lead to the emergence of a counter-ideology, perhaps even an ideology that was specifically anti-capitalist. And, one might also expect that such a counter-ideology would be revealed in the solutions offered to the crisis. But the leaders not only failed to reach a consensus on a shared critique, they also proved unable to find common ground for shaping a new ideological direction,

The inability of the leaders to offer ideas that would lead to change that would transcend the present government's political-economic system should come as little surprise. Martin Carnoy (1984), a political theorist, well documents the historical ideological as well as fiscal development of the American government's political economy and Michael Parenti (1988), a political sociologist, details its present operation. Both reveal the intoxicating way in which a capitalist political economy attracts adherents and rewards, if often times only minimally, its supporters. The regional leaders are products of the government's political economy and its accompanying ideology. They believe in the system, benefit, at least to some extent, from it, and thus support it. One should accordingly not be surprised that the leaders' ideological development shaped their ideas about the kind of actions that might be considered appropriate,

The solutions that the FSTRPC leaders offered were ones that all easily fit within the present political-economic system. Essentially they sought two kinds of solutions. First, they called for help from government at both the federal and state levels. In seeking this kind of assistance, they suggested that some of it must be general help to stimulate rural areas, while the remainder must be targeted to deal with specific problems

or to reorganize specific areas of rural America. And, second, they asserted that they themselves must organize groups to provide self-help, to protest government policy, and to lobby government assistance. While no pattern surfaced to explain which leaders suggested specific kinds of causes for the crisis, their choices of solutions that support the present political-economic arrangements well reflect both their contradictory class locations and specific occupations.

Perhaps quite expectedly the politicians asserted that rural people should look to government for leadership, not necessarily help, in finding solutions. Representative Daschle offered at the conference a proposal for an emergency farm bill that promised to extend credit to farmers. He observed "credit is not the answer, but we need it for breathing space in the coming months" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). Beyond this short-term solution, Daschle provided no direction. State Senator Tim Johnson, who was then running for a seat in the United States congress, stated that the farm bill, the farm credit system, international trade policy, tax reform, and deficit reduction all needed review. Referring to the upcoming election, Johnson said "we have a chance in 1986 to send some message loud and clear to Washington" (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). Governor Janklow implied government might provide direction to resolve the crisis, but he cleverly steered away from offering specific solutions. He commented the conference organizers "didn't ask me to come talk about solutions, because that gets into politics, just the problems" (FSTRPC, 1986: 1).

Those leaders participating in the conference who had a personal history of farm work and activism argued that rural people should organize groups to protest government policy and to provide support for those having trouble. South Dakota farm activist Bev Strom stated "it is important that groups get established throughout our state" (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Robin Wilson, farmer and spokesperson for the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, added "it's up to people here to go home and rattle some cages. . . . Washington, D.C., doesn't know what it's like in Vermilion; you've got to tell them. If you

don't do it, don't cry because something happened to you (FSTRPC, 1986:1). And, Bobbi Polzine, the Groundswell leader, stated "I believe we must pull together and do something... . Groundswell's goal is to take back American spirit, to fight back, to mobilize people in a peaceful movement, to encourage state and federal government to meet our demands' (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Polzine actually suggested four policy directions for rural people to seek to end the crisis: (1) moratorium on mortgage foreclosures, (2) minimum pricing legislation, (3) debt restructuring, and (4) land reform (FSTRPC, 1986: 1). Polzine's four proposals, especially the one calling for land reform, provided possible ideas for the formation of a counter-ideology.

The leaders at the conference who worked for or owned a business in a town or city (i.e., those closest to occupying a capitalist-class location in their class positions as petty capitalists or contradictory positions between capitalists and workers -- the bankers, the grain elevator operator, the small businessperson, and the attorney) sought policy adjustments to be obtained primarily through lobbying. Grain elevator operator Hansen asserted that besides a workable farm bill, 'the thing we [grain elevator operators and farmers] need is a representative in Washington' (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). Attorney Nancy Thompson stated that she had proposed a bill to the Nebraska state legislature to allow farmers to work out more favorable debt liquidation procedures, and to establish a state land clearinghouse which would tell farmers where land would be available for purchase. Thompson noted, "not just at the state level, but also at the national level there are some reforms that can be made to assist farmers. . ." (FSTRPC, 1986: 2). Finally, Tim Wrage, the owner of Emerson Fertilizer Company and the leader of the farm activist group the Farm Crisis Committee, stated that family farmers were an endangered species and federal reform was necessary to protect them (FSTRPC, 1986: 2).

In no instance did the leaders at the conference argue that a solution might have to be sought beyond political-economic arrangements of the

present government. Only bits and pieces of an emerging counter-ideology can be detected. Professor Hoover's comment that the farm crisis was in part a product of colonialism, and Bobbi Polzine's call for agrarian reform give rise to potential counter-ideological possibilities. Hoover's notion concerning internal colonialism could provide a framework that has been utilized throughout the Third World to justify counter-ideological change, and Polzine's push for agrarian reform has been a goal of many radical movements in the twentieth century. Somewhat ironically Hoover's critique was couched in a very cautious, conservative assessment of the farm crisis. Polzine, on the other hand, suggested the time for peaceful resistance had come, but her call for change lacked full development as a counter-ideology as well as popular support at the conference let alone in the region. The present political economy, in any case, can no doubt easily handle such calls for change by regional leaders by just ignoring or, if necessary, coopting them.

Conclusion

From this paper an understanding is gained of how regional leaders in the Upper Midwest conceptualized and responded to the rural crisis of the 1980s. Among these leaders there are strands of similarity in their thoughts about the crisis that reflect their contradictory class locations, but there are also notable differences due to the peculiarities of their work and lives. If early on they defined the crisis as a "farm crisis," like social service consultation coordinator Joan Blundall and I, by the time of the conference there was an emerging ideological consensus that the crisis was a much larger "rural crisis." The leaders also shared in a general way the idea that political-economic factors (the national and global economy, historical economic transformations affecting the employment structure, government policy unfavorable to agriculture, government and multinational corporation collusion, and internal colonialism) caused the crisis, but, at the same time, they seemed to little agree on which of these factors were most important.

As for solutions, the leaders, reflecting their mostly contradictory class locations and specific occupations, relied on class-based ideas to guide their thoughts about how to resolve the rural crisis. Politicians asserted that people should look to government for guidance but not necessarily assistance. The activist farmers argued that people should organize to help themselves and to protest or lobby government policies. Businesspersons (both petty capitalists and those in contradictory positions between capitalists and workers) suggested that help could be gained through lobbying government for policy changes. What the FSTRPC perhaps best reveals about the thoughts of the regional leaders concerning change is an emerging general ideological consensus in support of the present government's political-economic system. The leaders who participated in the FSTRPC identified with the status quo and were long time beneficiaries of the troubled, rural society in which they lived. There should be little surprise that they called for within system change and looked to longstanding ideological solutions rather opting for new ideological direction that might threaten their positions in the rural communities.

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