

THE INVISIBLE FARM

**The worldwide decline of farm news
and agricultural journalism training**

by

Thomas F. Pawlick

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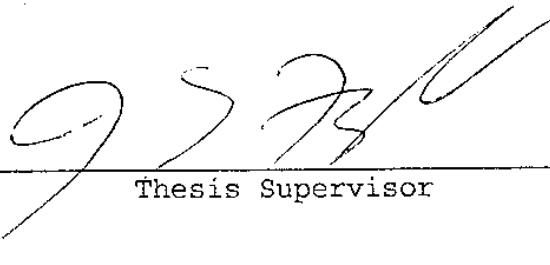
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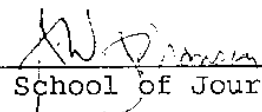
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of farm news and agricultural Journalism training"

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**The worldwide decline of farm news
and agricultural journalism training**

A Master's Degree Thesis
in Journalism Studies

by

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Ottawa, Canada

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A note to readers:

The approach taken in this Journalism Studies thesis may be perceived as unorthodox, due to the amount of space--roughly one-third of the total--devoted to a discussion of issues in agriculture, as opposed to journalism propement dit. The choice, however, is deliberate, and bears explanation.

The overall aim of this thesis is to alert journalists and journalism educators to a serious lacuna in current news coverage, one which threatens the well-being of society. Simply stating that a gap in coverage exists, without giving examples, would be unlikely to convince members of such a notoriously skeptical profession. Newsmen and women, it seems, are all "from Missouri." They want to be shown.

Nor would one or two examples do. They might be exceptions. It has to be demonstrated that the importance of agriculture as a subject of news coverage is pervasive and universal: thus, the systematic marshalling of evidence in Part I.

The detail provided, including sources cited from the agricultural literature, is specifically intended to give those journalists whose interest is piqued by the argument a substantial jumping-off point for research of their own--a base which those unfamiliar with the subject might waste

considerable time trying to acquire without such leads. It is assumed that, for many newsmen and women, this will be their first introduction to farm issues, and a primer ought to have some meat on it.

It might also be objected that the survey of farm coverage and agricultural journalism training in North America, the former Soviet Bloc and Africa, in Part II, leaves out areas of the world--Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, Australasia--at least as important as those actually discussed. Undeniably, this is true. However, attempting to include every major global region would have resulted in a virtual encyclopedia of agriculture and agricultural journalism, running to thousands of pages. This was neither feasible nor desirable. Who would read such a tome? How many years would it take to write it?

The author chose, instead, to concentrate on three regions which could be seen as approximately representative of the three major political and economic divisions in the contemporary world.

What follows should be read with these qualifications in mind.

1. The invisible farm

In the late spring of 1973, writes Joyce Egginton in The poisoning of Michigan, "a truck driver known as Shorty made a routine delivery from Michigan Chemical Corporation (MCC) to Farm Bureau Services, which operated the largest agricultural feed plant in Michigan."¹ The trailer load he dropped off was supposed to consist of 50-pound sacks of a feed additive called Nutrimaster, designed to aid cows' digestion and thus increase their milk output. But tragically, through an error at the MCC plant, the sacks were filled instead with a highly toxic fire retardant--a crystallized polybrominated biphenyl, or PBB.

The PBB was mixed into cattle feed, which was sold to farmers around the state, and within a few months an event comparable to the Love Canal or Chernobyl pollution disasters had occurred. Thousands of farm animals died--more than 35,000 contaminated cattle were slaughtered and buried at one mass burial site alone--and the environment near hundreds of affected farms was severely polluted. As for the human cost, virtually every resident of the state of Michigan--some nine million people who drank milk or ate

¹Joyce Egginton, The poisoning of Michigan (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1980), 13.

other farm products--was estimated to have absorbed "measurable levels" of PBB in their tissue. Hundreds developed immediate symptoms of severe toxicity for which there is no cure, while thousands of others may develop incurable diseases in years to come.

According to Egginton, the response of the state's major news media to the disaster ranged from lukewarm to non-existent. "The press, which should have been a public watch-dog, failed in its function," she charges. Her explanation is worth quoting at length:

Even more than politicians, newspaper writers are an urban breed. Large newspapers concentrate on city stories because therein lies circulation. Most journalists are out of their element on farms, and it was a long time before any Michigan editor was persuaded that there was a story worth chasing down dirt roads, not even marked on the state's highway map....

Months passed before the state's two biggest newspapers, both in Detroit, tackled the PBB crisis in depth. The Detroit Free Press did three detailed articles, but not until March 1977--almost three years after the first quarantines....

Out-of state newspapers paid scant attention to the story, seldom printing sufficiently detailed accounts for their readers to fully understand the dimensions of the disaster. Americans who care about environmental causes were better informed about the dioxin contamination of Seveso, Italy, and the mercury poisoning in Minamata, Japan, than about the PBB crisis in Michigan, although this was the biggest chemical disaster and the worst man-made agricultural catastrophe in United States history....

None of the national [television] networks tackled the subject as a documentary, although the idea was presented to them. Bonnie Pollard, senior associate editor of Michigan Farmer, made the suggestion in letters to all three networks late in 1974, but the correspondence was not even acknowledged... one argument used by television professionals was that sick cows are not good

visual subjects, and since few viewers live on farms the topic would not attract enough interest....²

Only a tiny percentage of the nine million people who were poisoned actually lived on farms, but the possibility that they might have been "interested" in knowing what had happened to them was apparently never entertained.

A media blind spot

Unfortunately, the kind of urban-rural media blind spot of which Egginton complains is not rare. Since her book appeared, it has become increasingly the rule throughout much of the industrialized world, including Canada. According to the annual Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, for example, the number of Canadian daily newspapers listing an "agriculture editor" or "farm writer" among their full-time personnel dropped by 65 per cent between 1975 and 1995. In the United States, even in a so-called "farm state" like Iowa, the number of dailies with full-time farm writers declined by 62 per cent over the same period.³ A comparison of the Broadcasting Yearbook 1976 and Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook 1994 shows that in the United States the number of on-air radio stations (AM and FM) listing themselves under the "agriculture and farm"

²Ibid., 198-201.

³Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 1975 and 1995 (New York: Editor & Publisher Co., Inc.)

format declined from an already low 3.4 per cent in 1976 to a negligible 0.8 per cent in 1994. In Canada in 1994, only three out of an existing national total 663 on-air AM and FM stations described their format as "agriculture and farm."⁴

The quality of agricultural news that does make it into print in North American newspapers and magazines is often low, as suggested in a 1994 study by the Office of Agricultural Communications and Education of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The study's authors surveyed members of both the American Agricultural Editors' Association and the National Association of Agricultural Journalists, asking them to evaluate the quality of agricultural coverage in the daily press and the specialized farm press. The results:

... both groups of judges said general-interest reporters' agricultural coverage is superficial, event-oriented, and often too cute or folksy. Both also said general reporters cover too few hard agricultural news stories, write too few in-depth stories, and do not give agriculture serious, long-term coverage. Furthermore, the judges said general reporters do not understand farming and give urban readers an incorrect picture of farming life.⁵

As for the specialized farm press:

... both groups also agreed that farm magazines take a pro-industry point of view, run too many "successful farmer" stories and stories that serve

⁴Broadcasting Yearbook 1976 and Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook 1994 (New Providence, N.J.: R.R. Bowker).

⁵Ann Reisner & Gerry Walter, "Agricultural journalists' assessments of print coverage of agricultural news," Rural Sociology, 59(3), 525-537.

advertiser interests, and fail to adequately investigate scandals... they agreed that magazines do not adequately cover environmental problems.⁶

In 1995, the Canadian branch of the media watchdog group Project Censored published its list of the "top 10 underreported stories," ongoing controversies which project staff believe have been largely ignored by the mainstream North American media. Three of the 10 were farm stories.⁷

Reliable industry statistics are not available for the so-called "successor states" of the former Soviet Union (FSU), where a relatively high percentage of the population of many countries is still rural (well over 50 per cent, for example, in the four Central Asian republics) or for most Third World countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where farming is still the leading industry. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates the state of coverage in these regions may be worse than that in North America (though perhaps for different reasons). A recent posting on the FSUmedia Internet list, for example, noted that:

Russian farm journalists met outside Moscow to discuss the closure of rural papers and the disappearance of rural television and radio programs. According to delegates, only one national program devoted to farm issues remains. This news vacuum is particularly dangerous as parliamentary and presidential elections loom close. Approximately one-third of Russia's population is rural and has been traditionally

⁶Ibid., 532.

⁷Bill Doskoch, "Project Censored Canada: a top 10 list of underreported stories," Media, Fall 1995, 7.

politically active.⁸

Sociological factors arising from the history of Russian dominance in the region also tend to militate against adequate rural coverage. As John C. Merrill notes in Global Journalism: survey of international communication:

In some of the countries, Russians dominated the cities while the local ethnic group lived in the countryside. This was true of Moldova, eastern Ukraine, northern Kazakhstan, and other places. What can happen is exemplified in Moldova... the Russian inhabitants speak only Russian, so read only the Russian press. The Russian-speaking urban population generally has more money and can more easily purchase the Russian-language press. It is also easier to distribute the press in the cities as compared to the more sparsely populated countryside. Private investors generally come from the cities, too, and when they choose to invest in the media, they invest in the Russian media.⁹

Inevitably, events affecting the non-Russian-speaking rural population receive less coverage.

In sub-Saharan Africa, a rural press has only existed in most countries since the early 1970s, and most papers are struggling for survival. As few rural readers can afford to pay for subscriptions to magazines or newspapers, and advertisers are not attracted to publications whose readerships live at subsistence level, printed publications must depend on subsidies from national governments or

⁸Betty P. Brown Ed. RUSAG-1. "Russian ag communicator update." In FSUmedia. (fsumedia@sovam.com). 1 December 1995.

⁹John C. Merrill (Ed.). Global journalism: survey of international communication (White Plains, N.Y., Longman Publishers USA, 1995), 182.

external aid agencies. Many are no more than mimeographed newsletters, edited by poorly-trained staff. As the authors of a UNESCO report, Rural journalism in Africa, note: "Most of the rural newspapers are run by an editor assisted by one or two full-time reporters. Almost all are development officers in one or another agency, but none was ever formally trained to run or edit a newspaper."¹⁰

As for Africa's larger daily newspapers, a five-year survey in Nigeria found that less than two per cent of the news hole of the West African nation's major dailies was devoted to farm coverage--and that a great deal of what was published lacked "immediate functional relevance for the farming audience."¹¹ Concluded the survey author:

... it appears that Nigerian newspaper editors place more importance on revenue generating content than agricultural subject matter... editors may have assumed that farmers do not constitute an audience, and little can be done to persuade them to buy their "products." In other words, editors may regard agricultural content as "uneconomic" news.¹²

Whether in North America, the former Soviet Union or Africa, the media resources devoted to coverage of agriculture and rural affairs are dwindling or inadequate. The reasons for this neglect differ from region to region,

¹⁰Paul Ansah, et al., Rural journalism in Africa (Reports and papers on mass communication No. 88) (Paris: UNESCO, 1981) 11.

¹¹Terry A. Olowu "Reportage of agricultural news in Nigerian newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 67(1), 195-200.

¹²Ibid., 199.

but the overall result is the same: major stories--not only environmental, but also economic, political and socio-cultural stories--are being underreported. In some cases they are not being reported at all.

Lack of training

The tendency to neglect rural news is not only a function of the increasingly inadequate resources devoted by the major media to agriculture, of an editorial bias stemming from the dictates of a heavily-urban circulation base, or of the poverty of means in developing countries. It is also due to a lack of available training for journalists interested in covering the farm beat, as well as to the absence in general journalism education of efforts to alert students to the importance of agriculture to all readers--including those who live in the city.

For example, in all of Canada in 1995, there was only one post-secondary program in agricultural journalism, offered on a cooperative basis by Loyalist College of Applied Arts and Technology in Belleville, Ontario, and Kemptville College of Agricultural Technology, Kemptville, Ontario, both two-year community colleges. Due to funding cutbacks, the program was expected to be discontinued in 1996. In the United States, out of 510 university journalism faculties listed in the 1995 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC) directory only

seven--.01 per cent--offered courses in agricultural journalism. Three such schools were in the same state: Texas.¹³

As for the former East Bloc countries, a search of the literature, queries posted to the FSU (Former Soviet Union), EE (Eastern Europe), and Rusag (Russian Agriculture) Internet discussion lists, as well as numerous contacts with journalism educators active in the region in late 1995 failed to locate even a single journalism course directed specifically at training agricultural journalists. Typical was the response of Viera Simkova, of the Slovak Club of Agricultural Journalists: "There is no university in Slovakia that has training for agricultural journalists at this time. To be an agricultural journalist, not only in Slovakia but also in most other formerly communist countries is very difficult and unpopular now."¹⁴

Similarly, contacts with UNESCO, with the African Council on Communication Education (ACCE) and with such wide-based press organizations as Inter Press Service (IPS), though they located several university-level journalism programs and a few international development-oriented courses and workshops, revealed no program in sub-Saharan

¹³Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), Journalism and Mass Communication Directory 1995-1996 (Columbia, S.C.: AEJMC, 1996).

¹⁴Viera Simkova. <trend@savba.savba.sk>. Personal e-mail. 4 October 1995.

Africa directed specifically at training journalists to cover agriculture. The situation is only marginally better in other developing-country regions. According to IPS' Peter da Costa, the neglect of the subject is not due to lack of local interest, but to the reluctance of outside aid donors to allot funds for this purpose.

Much as we would like to apply our... training specifically to agriculture, telematics and other global issues that are under-subscribed, we can't structure holistic, inclusive training programs based on our, or even on developmental priorities. Each donor [country or aid agency] has its priority, and its own funding gaps.¹⁵

Worldwide, most reporters and editors are urban-bred, urban-based and urban-oriented, generations removed from farm life. As subsequent chapters will show, in the industrialized countries, this reflects the trend of the general population, while in the Third World it reflects the tendency of an educated urban elite to dominate the information industries. Lack of any personal experience with agriculture, or of the opportunity to learn about it in school, renders the countryside a literal terra incognita to many media people--out of sight and out of mind.

Even when an urban reporter or editor might be inclined to look at rural life, ignorance is a handicap. Compared to, say, the police or sports beats, about which any competent urban journalist with basic professional skills already has

¹⁵Peter da Costa. <ipsdc@gn.apc.org>. Personal e-mail. 2 May 1995.

some familiarity, and whose finer points can be learned on-the-job, the complexity of the farm beat can take years to master: it covers an entire way of life, one often utterly foreign to city people.

The invisible farm

The paucity of resources made available by the major media to cover agriculture and rural affairs, and the ignorance of most journalists regarding rural issues, has rendered the farming and food distribution systems that feed the people of the globe effectively invisible. Massive and far-reaching changes now convulsing the so-called "harvest industries" around the world are proceeding largely without input from the general voting and consuming urban public-- whose lives will be both directly and indirectly affected by the results. When these stories are reported, it is most often in scholarly or specialist publications, or the rare investigative expose, available to professionals who follow the industry but not to the population at large (many of the stories to be cited in subsequent chapters were documented from such sources).

Unaware of the issues, or of their own stake in what is happening, most newspaper readers, radio listeners and television viewers know more about the private lives of Hollywood stars (few media organizations have farm editors, but virtually all have "entertainment" writers) than they do

about the quality and stability of their own food supply. Nor are they aware of the ongoing, often universal, social and cultural changes--some subtle and some not--being provoked by the silent metamorphosis of our forgotten rural world.

As in the case of the poisoning of Michigan, the unwise assumption seems to have been made that no one is interested.

2. Culture, agriculture and survival

The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.¹⁶

-- Masanobu Fukuoka

Among the first things one learns from the practice of agriculture, whether one comes to it by birthright--raised in the country--or transplanted from the city, is that farming is not a mere mechanical, scientific, or even economic enterprise, but a social, and thus **cultural** one. The term agriculture implies this, as does the Concise Oxford Dictionary, whose 1964 edition defined "culture" as, first, "tillage; rearing, production (of bees, oysters, fish, bacteria)"--and only afterward as anything else.¹⁷

Perhaps the editors took their cue from anthropology, which accepts as given that the achievements of every civilized people since the dawn of the Holocene epoch 11,000 years ago, when farming began, have depended on agriculture

¹⁶Masanobu Fukuoka, The one-straw revolution (Emmaus, Pennsylvania, Rodale Books Inc., 1978).

¹⁷H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, eds., The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 5th ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964), 297.

as a base. As Barbara Bender says in Farming and prehistory:

"Though definitions vary, all authorities would agree with Adams (1966, 38), who says that it is 'a truism that complex, civilized societies depend upon a subsistence base that is sufficiently intensive and reliable to permit sedentary nucleated settlements, a circumstance that... in the long run has implied agriculture.' We may add that not only must there be farming, but in most cases it must be diversified and intensive."¹⁸

Later editions of the Oxford have revised their priorities in defining "culture," giving pride of place to "the arts [presumably including tillage, which is an art¹⁹] and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement," while moving "the cultivation of plants," "the rearing of bees, silkworms, etc." and "the cultivation of the soil" to fourth place.²⁰ But the interconnections and overlaps between the realities of rural life as it is lived and the dictionary's various descriptions of culture remain as intricate as they are obvious. Even in the industrialized countries, almost every act a farmer performs--buying seed, repairing machinery, finding a market for a crop--has a socio/cultural component, governed by what the dictionary describes as "the customs, civilization and achievements of a particular time or people." When a baler breaks down at

¹⁸Barbara Bender, Farming in prehistory: from hunter-gatherer to food-producer (London, John Baker, 1975), 12.

¹⁹Thomas Pawlick, "The essential ploughman," Harrowsmith, IV(7), 42-49, 104-106.

²⁰R.E. Allen, ed., The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 8th ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), 282.

hay time, one customarily turns to a neighbor for help, or loses the crop. When a crop is lost, the banker (whose acts are ruled by cultural as well as financial norms) customarily forecloses. And, as the author of this paper can attest from experience, nowhere more than in the country--where one is separated by greater physical distance from one's neighbors--does one feel so much part of a community.

But beyond individual level, the level of farmer-with-neighbor, or farmer-with-urban-interlocutor, agriculture has for millenia been intertwined with greater human society in a myriad ways: as support and underpinning, as source, as inspiration--and most important culturally, as symbol.

Aside from the fact that all writers, artists and musicians must eat, and thus depend at least indirectly on farmers, the place of farming and rural life in literature and the arts is inescapable. From Virgil's Georgics and Langland's Piers Plowman, through Shakespeare and Cervantes, to such varied 20th century voices as France's Jean Giono, Britain's J.R.R. Tolkien or Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiongo, the pastoral setting and rural theme have been integral to generations of written works around the world. A bibliography drawn from English and North American literature alone would be as thick as a small telephone book, including, as it would have to, Milton, Cowper, Spenser, Herrick, Fielding, Goldsmith, Hardy, Cobbett, Coleridge, Lawrence, Wordsworth, (George) Eliot, Jefferies,

Thoreau, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Frost, and W.O. Mitchell--to name a few. Add to it a list from the other fine arts--the paintings of Turner, Constable, Millet, Van Gogh, the "pastoral" works of Beethoven (whose name means beet farm), Schubert, Sibelius or Virgil Thompson ("The plow that broke the plains")--and it would fill a thick phone book indeed. Folk and popular arts, from "bluegrass" music and the quilts and cake baking contests of annual farm fairs to the more sophisticated, stylized products of the Nashville "country music" scene in the U.S., provide still more examples.

This artistic presence exists, and grows, because life in the country, on the farm, has assumed an Eden-like position in the mythologies and literatures of most human societies (John Steinbeck even uses the term in the title of his novel of California farm life, East of Eden).²¹ As Raymond Williams points out in The country and the city, "on the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue."²² Englishmen and Americans, in particular, have added their own mythology, of the sturdy, independent yeoman farmer, the ultimate "freeman," beholden to no man, ready to defend his country and way of life, whether at Agincourt, where his longbow defeated the aristocratic French, or at Bunker Hill, where

²¹John Steinbeck, East of Eden (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1979).

²²Raymond Williams, The country and the city (London, The Hogarth Press, 1993), 1.

his flintlock rifle defeated the "Redcoats."

This, of course, is only half the mythological picture, whose other half includes more hostile associations of the country with "backwardness, ignorance, limitation,"²³ and with the small town as incestuous snakepit (the work of Italian-Canadian author Nino Ricci, in Lives of the saints, is a prime example)²⁴. But the positive myth is dominant.

Myth, of course, is nearly always based on a core reality. Yeomen really did defeat the French at Agincourt, and King George's military machine at Bunker Hill. The family farm really was a key engine of growth in the opening and development of North America by Europeans, and stamped its character on the democracies of the U.S. and Canada. Socially, politically and economically it has been a pivotal entity in most societies around the world, from the "White Highlands" of Kenya's colonial period²⁵ to post-Second World War Japan, where land reform and economic empowerment of peasant farmers marked the first step in the change from semi-feudal state to modern democracy. Its disappearance could not help but have profound cultural consequences.

The cultural effects of radical change in agriculture

²³Ibid., 1.

²⁴Nino Ricci, Lives of the saints (Toronto, McKay, 1991).

²⁵Detailed descriptions of this aspect of African history are contained in: Elspeth Huxley, White man's country (London, Chatto & Windus, 1935), and Errol Trzebinski, The Kenya pioneers (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1985).

could be more disturbing if, as Williams suggests, the significance of the mythical, pastoral model is not limited to the country, but applies also in the urban context:

The complaints of rural change might come from threatened small proprietors, or from commoners, or even, in the 20th century, from a class of landlords, but it is fascinating to hear some of the same phrases--destruction of local community, the driving out of small men, indifference to settled and customary ways--in the innumerable campaigns about the effects of redevelopment, urban planning, airport and motorway systems, in so many 20th century towns and even, very strongly, in parts of London. I have heard a defence of Covent Garden, against plans for development, which repeated in almost every particular the defence of the commons in the period of parliamentary enclosures.²⁶

The country is not revered only for itself, but as the original source and lasting symbol of an attitude towards life and one's fellow human beings. "People have often said 'the city' when they meant capitalism or bureaucracy or centralized power," writes Williams, and for its opposite, they use the code word "country."²⁷ Whether it is the destruction of a culturally-integrating city neighborhood to make way for highway construction, or the elimination of a city's diverse restaurants in favor of internationally-franchised fast-food competitors, the situation is essentially the same as it was when England's commons were enclosed. Williams' argument, which he expands to global proportions and in which the Fall from Eden has such a

²⁶Williams, op. cit., 291.

²⁷Ibid., 291.

strong allegorical echo, is worth quoting further:

The very fact that the historical process, in some of its main features, is now effectively international, means that we have more than material for interesting comparisons. We are touching, and know that we are touching forms of a general crisis. Looking back, for example, on the English history, and especially its culmination in imperialism, I see in this process of the altering relations of country and city the driving force of a mode of production which has indeed transformed the world. I am then very willing to see the city as capitalism, as so many now do, if I can say also that this mode of production began, specifically, in the English rural economy and produced, there, many of the characteristic effects--increases of production, physical reordering of a totally available world, displacement of customary settlements, a human remnant and force which became a proletariat--which have since been seen, in many extending forms, in cities and colonies and the international system as a whole... What the oil companies do, what the mining companies do, is what landlords did, what plantation owners did and do... our images of country and city [are] ways of responding to a whole social development."²⁸

Symbol under seige

The idea that not only the rural world, but every world that could be considered humane or communitarian, is under seige--that we are continually being banished from a succession of socio-cultural Edens by the effects of the economic systems we ourselves construct--is shared by a variety of critics, including Murray Bookchin.

In his landmark 1976 essay, "Radical agriculture," Bookchin insists that "in an epoch when food cultivation is

²⁸Ibid., 292-3, 297.

reduced to mere industrial technique, it becomes especially important to dwell on the cultural implications of 'modern' agriculture--to indicate their impact not only on public health but also on humanity's relationship to nature and the relationship of human to human."²⁹

That agriculture is being reduced to an industrial technique, whose concentration, mechanization and capitalization have so "rationalized labor" as to wipe out the rural populations of most of North America, large parts of Europe and Japan, is not in dispute. The statistics are inescapable. For example, a decades-long trend of rural out-migration in Canada became particularly intense after the Second World War. Between 1950 and 1980, the number of people living on farms "was slashed by a full 50 per cent. In Ontario alone, nearly 362,000 people left the land--the equivalent in urban terms of the entire population of a city the size of Hamilton--suburbs included--packing up and walking away from their homes."³⁰

According to United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) figures, the population of the U.S. (the majority of whose people were engaged in agriculture at the time of Henry David Thoreau) included only two per cent

²⁹Murray Bookchin, "Radical agriculture," in Radical agriculture, ed. Richard Merrill (New York, New York University Press, 1976), 3-13.

³⁰Thomas Pawlick, "The cause and its effects," Harrowsmith, VII(2), 29.

engaged in farming in 1993.³¹ Similar movements have occurred in France, Germany and Japan, with significant drops in agricultural population between 1961 and 1993. Overall, the European Union (EU) has seen its agricultural population--already considerably reduced from pre-Second World War levels--drop by 14 per cent between 1961 and 1993.

According to the FAO, the agricultural population of the Soviet Union, including Russia, also fell steadily from 1963 to 1984, as farming became increasingly mechanized and the size of state and collective farms grew. It has kept falling in most successor states since the destruction of the Soviet empire. In many Third World countries, only massive growth in the general population has prevented a similar drop in rural numbers. Migration from the impoverished countryside to cities proceeds at an unsustainable rate, causing acute urban environmental and employment problems,³² but the rural population continues to grow faster than its members can flee to the towns. In Kenya, total population grew from 8,592,000 in 1961 to 26,090,000 in 1993--an astonishing increase of 303 per cent--while agricultural population jumped from 7,473,000 to

³¹FAO, The state of food and agriculture (SOFA) 1994 (Rome, FAO, 1994).

³²A good description of the situation in Third World cities is provided in: Jorge Hardoy, Diana Mitlin & David Satterthwaite, Environmental problems in Third World cities (London, Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1993).

19,737,000 in the same period--a 264 per cent rise.³³ The country's rural economy, crippled by falling world prices for such commodities as coffee, tea and sugar, and the unfavorable terms of trade created by the recent Uruguay Round negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), cannot provide for its newest arrivals--nor can the overstrained urban environments of Nairobi and Mombasa to which so many migrate.

Throughout the 20th century, all over the world, agriculture has shed labor in massive numbers, first depopulating the countrysides of most northern nations, and now beginning to drain those of the global South and to complete the process of concentration--already well-launched by communism's state and collective farm systems--in the poorer parts of the former East Bloc. The small family farm has been replaced by larger and larger private operations, and finally by the corporate farm. As Washington Post reporter Nick Kotz writes, observing the U.S. scene:

The medium to large-size "family farms"--annual sales of \$20,000 to \$500,000--survived earlier industrial and scientific revolutions in agriculture. They now face a financial revolution in which the traditional functions of the food supply system are being reshuffled, combined, and coordinated by corporate giants. "Farming is moving with full speed toward becoming part of an integrated market-production system," says Eric Thor, an outspoken farm economist... "This system, once it is developed, will be the same as industrialized systems in other U.S. industries"... Twenty large corporations now

³³FAO, op. cit..

control [all of U.S.] poultry production.³⁴

Describing the entry of oil and chemical companies, including the giant conglomerate Tenneco Inc., into farming, Kotz asks: "Will agriculture become--like steel, autos and chemicals--an industry dominated by giant conglomerate corporations like Tenneco? In that case the nation will have lost its prized Jeffersonian ideal, praised in myth and song, of the yeoman farmer and independent landowner as the backbone of America."³⁵ The industrialization of agriculture, he writes, has further serious implications:

1. The future shape of the American landscape. Already in this country, 74 per cent of the population lives on only one per cent of the land. If present trends continue, only 12 per cent of the American people will live in communities of less than 100,000 by the 21st century; 60 per cent will be living in four huge megalopoli, and 28 per cent will be in other large cities;

2. The further erosion of rural life, already seriously undermined by urban migration. Today 800,000 people a year are migrating from the countryside to the cities. Between 1960 and 1970 more than half our rural counties suffered population declines. One result is the aggravation of urban pathology--congestion, pollution, welfare problems, crime, the whole catalog of city ills;

3. The domination of what is left of rural America by agribusiness corporations. This is not only increasing the amount of productive land in the hands of the few, but is also accelerating the migration patterns of recent decades and raising the specter of a kind of 20th-century agricultural feudalism in the culture that remains.³⁶

³⁴Nick Kotz, "Agribusiness," in Radical agriculture, ed. Richard Merrill (New York, New York University Press, 1976), 41-51.

³⁵Ibid., 48.

³⁶Ibid., 49.

Of course, the same trends Kotz deplures are working-- or already have worked--the same kinds of changes in the industrialized economies of Western Europe and Japan.

Bookchin laments the increasingly common worldwide result:

Agriculture, in effect, differs no more from any branch of industry than does steelmaking or automobile production... In this impersonal domain of food production, it is not surprising to find a "farmer" often turns out to be an airplane pilot who dusts crops with pesticides, a chemist who treats soil as a lifeless repository for inorganic compounds, an operator of immense agricultural machines who is more familiar with engines than botany, and, perhaps most decisively, a financier whose knowledge of land may beggar that of an urban cab driver. Food, in turn, reaches the consumer in containers and in forms so modified and denatured as to bear scant resemblance to the original. In the modern, glistening supermarket, the buyer walks dreamily through a spectacle of packaged materials in which the pictures of plants, meat and dairy foods replace the life-forms from which they are derived. The fetish assumes the form of the real phenomenon. Here, the individual's relationship to one of the most intimate of natural experiences--the nutriments indispensable to life--is divorced from its roots in the totality of nature... This denatured outlook stands sharply at odds with an earlier animistic sensibility that viewed land as an inalienable, almost sacred domain, food cultivation as a spiritual activity, and food consumption as a hallowed social ritual.³⁷

American poet and social critic Wendell Berry, himself a farmer, has also identified and warned against this process of agricultural industrialization and rural depopulation, which he calls "a work of monstrous ignorance and irresponsibility on the part of the experts and politicians, who have prescribed, encouraged and applauded

³⁷Bookchin, op. cit., 4.

the disintegration of farming communities all over the country."³⁸ Like Kotz and Bookchin, Berry sees links between the rural and urban crises, and fears the cultural effects:

Few people whose testimony would have mattered have seen the connection between the "modernization" of agricultural techniques and the disintegration of the culture and the communities of farming--and the consequent disintegration of the structures of urban life. What we have called agricultural progress has, in fact, involved the forcible displacement of millions of people.

I remember, during the 50s, the outrage with which our political leaders spoke of the forced removal of the populations of villages in communist countries. I also remember that at the same time, in Washington, the word on farming was "Get big or get out"--a policy which is still in effect and which has taken an enormous toll. The only difference is that of method: the force used by the communists was military; with us, it has been economic--a "free market" in which the freest were the richest. The attitudes are equally cruel, and I believe that the results will prove equally damaging, not just to the concerns and values of the human spirit, but to the practicalities of survival... The aim of bigness implies not one aim that is not socially and culturally destructive.³⁹

Berry insists food is "a cultural product; it cannot be produced by technology alone"--that is, not unless the process is radically simplified, as it is in highly mechanized, industrial monocropping (single-crop) systems. Massive acreages are levelled and sown, year-after-year, with no or only infrequent crop rotations, to a lone, high-

³⁸Wendell Berry, The unsettling of America (San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1977), 40.

³⁹Ibid., 41.

cash-return crop such as hybrid maize, which quickly depletes soil nutrients. To make up for the lost nutrients, especially nitrogen, heavy doses of inorganic chemical fertilizers are employed, which "burn" living soil organisms and pollute the water table. The industrial division of labor involved in such environmentally destructive "factory farming" also multiplies the number of wage-worker "specialists" doing the work, each focussed on his narrowly-defined task, while eliminating generalists who, like the vanishing family farmer, can envision whole systems.

Like Williams, Berry sees this as symbolic of a social outlook that now runs through virtually every aspect of life, one that favors compartmentalization and leads to "a radical simplification of mind and character:"

That the discipline of agriculture should have been so divorced from other disciplines has its immediate cause in the compartmental structure of the universities, in which complementary, mutually sustaining and enriching disciplines are divided, according to "professions," into fragmented, one-eyed specialties. It is suggested... that farming shall be the responsibility only of the college of agriculture, that law shall be in the sole charge of the professors of law, that morality shall be taken care of by the philosophy department, reading by the English department, and so on. The same, of course, is true of government, which has become another way of institutionalizing the same fragmentation... However, if we conceive of culture as one body, which it is, we see that all of its disciplines are everybody's business...⁴⁰

The "compartmental" mind-set, symbolized by the factory-farm, is symptomatic of a culture of alienation,

⁴⁰Ibid., 43.