

# Social Science and the Farm Crisis's Aftermath: *When a Dream Dies* and Recent Agricultural Developments

MARK FRIEDBERGER

THE FARM CRISIS OF THE 1980s marked the last gasp of agrarianism in Iowa. After 1990, despite the continued reliance on farm programs, the horizontal concentration of farm and food production grew apace. Although the Farm Crisis is largely ignored in history textbooks, the steep downturn of the farm economy characterized by high inflation and rapid deflation provided a precedent. Something similar was repeated a few years later in the savings and loan downturn and the more serious subprime recession of 2008. Moreover, in the late 1980s a drought followed by flooding came as a warning that climate change might affect Iowa farming. Politically Iowa was a battleground state; even in the twenty-first century Iowa remained purple. However, by 2016 the Iowa Congressional delegation was dominated by Republicans, and state government and the General Assembly were controlled by the GOP.

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg has written a splendid book. *When a Dream Dies* is thoroughly researched, well written, and beautifully produced. Rather than give a closely argued review, my aim here is to suggest some alternative approaches historians might take in any future analysis of rural Iowa in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Although Lee Benson and Allan Bogue helped form the Social Science History Association in the early 1970s, historians

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gradually lost interest in social science methods. By the twenty-first century the Association was dominated by social scientists rather than historians. This was unfortunate because historians can learn from social scientists' work. Rural sociologists and rural-oriented political scientists, for instance, provided insights and analytical rigor to any discussion of the Farm Crisis, its impact, and the route agriculture and food production took later.

This essay will concentrate on four themes that are interwoven in *When a Dream Dies*: the utilization of source materials; policy tensions at the federal and state levels between, what I call, neopopulism and neoliberalism over solutions to the Farm Crisis; the impact of the Farm Crisis on Iowa agriculture and the path agriculture took in the twenty-first century; and finally how, in the past 20 years, scholars have written about the production of food.<sup>1</sup>

In regard to sources, the most obvious question is the potential of the Ray and Branstad letters for future research. Given the available space, Riney-Kehrberg could not be expected to do more than explore the material in a conventional fashion. At the same time, even in a mobile society with the passage of years, research could use quantitative methods to gauge the status of farm families. Names and addresses provide keys to a host of questions: what happened to these families, did they survive the 1980s on the farm, if not, did they go bankrupt; what happened to their land if it was lost, and who bought it? (Renters would be more difficult to follow). A fascinating, but very tricky tracing exercise would be to find out the occupational status of those who quit farming. A statewide study would be impossible, but a sample of counties could provide a possible research design. All 99 counties hold land, mortgage, probate, and vital records in their court houses. Title companies possess tract books which facilitate the laborious tracing process to research land and mortgage

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1. Space prevents analysis of social psychological issues in the Farm Crisis. For a discussion of neopopulism in the 1980s, see Harry C. Boyte and Frank Riessman, *The New Populism: The Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia, 1986); for neoliberalism, see Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York, 2022).

records.<sup>2</sup> The bankruptcy courts in Des Moines and Cedar Rapids house Chapter 12, 11, and 7 cases, with indexes. In theory it might be possible to interview family members, but this would be difficult to achieve.

One intriguing anecdote from my research 30 years ago concerned political affiliation. I interviewed a family in Northwest Iowa whose operation was under water. They were prominent Republicans, and they contacted Governor Branstad and asked him to intervene with lenders to save their farm. Apparently, the Governor was able to influence the outcome of the financial roadblock. Later the family organized a fishing trip to Canada to celebrate their release from the lender's clutches. While a single case means nothing in the scheme of things, the question of political connections and status in litigation would be illuminating.

The tension and competition between factions over farm policy as the Crisis played out is another theme. I contend that the 1980s would have been different without pressure from neopopulists—the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, led by PrairieFire. The American Agriculture Movement made little impact in Iowa; indeed one of its members who drove a tractor to Texas worked for PrairieFire. Other states like Minnesota followed the PrairieFire advocacy template, but in neighboring Illinois, for instance, there was little protest over farm policies or the conduct of lenders.<sup>3</sup> The neopopulists advocated a drastic alternative to the way agriculture was conducted. They desired to bolster family farming and steer families away from market driven industrial agriculture where larger farms and agribusiness were dominant. The neopopulists sometimes took their cues from the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska. The Center was deliberately established in an area of relatively small farms, and worked with local farmers on projects.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Mark Friedberger, "Probate and Land Records in Rural Areas," *Agricultural History* 56.4 (1984), 123–26.

3. Sonya Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family Farming and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill, 1992); and Sonya Salamon, "Middle Range Farmers Persisting through the Agricultural Farm Crisis," *Rural Sociology* 51 (1986), 503–12.

4. Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* (Lawrence, KS, 1988).

If PrairieFire and the Farm Unity Coalition raised the profile of distress for farmers, the media was their handmaiden to publicize their plight. Although social media was not yet invented, conventional media was very active. *The Des Moines Register* made the Farm Crisis a major story throughout the 1980s and beyond. Local TV stations were consistently attuned to activities publicized by PrairieFire, and farm families in trouble were able, on occasion, to summon reporters to cover confrontations with lenders and law enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly an interesting phenomenon of the Farm Crisis was how Republican politicians came to espouse the neopopulist cry to “Save Family Farms.” Terry Branstad, a young, newly elected governor in 1982, came into office at a difficult time for the state and his family—his brother’s farm was in financial trouble. Slowly Branstad moved from a conventional Republican position to a position more in line with the neopopulists. Even Senator Charles Grassley changed his tune after listening to a farm caller on the PrairieFire hotline.

At both the national and state level, the advent of the Reagan Administration heralded a drive to establish free market agriculture—to cut farm programs and install a neoliberal agenda in government. In Washington, Reagan’s Budget Director was David Stockman. A farm boy from Michigan who grew up on a fruit farm, he believed that farming was a business. According to Stockman, “[farming] didn’t need subsidies any more than any other business.” Stockman became an antagonist in any attempt to assist farmers. Branstad headed a delegation to Washington to lobby for federal support. At a meeting Stockman interrupted Branstad’s plea for farmer assistance with a curt reply. “Just let them fail,” he exploded; “We’ll have a blow off. Lose a few hundred farmers, even a few hundred bankers, then we would not spend \$18 billion for farm programs.” After only 40 minutes, Stockman left the meeting.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, 1985).

6. David A. Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics* (New York, 1986); the meeting with Stockman is discussed in Neil E. Harl, *The Farm Debt Crisis of the 1980s* (Ames, 1990), 170–71.

Despite the Budget Director's negativity, the farm lobby succeeded in their quest for extensive and expensive legislation to bolster farming. This included an Emergency Food Assistance Act in 1983, and the Food Security Act of 1985 (that cost \$169 billion), which Reagan vetoed before eventually signing it five months later. There was legislation to save the bankrupt Farm Credit System, and the Payment in Kind program (PICK and ROLL) paid farmers to store grain until higher prices allowed them to market their crops.<sup>7</sup>

By 1985 the Branstad Administration began to mobilize the state's resources to save family farms. On the other hand, experts like the agricultural economists at Iowa State University remained skeptical. The one exception was Neil Harl who had a law degree and a Ph.D. in agricultural economics. He first objected to the Reagan Administration's tax cuts, which introduced trickle-down economics. This combined with the Federal Reserve interest rate hikes pushed the farm economy towards disaster. Harl was not popular with his Iowa State colleagues who objected to his proposals to extend mortgage payments. The Dean of the College of Agriculture convened a taskforce to study proposals for state intervention and push Extension into action. At the same time, prominent agricultural economists like Michael Boehlje and Arnold Paulsen stuck with their free market neoliberal ideology. In late 1986, their attitudes had not changed. In a press interview these experts suggested that in their opinion the Farm Crisis was a pseudo crisis and just a deep recession.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Harl, *The Farm Debt Crisis*, 139–47; for Farm Legislation and Congressional relations, see William P. Browne, *Private Interests, Public Policy, and American Agriculture* (Lawrence, 1988) and John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919–1981* (Chicago, 1991).

8. One indirect result of the Crisis was the introduction of gambling in Iowa to raise money for the state. Horse and greyhound racing came in 1983, the lottery in 1985, and riverboat casinos in 1991. Harl, *Farm Debt Crisis*, 49, 63, 72, 161–82; *Des Moines Register*, 11/16/1986; see the caustic review of Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington, 1989), by Arnold Paulsen, an agricultural economist at Iowa State University, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 72.4 (1990), 1096–97; Michael Boehlje, *Financial Stress in Agriculture: Implications for Farmers, Lenders and Consumers* (St. Louis, 1986). The classic critique of Land Grant Colleges is Jim Hightower, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times: The Failure of the Land Grant College Complex* (Washington, D.C., 1972).

In Iowa the battle between the neopopulists and neoliberals ended in a draw. By the end of the 1980s, the government had committed large outlays to agriculture. Despite this the neopopulists were dissatisfied. They wanted to steer farming away from its industrialized path. In contrast, neoliberals remained hostile to what they perceived to be wasteful farm programs. They desired to cull small inefficient operations and replace them with larger farms that were run in a businesslike fashion.

What about the impact of the Farm Crisis, and the future of agriculture after 1990? As in the economy as a whole, farming saw neoliberalism triumphant. Bruce Gardner, a leading agricultural economist, welcomed big farming and the promise to eliminate farm programs.<sup>9</sup> Radical proposals by Steven Blank, another agricultural economist, were more far reaching. He hypothesized that American agriculture was not competitive in world markets, that farmland would grow too expensive to purchase because urban sprawl would gobble up land near cities, and third, that urban Americans would no longer tolerate farm programs and they would be eliminated.<sup>10</sup>

Another critic of American agriculture was the rural sociologist Frederick Buttel. He fine-tuned Blank and offered his own insights. He claimed that farm and food production were now concentrated horizontally. In other words, there was a food chain where large corporations controlled goods from farm to factory. As few as 18% of farms produced 68% of all farm products in 1999; livestock production was industrialized; agricultural technology continued to adopt the latest techniques of computerization and weed control; farmers no longer engaged in protests—instead outsiders questioned the quality of food and how it was produced; finally, Buttel accused farmers of being polluters who were reluctant to alter their methods. In short, Buttel saw that industrialized agriculture was dominant. What he called the

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9. Bruce Gardner, *American Agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

10. Steven C. Blank, *The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio* (Westport, CT, 1998).

Arcadian myth espoused by authors like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson in the 1970s and 1980s was dead and buried.<sup>11</sup>

In the long term, as Iowa agriculture evolved, change was inevitable. A study by Iowa Extension in 2018 showed that 60% of farmland was owned by those who did not farm, and 20% of owners were retirees. Those aged 65+ owned 68% of farmland, and 35% was owned by individuals who were 75+, while only 2% of land had owners who were 35 or younger. As many as 47% of owners were women. Eighty percent of owners lived in Iowa, and 17% were outsiders or lived in Iowa part time. Iowa barred corporate farming, but 20% of farmland was held by trusts with 10% owned by family corporations.<sup>12</sup> National figures showed a geriatric pattern as well. The average age of farmers was 57. As much as 48% of all farmland was rented and only 1% sold in 2022. Because of stock market volatility, investors looked to buy farmland and this priced farmers out of the market. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic the government provided generous outlays to farmers. Subsidies totaled \$23 billion in 2020 with crop insurance adding a further \$45.3 billion, although these figures were reduced by 2022. Farmers were generously compensated as COVID-19 struck.<sup>13</sup>

My final theme deals with the production and delivery of food in this century. A whole variety of studies dealt with food chains, and products like tobacco, cheese, and fruit. Similarly, animal welfare, worker's conditions, the impact of organic farming, and community supported agriculture were studied.<sup>14</sup> An

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11. Frederick Buttel, "Continuities and Disjunctures in the Transformation of the US Food System," in David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson, eds., *Challenges for Rural America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (College Park, PA, 2003), 177–92; for agrarianism, see Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco, 1977); Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (Lincoln, NE, 1985).

12. *Iowa State University Farmland Ownership Tenure Survey, 1982–2017*, <https://store.extension.iastate.edu>. For the difficulties of farming in Iowa today, see Beth Hoffman, *Bet the Farm: Dollars and Sense, Growing Food in America* (Washington, D.C., 2022), a *tour de force* on the quagmire of contemporary American agriculture.

13. Linda Oiu, "Farmland Values had Record Highs, Pricing Out Farmers," *New York Times*, 11/13/2022.

14. See Heather Paxton, *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (Berkeley, 2013); James W. Belasco and Roger Horowitz, eds., *Food Chains from*

important book by the MacArthur recipient Ellen Silbergeld, MD, an expert in environmental health, cannot be ignored. Her *Chickenizing Farm and Food* is a devastating critique of how food chains dominate the global food economy. Silbergeld's concern was how human society and the natural world could be sustained in the future. Agriculture was driven by technology, and romantic notions about farming were a fantasy. Industrially produced food was porous and often ended up as waste when unregulated. In addition, industrial food production did not necessarily produce safe food. The widespread use of antimicrobial drugs in animal feed, and the use of high fructose corn syrup, the popularity of chicken nuggets, and the consumption of 8 billion broiler chickens a year in the US underlined trends. Silbergeld's criticism of worker conditions in meat plants was severe. Poor conditions were caused by lax government controls by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Hazard Assessment and Critical Control Points agency (HACCP). In effect worker safety was in the hands of those dedicated to support production. At the same time, the corporations that controlled meatpacking created a "New Jungle" where Taylorism dominated the workplace. Furthermore, Silbergeld suggested that industrial animal food production, especially in feedlots, endangered global health.<sup>15</sup>

Summarizing, Silbergeld pointed out that non-industrial methods were not a solution at present. In 2015 organics only comprised 5% of food production in the United States. In addition, most Americans would not change their food choices and eat healthier and more sustainable alternatives. The industrial model for food production would remain in place, but needed to adapt. In practical terms, a partnership between the industrial

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*Farmyard to Shopping Cart* (Philadelphia, 2009); Susanne Freidberg, *Fresh: A Perishable History* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Carolyn Jensen, *Raising a Stink: The Struggle over Factory Hog Farms in Nebraska* (Lincoln, NE, 2003).

15. Ellen K. Silbergeld, *Chickenizing Farms and Food: How Industrialized Meat Production Endangers Workers, Animals, and Consumers* (Baltimore, 2016); for hog plants, see Alex Blanchette, *Porkopolis: America, Animality, Standardized Life, and the Factory Farm* (Durham, NC, 2020).

and alternative models in field and factory held the best hope for the immediate future.

Despite these pleas for change among specialists who stressed the environmental and social dangers in contemporary food production, neoliberalism remained dominant in what it called the "New Agriculture." For example, agricultural economists Jason Lusk and Michael Boehlje, colleagues at Purdue University, continued to write technical articles in journals and op-ed pieces in the press. They aimed to spread the gospel of industrial agriculture. Lusk once wrote an article that praised the environmental record of large industrial farms. He also wrote a book which chastised "liberal elites" for hypocrisy when it came to food.<sup>16</sup> However, by 2020 even these academic boosters of neoliberalism admitted that all was not well for farmers and consumers who depended on the "New Agriculture."<sup>17</sup>

Riney-Kehrberg has filled a large gap in the history of Iowa agriculture. The mid-1980s were one of the few times when the media focused on farmers in the Heartland. The book puts a human face on the Farm Crisis and highlights the role of women, the effects of the financial downturn on children's education, and the economy of small communities. Her use of Branstad's letters produced a treasure trove of material which can be used by historians in the future.

Unfortunately, though, all is not well in the 2020s for Iowa or Corn Belt agriculture. As I have suggested farming is firmly in the hands of large farmers who are supported by international corporations. Two recently produced books written for the general public, Beth Hoffman's *Bet the Farm* and Tom Philpott's *Perilous Bounty* discuss many of the themes emphasized in this essay. These books combined with the social science literature are a reminder of neoliberalism's legacy on rural America and that most Americans know little about farming and how food is produced. The state of agriculture is unknown to most of the population,

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16. Jason Lusk, "Why Industrialized Farms are Good for the Environment," *New York Times*, 9/23/2016; Jason Lusk, *The Food Police* (New York, 2013).

17. Jason Lusk and Michael Boehlje, "Farmers and Consumers, A Crazy Year in Food," *Wall Street Journal*, 12/16/2020.

and they have little idea how food arrives on grocery store shelves.