

Losing ground: Farmland preservation, economic utilitarianism, and the erosion of the agrarian ideal

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Abstract. The trajectory of the public discourse on agriculture in the twentieth century presents an interesting pattern: shortly after World War II, the manner in which farming and farmers were discussed underwent a profound shift. This rhetorical change is revealed by comparing the current debate on farmland preservation with a tradition of agricultural discourse that came before, known as “agrarianism.” While agrarian writers conceived of farming as a rewarding life, a public good, and a source of moral virtue, current writers on farmland preservation speak of farming almost entirely in utilitarian terms describing its productive capacity and its economic returns. Proponents of farmland preservation use essentially the same underlying framework as critics of preservation: an “economic utilitarian” paradigm that purports to eschew normative values and evaluate land use decisions based on economic criteria only. I argue that, despite their good intentions, farmland preservationists are doomed to piecemeal victories at best, because their arguments, which rely on a utilitarian justification and disregard the agrarian ethic, are inadequate. Without expanding its focus beyond farmland to encompass farming and farmers, the movement risks losing both integrity and effectiveness.

Key words: Agrarianism, Agricultural ethics, American Farmland Trust, Economic utilitarianism, Farmland preservation, New agrarians, Urban sprawl

Abbreviations: AFT – American Farmland Trust; USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

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The errors of politicians ignorant of agriculture ... can only rob it of its pleasures,
and consign it to contempt and misery.
– John Taylor, 1813

Introduction

Agriculture has been an activity of central significance to virtually every settled society the world has known. Even in the United States, where farmers have comprised less than half the population for over a century, and less than 3% several decades ago, the working farmstead set in a bucolic rural landscape continues to hold a special place in most people’s hearts. Indeed, public discourse on the value of agriculture stretches back to our country’s founding and has hardly let up even as its subject has played a decreasing role in the national economy.

Culture and agriculture are dynamic and interrelated phenomena. Transitions in the makeup and mores of a society are closely interconnected with shifts in agricultural practice, which in turn relate to shifts in the dia-

logue on agriculture. In fact, if one examines the trajectory of the public debate over agricultural policy through the course of the last one hundred years, one notices a stark example of such a shift: the very parameters of the debate change quite profoundly around mid-century. In the decades preceding World War II, agriculture was rendered in grandiose terms as a foundational element of American culture and democracy and an explicitly virtuous activity. It was seen not as an occupation so much as an all-encompassing lifestyle whose purpose was sustaining families and communities in addition to fields and pastures. This point of view, taken generally, defines the stance known as “agrarianism.” After the 1940s, however, agriculture was looked on increasingly as a business venture, a means of production reducible to basic inputs and outputs and whose sole purpose was raising food. Through this more recent

lens, agriculture exists simply to satisfy the alimentary needs of a largely non-agricultural population. The agricultural discourse thus shifted from one dominated by agrarianism to one dominated by the putatively less biased viewpoint of “economic utilitarianism.”

The repercussions of this shift are especially interesting as they play out in populist agricultural causes, such as the defense of family farms or the push for value-added agriculture. Advocates for such initiatives can still claim as an asset the mythical hold farming has on the public conscience, although that hold has diminished considerably since mid-century. Increasingly, the platform required to resonate in the realm of public discourse must consist of economically quantifiable arguments. In the following paper, I will explore this thematic shift through an examination of one of the preeminent public debates on agriculture today: the farmland preservation movement. I will begin by laying out the chief arguments made by both preservation proponents and opponents, which together provide an insightful picture of the way in which farming is currently perceived and valued. I will then outline the chief tenets of the “agrarian” worldview, which was the dominant mode of looking at agriculture prior to 1940, and which still claims a small number of supporters today. The contrast between the two themes will then inform a discussion of the role of ethics in agricultural discourse and why the agrarian point of view – now a distinct minority among agricultural voices – is still relevant to the farmland preservation movement.

The argument for farmland preservation

Declining interest rates and booming exports made the mid-1970s a time of optimism and financial windfall for American farmers, but the decade also brought a new kind of agricultural crisis: the accelerated loss of productive cropland to urban expansion and other non-agricultural uses. Starting in the late 1960s, urban populations began flocking back to the countryside in ever greater numbers. Housing subdivisions and commercial shopping centers proliferated on what had only recently been prime farmland. The USDA’s Soil Conservation Service published a *Potential Cropland Study* in 1977 that confirmed many peoples’ suspicions: between 1967 and 1975, rural land in the USA had been converted to urban use at a rate three times that of the historical norm (Dideriksen, Hidlebaugh and Schmude, 1977). Beginning in 1975 with a “Seminar on Prime Lands” sponsored by the USDA, a systematic argument for preserving farmland was laid out by various members of the government, non-profit organizations, and academia. What began as a congressional initiative soon burgeoned into a nationwide movement, including the

creation in 1980 of the American Farmland Trust (AFT), a national non-profit organization dedicated to the cause. Today, the idea of preserving farmland has been widely accepted by the public and has resulted in a number of successes at the national level, most notably the inclusion of a subsidized farmland protection program in the last two congressional Farm Bills (Economic Research Service, n.d.).

When members of the farmland preservation movement write and speak, they generally do so in order to convince citizens and politicians to support preservation measures. The task they are charged with is to lay out the argument for preservation in such a way as to convince the wider public that it is a social imperative – not a special interest perk or an abstract academic philosophy, but a necessary act that will stave off future harm to society. They must play upon both the ways in which agriculture matters to a largely non-agricultural public and the general style of argument that resonates the most with Americans. The reasons put forth by the AFT and others to protect farmland can be broken into three main categories: ensuring the ongoing production of food and fiber; helping rural economies and communities survive; and stemming urban sprawl.

Ensure continued production of food and fiber

Nearly every tract on farmland preservation begins with the assertion that farmland must be preserved quite simply so that it can continue to produce agricultural products. American agriculture is the envy of the world and, in many respects, the feeder of the world also. The statistics are well-known to most. The average American farmer feeds 51 individuals worldwide. US farmers produce half of the world’s grain exports. Global population is predicted to grow by 50% in the next half century and global food demand by 70%. Every acre paved over is an acre less to supply that need (Olson and Olson, 1999).

The argument for maintaining agricultural productivity provides the movement’s most alarming statistics. According to the AFT, every minute of every day we lose two acres of farmland to non-agricultural uses and the trend is only getting worse – during the 1990s we lost farmland at a rate 51% greater than that of the 1980s. Such changes are not confined to select areas of the country, as every state is losing valuable farmland (AFT, 2002a). Simply consider the following analogy: “Throughout the past decade, an area the size of the states of Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Delaware combined has been converted into new housing developments, industrial complexes, shopping centers, highways, water reservoirs, and other uses” (Steiner and Theilacker, 1984: xv). There

is a cropland buffer at present in the United States due to several million acres being held in conservation reserve. With predicted increases in food demand, however, this surplus land could disappear by 2020 (Olson and Olson, 1999: 35).

Two other elements further exacerbate the problem of losing productive capacity. First, conversion from agricultural use occurs disproportionately on the highest quality farmland. The best croplands exhibit the same qualities most prized for residential development – flat topography and well-drained, fertile soil. The rate of conversion for prime land was 30% faster than the rate for lesser land between 1992 and 1997 (AFT, 2002a), and the percent of high-quality soils converted to urban uses was twice that of low- and moderate-quality soils (Peterson et al., 1997). Second, land lost to urban uses is lost from farming forever. Commercial strips and subdivisions do not yield bumper crops. Interestingly, some critics of preservation refute this point and insist that the process is not irreversible (e.g., Fischel, 1984). Nevertheless, it seems a fairly intuitive notion to preservationists. Olson laments the situation thus:

Development forecloses any options for agriculture on a particular piece of land; if you grew up on a vegetable farm in western Long Island or a productive orchard in the Santa Clara Valley (or any of a hundred other urban fringe areas) during the 1940s or 1950s, you literally can't go home again (1999: 2).

Protect rural economies and communities

Agriculture serves as the base of many rural economies, and keeping the land in farming maintains this economic foundation. In addition to the more obvious income derived from farmers buying equipment and seeds and selling produce, land retained in farming protects municipal coffers from being emptied to provide basic services such as sewage and water lines to residential subdivisions. A number of studies have demonstrated that residential developments cost municipalities more than the tax revenues they generate, while farmland and open space cost only a fraction of their respective tax revenues (AFT, 1986; Tibbets, 1998: 7). The most comprehensive recent guide to saving farmland advances this argument emphatically in an entire chapter devoted to “making the case for farmland protection.” The subheadings in the chapter indicate that protecting farmland is “good fiscal policy ... good economic development policy ... promotes a diverse local economy ... [and] will minimize conflicts with non farm neighbors” (Daniels and Bowers, 1997: 15–19). The economic side of rural farming communities is clearly of critical importance. Indeed, given their connection to the productivity arguments outlined above,

economic considerations appear to outweigh all other criteria for defending farmland preservation.

The other side of the “community” coin is harder to define and is usually only hinted at. The AFT puts it like this: “Sometimes the most important qualities are the hardest to quantify – such as local heritage and sense of place Farms and ranches create identifiable and unique community character and add to the quality of life” (2002b: 3). Several elements are wrapped up in this argument. There is the idea that farming is conducive to family values and land stewardship: “Although they are entrepreneurs, most farmers and ranchers work the land because they love it. They are as motivated by family, faith and feeling as they are compelled to make a profit” (AFT, 1997: 14). There is the sentimental attachment to the farmscape as an essential part of America’s heritage. There is, also, the aesthetic quality of farmland as inherent open space, a natural respite from the oppressive rhythms of urban life.

On each of these individual points, however, the literature is surprisingly sparse. They are mentioned from time to time but never pointedly emphasized. Advancing an argument for “quality of life” exposes a fine line between preservation for farming’s sake and preservation for the benefit of non-farmers. The question could be posed: whose quality of life is being improved? Consider the statement of a preservation proponent from Michigan: “Folks like to leave the hustle and bustle of the city and visit the wide open countryside. Psychologically, green space and farmland are an important piece of the lifestyle that west Michigan has to offer” (Guy, 2002). Or the director of the Puget Sound Farm Trust: “We’re losing all the qualities that make this such a great part of the country to live in” (Baker, 2000: 32). Is the purpose of farmland preservation to preserve farming or to create “a great place to live”? A regional director for the AFT admits that the newest generation of preservationists is less concerned with saving land for the sake of the farms and more with nipping the disagreeable trend of urban expansion in the bud (D. Caneff, personal communication). As we will see shortly, such statements will prove problematic when subjected to critical scrutiny.

Slow urban sprawl

It is no coincidence that the surge in concern over disappearing farmland began in the mid-1970s. In 1975, a government demographer announced that for the first time in one hundred years, transportation networks and decentralized industry had reversed a trend centuries in the making: population migration was greater out of the cities than into them. Of course, citizens were not moving back onto farms but into low-density housing divisions, creating a new kind of growth called

“buckshot urbanization” (Lehman, 1995: 95–96). This decentralized pattern of development was the primary cause of farmland conversion and, though rarely acknowledged as such, underlying the call for preserving farmland has been an emotional attack on urban sprawl.

In many cases it only emerges as an aide to illustrate another point. For example, to demonstrate that farmland conversion is getting worse instead of better, it is helpful to show that urban sprawl is becoming all the more culpable. In the period 1982–1997, while the U.S. population grew by 17%, urbanized land almost doubled, as did acreage per person for new housing (AFT, 2002a). Developed land per capita rose from 0.34 acres in 1982 to 0.6 acres in 1992 (Olson and Olson, 1999: 25). While new housing lots of the past were usually in the 1–10 acre range, lots of 10–22 acres have accounted for 55% of new housing since 1994 (Heimlick and Anderson, 2001: 14).

Sprawl is similarly implicated in the results of a number of studies that point to the government’s role in subsidizing horizontal urban growth. Municipal governments fund the building of transportation corridors from city centers to “exurbs” and control taxes and other fees which contribute to stark differences in land prices (Bergstrom et al., 1999). Farmland preservation is also mentioned in most popular magazine articles about urban sprawl (e.g., Baker, 2001; Montaigne, 2000). As seen, though, it is a topic usually only mentioned tangentially, as in the AFT’s veiled and muted criticism that the phenomenon of thousands of city dwellers seeking serenity in the countryside “begins a process of re-creating urban problems in the country” (1997: 4). In fact, as I will soon describe, the seeming covertness of the anti-sprawl agenda becomes grounds for one of the chief arguments *against* farmland preservation.

Utilitarian rationale and the missing (land) ethic

Farmland preservation as a movement is inherently linked with the larger cause of environmentalism, at least to the degree that both strive to conserve undeveloped open space and farms are seen as (at least potential) allies in preserving biodiversity, riparian buffers, bird habitats, etc. There is a large and respected body of literature on environmental ethics. It seems strange, then, that the preservationist literature should be so devoid of a counterpart. Of course when the AFT points to the maintenance of “quality of life” or a “shared heritage” (albeit as the fourth of its four reasons to preserve), there is some implication of a connection to human ethics. Yet save for a handful of articles spread out over more than two decades – and all of them emanating from academia (Sampson, 1979;

Jacobs, 1995; Sutton, 1999) – the literature does not overtly address any overriding moral issues intertwined with farming and farmland use. A recent, comprehensive handbook on farmland protection embodies this norm. In an entire chapter devoted to the justification for preservation, the closest the authors get to an ethical assertion is that “besides benefiting the community, protecting farmland benefits farmers” (Daniels and Bowers, 1997: 18).

Of course, it would be misleading to claim that farmland preservation arguments are devoid of an ethical underpinning; no normative argument can exempt itself from moral discourse. Rather, the question is: What is the underlying and unstated ethical framework that bulwarks the preservationist cause? Consider the following statement from the final section of the AFT’s 2002 fact-sheet entitled “Why Save Farmland?”: “Farms and ranches create identifiable and unique community character and add to the quality of life” (AFT, 2002b: 3). At first glance, it seems a typical example of preservationist rhetoric, drawing on both public sentiment for family farms and the loss of community cohesiveness in rural America. Upon closer inspection, though, one notices that the recipient of this “quality of life” is left unspecified. Presumably, then, the continued existence of farms and ranches adds to everyone’s quality of life.

Farmland preservation thus joins the majority of agricultural literature from the second half of the twentieth century in relying on what Tweeten (1987: 246) endorses as “perhaps the most widely shared ethical system in America”: the long-entrenched tradition of utilitarianism.¹ The notion of “the greatest good for the greatest number” is implied throughout preservationist literature. Producing an adequate food supply is good for everyone who eats. Protecting rural economies is good for rural and urban dwellers alike. In short, society benefits when there is more agricultural land around, and the loss of productive farmland is a collective loss for society – that is to say, for the majority of citizens.

But calling preservationist arguments “utilitarian” still does not answer the question of why ethical issues are not discussed more overtly in the preservation literature. After all, the school of environmentalism has utilitarian ends as well (environmental protection benefits everyone, not just environmentalists). Yet discussions of ethics are nowhere as rare in environmental literature as they are in farmland preservation tracts. In considering this conundrum, Olson implicates the nation’s overall economic system: “As Americans observe what is happening around them to farmland ... their conclusions as to the rightness or wrongness of these events are often based on each event’s conformity to the principles of capitalism” (1999: 10). Here we begin to glimpse the ways in which the agricultural

dialogue has shifted during the past century. An explicit moral stance is not to be found in preservationist literature because preservationists, in keeping with the prevailing mode of discussing agricultural problems, have embedded their cause in economic arguments, or what might more accurately be called “economic utilitarianism.” This fact requires further elaboration, and we will be aided in the process by examining the arguments of a set of writers who embrace the economic utilitarian point of view unabashedly: the small but vocal group of farmland preservation critics.

The argument against farmland preservation

It may come as a surprise to some to find that there is such a thing as an argument against farmland preservation. The issue of farmland loss is by now painted in such vivid colors in the popular media that few would question the severity of the problem or the need for a solution. It seems entirely intuitive to want to protect farmland, yet from the moment of its inception farmland preservation has faced criticism from both political and academic arenas. Apart from letters to the editor by property rights advocates in many local newspapers, the literature of the anti-preservation camp has been mostly confined to a few edited volumes (see especially Crosson, 1982a; Baden, 1984a). The critics are almost exclusively economists, and their arguments embody the “economic utilitarian” paradigm. Stemming from the fundamental premise of neoclassical theory that economics is amoral, this viewpoint holds that economic factors should be the predominant consideration in determining the use or value ascribed to a particular commodity. In other words, it eschews explicitly biased statements and enacts a guise of value neutrality. As Gould and Kolb write, the discipline of economics “is sometimes called a utilitarian science ... because it is not thought [to be the role of] economists to pass judgments on men’s wants. As economists, they are supposed to consider only what men’s wants are and how they can be satisfied at the least cost” (1964: 740). This claim to value neutrality is highly problematic from a postmodern point of view. Numerous scholars have attacked it on the grounds that it itself represents a deeply-rooted, foundational “bias” and reflects a particular view of human nature. Nevertheless, it is a principle that informs every theme winding its way through the anti-farmland preservation literature.

There is no farmland crisis

Virtually every volume attacking preservation measures begins with an article denying the severity of the farmland loss “crisis.” Baden, for example, says that the

issue is “widely misunderstood and exaggerated” and refers to the public sentiment it stirs up as “hysteria” (1984a: vii). Gardner (1984) points to the obvious truth that urban lands have always been located near the best farmlands, and thus for millennia the first land to fall to urban expansion has been prime cropland. Furthermore, we cannot expect farmland to remain farmland for eternity, especially in a country where farming continues to decline in economic importance: “Economic problems are always rooted in change, and in a dynamic economy, any pattern of land use will eventually become obsolete” (Pasour, 1984: 105).

The brunt of this type of criticism is directed at the statistics that inform the crisis in the first place. Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, several different national cropland surveys were carried out, often using different protocols for ranking rural and urban land. The figure of three million acres of farmland lost per year that emerged from the 1977 *Potential Cropland Study* was used as the rallying cry for the initial push for preservation (Dideriksen et al., 1977). In 1979, a more comprehensive and in-depth survey was ordered to mitigate the barrage of criticism that greeted the 1977 study. Yet the criticism continued.

Fischel claims that the methods used to calculate urban land figures in the 1970s surveys were more inclusive than those used in the prior decade, thus skewing all farmland conversion data in an upward direction (1984: 81). Simon calls the three-million figure the product of “eco-freaks” (1982: 40), and concludes that methodological difficulties make it essentially “impossible to determine how rapidly land in the United States is being converted from cropland and other agricultural purposes to urban and built-up areas” (1984: 70). Even projecting decades into the future, these scholars conclude that “neither soil erosion nor conversion to nonagricultural uses, nor the two in combination, [will] pose a serious threat to the future supply of agricultural land” (Crosson, 1984: 8). Baden insists that public fears over farmland loss are simply the result of “windshield empiricism” – we see urban sprawl occurring here and there and falsely conclude that it is ubiquitous and happening on a tremendous scale (1984b: 145).

Technology is a substitute for land

The analysis goes beyond the simple notion that land remains abundant. As is typical of an outlook grounded in neoclassical notions of progress, there is the firm belief in the ability of technology to mitigate the difficulties imposed upon us by natural scarcity. That is, the issue of land scarcity is a moot point, because, as the history of American agriculture has shown, there are other inputs into the production equation besides land.

Specifically, technology in the form of mechanized machinery, large-scale irrigation, and various petrochemicals raises productivity without requiring any additional acres of land. Technology is literally a “substitute for land” (Crosson, 1984: 4).

Given yield statistics over the past century, such assertions are impossible to deny in the technical sense. The 316 million tons of grain produced on 162 million acres in the U.S. in 1979 would have required 509 million acres using the labor-intensive practices from 1910. The 7.6 billion bushels of corn produced on 69 million acres in 1979 would have required 272 million acres of land in 1910; hay acreage would have had to increase from 60.9 million to 130 million acres and cotton from 13 million to 40 million acres (Heady, 1982: 30–31). Early Malthusian skeptics must now admit that “there is no fixed relationship between land and output” (ibid: 197). Continuing in this vein, of course, the newest addition to the technological arsenal is biotechnology, and Gordon and Richardson perfectly capture the optimism it has engendered: “The future of biotech and superior crops and larger harvests will only make things better. The demand for croplands will continue to fall” (1998).

A reliance on technology rather than land as a means of ensuring the viability of farming underscores a notion central to the anti-preservation argument – the “farm problem” is little more than a production problem. If we achieve a crop yield sufficient to feed the populace and continue to do so indefinitely, then agriculture has accomplished its mission. Issues of urban sprawl or the loss of family farms are irrelevant.

Anti-development in preservationist clothing

If there is no crisis of farmland loss, and if technology can substitute for the little bit of land that is being paved over, then why are preservationists up in arms? Critics of preservation continue with their argument by attacking the supposed motivations of preservationists themselves. Crosson, for example, questions why some of the strongest support for protecting farmland comes from states which no longer comprise a significant component of the agricultural economy, citing New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Oregon as examples, and then plainly answers his own question: “[S]ome of those ostensibly concerned with the adequacy of land as a factor of agricultural production are really concerned about it as a source of amenity values, such as open spaces” (1982b: 4). It is a theme repeated by critic after critic – farmland preservation is merely window dressing for a more underhanded cause. “The real beneficiaries and the real force behind the movement for farmland preservation are local antidevelopment interests” (Fischel, 1984: 93).

According to this argument, preservationists are more interested in selfish victories over an urban landscape they detest than in the continuation of farming per se. Not content with mere conservation of rural land resources, they want control of those resources. Echoing McClaughry’s (1976) provocative argument about the inefficient and domineering character of governmental land regulation, Meiners and Yandle (2001) call the rise of farmland trusts which hold development rights in perpetuity “a return to feudalism.” Agriculture is important not for its salubrious effects on society or its maintenance of rural communities, but because it is a de facto guarantor of open space, and in keeping with the image many Americans already have of the environmental movement, farmland protection is a way for preservationists to have their cake without paying for it themselves. As Beattie writes, “It is easier to convince others – notably nonlocal taxpayers and their political representatives – to foot the bill by wrapping open-space and antidevelopment motivations in agricultural-capacity clothing” (2001: 18–19).

Farming measured in economic terms only

While preservationists attempt to elevate farmland to a kind of mythical status, their opponents work to demystify it. Clawson notes, “Preservation of prime land is important, but so is the preservation of land prime for other uses. Agricultural land use must be viewed in a wider context than agriculture alone” (1979: 121). Baden is less circumspect. He skewers the idea of preserving land “in perpetuity,” with its attendant insinuation that land has a greater value as farmland than it will ever have in another use, stating that “it is difficult to imagine a more extreme, myopic view” (1984b: 152). Even members of the farming community are not immune to this sentiment. As a lobbyist for the Farm Bureau put it in 1980, “There’s nothing magic about any one patch of ground” (Peirce and Hatch, 1980: 1359).

The lobbyist’s statement perfectly captures the tenor of the anti-preservation argument. If farmland is only as good as its yield, then it has no meta-economic qualities. There is no “land ethic,” there is just land. As pointed out before, contained within the preservationist argument is at least the recognition, however faint, that land might have a value that cannot be captured in economic terms. An interesting manifestation of the economists’ counterargument, though, is that when they themselves summarize the preservationist position for the sake of clarity, even this slight hint of a meta-economic value is gone. Gardner, who is wary of preservation, lists four ostensible reasons for saving farmland, but his reasons differ from the ones advanced by the AFT: (1) ensure the supply of suffi-

cient food and fiber; (2) maintain the local agricultural economy; (3) control urban sprawl; (4) provide open space and associated amenities, primarily for the benefit of urban dwellers (1984). Gone is the AFT's "quality of life," except as an implied benefit for those who live in the city.

This perspective should surprise no one; a fundamental characteristic of economics as a discipline, after all, is its amoral stance. Pastures and parking lots are not compared using aesthetic or ethical criteria, but on a cost-benefit basis only. The demands of the marketplace, not principles such as equity or stewardship, have the final say: "It would be hard to make a case that land is more valuable in agriculture than in urban uses when the market denies it several times over" (Brubaker, 1982: 218). The dispassionate rendering of a farmer's decision to sell is a perfect example of how this view functions:

If the park owner is able to buy the acreage from the farmer, both parties agree with the park owner's thesis that the amusement park is the more valuable use of those 20 acres. Similarly, should the park owner be unable to buy those acres, the park owner would agree with the farmer's thesis that dairy farming was the more valuable use of that land (Wagner, 2001: 59).

There is simply no recognition that land may have any value other than the money that changes hands upon its purchase. The land is more "valuable" as a farm for the sole reason that the developer cannot afford to turn it into a park.

Others are even more direct. Note the language at the end of this statement by Fischel: "If a farmer suspects that he will be selling his land to a developer soon and if the developer is not interested in the barn or the fertility of the soil, it is a net loss to both the farmer and society to continue to maintain them" (1984: 91). The few arguments put forth by the AFT and others about farming's contribution to the rural way of life have been turned on their head. It is not society's loss that farmland is disappearing, but rather that the preemptive actions of a preservation committee should cause it *not* to disappear. A final quotation drives the point home. Luttrell writes, "When the value of land that is converted to urban use exceeds the value that is obtained from farming, the farm owner, the land developer, and *the general public will profit from conversion*" (emphasis added; 1984: 41). The juggernaut of progress assigns land to higher and better uses from which all of society benefits. The economists have achieved a rather remarkable feat. They use the same utilitarian framework employed by preservationists, and in spite of their insistence on moral objectivity, they have attached a sense of moral duty to the process of farmland conversion itself.

Agrarianism

The carefully-worded, economics-oriented debate just outlined stands in contrast to a substantial body of literature on agriculture that spans several centuries (indeed, millennia) and is typically lumped under the term "agrarianism." Agrarian works long predate the reign of economics in public discourse. Those from what is considered the "golden age" of agrarian literature – roughly the first third of the twentieth century – fairly leap off the page with hyperbole and grandiose sentiments. Agrarian philosophy proves instructive to the debate on farmland preservation because it delves well beyond economic reasoning. Agrarians are not so much concerned with the services that farmers (or farmland) offer society, but with the continuation of farming for its own sake. Certainly farmers provide food as well as a handful of crucial traits to the republic – for example, a spirit of independence that forms the backbone of our democratic society – but these are the fortunate gifts that a robust agricultural sector inherently gives, rather than the *de facto* reasons for agriculture's existence.

Most readers are likely familiar with at least the term "agrarianism," but there may remain much confusion about what the word actually signifies – and with good reason. The "agrarian idea" has been around for as long as people have written about agriculture, yet scholarly works on the subject have been few. What follows is not meant as a full history or analysis of agrarianism, for the concept is far too historically rooted and nuanced to be covered in a few paragraphs. Rather, I will concern myself with what I see as the idea's most fundamental tenets, particularly as they relate to the current farmland preservation debate.

What is agrarianism?

Agrarianism is ineluctably coupled with agriculture. Its locus is in the countryside, but location alone is not a sufficient criterion; the agrarian life is the farming life. Beyond this fundamental relationship, however, the historian of agrarian thought faces a formidable problem in the variety of ideas that fall into the category of agrarianism. The modern conception of agrarianism owes a good deal of its inspiration to a scant few paragraphs in the voluminous writings of Thomas Jefferson, including these famous lines: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country ... by the most lasting bonds" (McEwan, 1991: viii). However, as some scholars have recently pointed out, Jefferson's version of agrarianism has held a disproportionate sway over the public's imagination (Thompson, 2000).

Inge (1969), in his exhaustive compilation of American agrarian literature, differentiates among five different agrarian “voices”: (1) the moral view of farming as a virtuous occupation; (2) the romantic view that farming offers independence and self-sufficiency; (3) the psychological view that farming confers identity and a sense of place; (4) the more severe political view that farming shelters individuals from the corruption and vice of the industrial, urban world; and (5) the communitarian view that posits the farming community as a model for a positive social order. In keeping with these divergent threads of agrarianism, Montmarquet (1989) goes even further back in time and across continents, distinguishing between at least six different schools of agrarian thought associated more with specific time periods and their socio-political contexts. Some of the more prominent of these schools have been the French Physiocrats of the eighteenth century, who posited that agriculture, and not industry or commerce, was a nation’s only source of true wealth; the Country Life agrarians of the early twentieth century, who combined a passion for soil conservation with a concern for the declining quality of life in America’s farming communities; the Southern Agrarians (also known as the Vanderbilt Agrarians), who argued vociferously in defense of an agrarian South; and the New Agrarians, the most recent batch of writers who attempt to merge the sustainable agriculture dialogue of recent decades with a spiritually-derived sense of land stewardship and an emphasis on reviving local economies.

None of these strains of agrarianism are mutually exclusive, but there is a degree of ideological conflict between some of them. Views on the merits or demerits of industrialization, for example, have changed over time. Jefferson seemed at times fearful of the effects of industrializing forces on the American citizenry, at other times ambivalent. Populists at the end of the nineteenth century, desiring an alliance between proletarians of all stripes, lumped farmers and industrial workers together (Smith, 2003). The Southern Agrarians, meanwhile, reviled the forces of industrialism that they saw encroaching from the North (e.g., *Twelve Southerners*, 1930; Cauley, 1935), and the work of modern-day agrarians such as Wendell Berry is infused with “an overwhelming hostility to technological innovation” (Carlson, 2000: 190).

Similarly, agrarians through time have displayed mixed feelings about the idea of independence. The majority of agrarian works posit rugged individualism as perhaps the preeminent beneficial quality flowing from the farming life, taking their cue from Jefferson’s vision: “A society of independent farmers, most with small holdings, almost wholly self-sufficient, would anchor a nation of happy individuals, beholden to no one, and uncorrupted by their own greed or that of an

employer” (cited in McEwan, 1991: vii). By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, writers such as Liberty Hyde Bailey were forced to balance their respect for rural independence with their belief that beneficial rural development could only occur through increased civic participation. By century’s end, agrarians such as Wendell Berry had come to view the ideal of rugged individualism as little more than “a hubristic quest for individual freedom and power” (Smith, 2003: 135).

Other examples of divergence among agrarian schools can be cited as well. Agrarian writers have disagreed on the reverence for private property, the role of governmental regulation, and the importance of environmentalism (Smith, 2003). Though usually talked about as a unified concept, agrarianism simply does not fit neatly into a single coherent history or school of thought. As Montmarquet describes it, “the advocate of large-scale, highly capitalized agriculture and the advocate of small, highly dispersed landholdings; both those who eagerly embrace the application of science to agriculture and those who are highly skeptical of anything but traditional ways – all of these and more – have sought to march in some fashion or other under the banner of agrarianism” (1989: viii). However, these divergent viewpoints need not serve as a hindrance to the current discussion. Indeed, as I hope to show, they will help to illustrate my basic point. Despite the variety of arguments contained within the agrarian pantheon, there is a fundamental tenet which emerges time after time, and it will prove highly germane to the discussion on farmland preservation.

Going beyond economics

The tenor of the preservation debate, especially that of the preservation critics, stands in marked contrast to a foundational assertion by agrarians – that farming should be valued for more than its material contribution to society. Agriculture of course produces the food-stuffs that sustain life, but it also has a community value, a social value, even a moral value. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “the growing of crops, though an essential part, is only a part of country life” (1909: 6).

Farming to the agrarians is not merely an occupation but a way of life. When speaking of farming families in the countryside the emphasis is rarely on rural economics, but rather on rural culture in its entirety. Taylor, for example, described farming as a “mode of life and living” (1925). In Bailey’s words, “Agriculture is not a technical profession or merely an industry, but a civilization” (1911: 63). Indeed, to the Vanderbilt Agrarians it was precisely Southern civilization which was on the line in the fight against becoming “only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial

community” (Twelve Southerners, 1930: xi). Perhaps responding to the reduced role that agriculture currently plays in popular culture, modern-day agrarians such as Logsdon draw a connection back to the cultural fabric of the nation: “Farming is very much a part of the whole societal structure, not just another job by which a person makes a living” (1993: 225).

In light of modern trends in agriculture and the larger national economy, agrarian writers from the early decades of the twentieth century prove to be remarkably prescient. The seminal Country Life Commission report recognized in 1909 how capitalist economics spurred the narrowed focus already gaining ground in agriculture: “So completely does the money purpose often control the motive that other purposes in farming often remain dormant” (Bailey et al., 1909: 64). Elliott went even further in giving the tailoring of farm decisions to a short-term economic outlook the air of inevitability:

Under conditions of free competition in agriculture, the immediate economic interest of a majority of individual producers repeatedly comes in conflict with that of the Nation with respect to soil conservation. The individual farmer frequently finds it necessary to discount the future heavily. When the choice lies between an uncertain future and a very real present, the latter usually wins out (1937: 18).

What these writers feared most was that a tendency towards reducing the occupation of farming to its economic component would rob it of certain inherent virtues it contained, and here we find the single idea that lies at the core of agrarianism, the “unifying thread” that ties together all agrarian doctrines (Montmarquet, 1989: viii). Agrarians of all stripes and political dispositions begin from the notion that, to borrow Montmarquet’s pithy summary, “agriculture and those whose occupation involves agriculture are especially important and valuable elements of society” (ibid.). Note the wording – “especially important and valuable.” Agriculture is more than just another means by which to produce wealth or some material product; it is a uniquely significant part of any culture to which it belongs. There are essentially three different versions of this tenet, three ways by which agriculture manifests its “specialness.”

First, it is a pleasing occupation in and of itself and thus conducive to the happiness of its practitioners. Hence we have the Roman poet Virgil writing the following lines:

... let not your land lie idle.

What joy it is to sow all Thraces with vines

And clothe in olive the slopes of vast Taburnus!
(Montmarquet, 1989: 12).

Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, not normally associated with agricultural discourse, proffered that “every man

has an exceptional respect for tillage, and a feeling it is the original calling of the race” (Emerson, 1942: 749). Bailey exemplified the early twentieth century agrarian ideal when he wrote, “It is the farmer’s rare privilege to raise crops and rear animals. The sheer joy of the thing is itself a reward” (1927: 78). Among all agrarian writers, this sentiment is perhaps most strongly expressed by those of the New Agrarian camp who are themselves farmers (see for example, Kline, 1990; Logsdon, 2000).

Second, farming communities provide an essential sense of place and a social cohesion not found away from the farms. As Bailey wrote, “In the accelerating mobility of our civilization it is increasingly important that we have many anchoring places; and these anchoring places are the farms” (1911: 17). While crowded cities and the competitive urban workplace can be alienating, the farming community fosters warm human companionship. Agrarian fiction such as that of Louis Bromfield, the famed twentieth-century patriarch of Malabar Farm in Ohio, repeatedly emphasized this sense of attachment to both the land and its human community.

Most importantly, the farming life breeds in its participants the hallowed virtues of humankind. Characteristics such as patience, humility, and a hard work ethic are inherent to the farming lifestyle. This is one of its qualities identified by the earliest writers on American agriculture. Thomas Jefferson unabashedly laid out this position when he wrote in 1781, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, ... whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue... . Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example” (quoted in McEwan, 1991: viii). John Taylor wrote only a few decades after Jefferson, “The capacity of agriculture for affording luxury to the body, is not less conspicuous than its capacity for affording luxuries to the mind.... [I]t becomes the best architect of a complete man” (Taylor, 1813: 315–316). Montmarquet (1989) points out how a number of religious writers as far back as the Middle Ages championed agriculture as a means of cultivating frugality, a strong work ethic, and virtue in the eyes of God, and a few religious agrarians of the twentieth century echoed the notion that the farm was “the finest place on earth for a family to prepare for heaven” (Ligutti, 1950: 6). Not surprisingly, this same tone is echoed by New Agrarians, whose work is suffused with moral principle: “good farming” has a direct link with the “public good” (Worster, 1984). In fact, for Berry the question, “What is the best way to use the land?” is automatically a question of “What is the best way to farm?” (2002a: 55).

We must be careful here not to overemphasize this to the point of parody. No agrarian writer would make the claim that farming always leads to virtue, or that all farmers are virtuous. The point is more that agriculture of necessity involves a number of elements that have historically been central to the human experience, such as hard work, aesthetic beauty, living according to nature's rhythms, and relying on community ties. That is, agriculture provides a "privileged outlook upon fundamental questions of human conduct" that is not necessarily embedded in other occupations (Thompson, 1990a: 3). It would be inaccurate to paint the entire agrarian school of thought with one brush. However, it is within the realm of ethics that we find the one thread applicable to the vast majority of agrarian writers.

There is a final key point to take away from this brief overview, implied but not overtly stated throughout the agrarian canon – as a philosophical outlook, agrarianism is concerned with the farmer first and foremost. Issues of soil conservation, wealth creation, land tenure, or spirituality are of prime importance, but they are approached in terms of their relationship to the farmer, rather than the non-farming public. It is for this reason that agrarian sentiments today strike most as romanticized, unrealistic, and outdated. How widely can a philosophy resonate if it only applies to one fiftieth of the population?

Preservation for whom? The erosion of agrarian discourse and the limits to utilitarianism

The close of the 1930s marked a turning point in American agriculture. As Hambidge wrote in 1940, that year signaled "the end of a decade that [had] seen more swift and far-reaching changes in agricultural viewpoints and policy than perhaps any other decade in the history of the United States" (p. 2). That is, shifts in the technical and demographic dimensions of agriculture were being accompanied by shifts in the discourse on agriculture. Though the writings of men such as Liberty Hyde Bailey and the Vanderbilt Agrarians preceded him by only a few decades, M. L. Wilson could safely declare in 1939 that "the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian America definitely belongs to the past" (p. 31).

Hilde and Thompson (2000) place the watershed moment a decade later, with the 1948 publication of Griswold's *Farming and Democracy*. Griswold critiqued the long-assumed link between small farms and a democratic social structure and, in so doing, "precipitated several decades of agricultural and rural development policy based on the belief that agriculture, like any other sector of the general economy, should be organized so as to maximize economic efficiency" (Hilde and Thompson, 2000: 18). Regardless of where

one sets the decisive moment, within a matter of decades the turnaround was so complete that by the 1970s the US Secretary of Agriculture could give the following statement: "Farming isn't a way of life, it's a way to make a living" (quoted in Merrill, 1976: 284). The New Agrarians continue to write today and are even gaining in popularity, but they are a tiny fraction of agricultural observers, viewed by most – and not without reason – as antiquarian and quixotic. An agricultural worldview characterized by agrarianism, with its concern for aesthetics, community, and moral norms that go well beyond economics, has by now been almost completely eclipsed by the more narrowly focused creed of economic utilitarianism.

I have attempted to illustrate the degree to which this hegemonic framework has affected one particular segment of the agricultural dialogue, the debate over farmland preservation. Impassioned arguments have been made both for and against the cause of preservation, but neither side deviates much from a basic economics-oriented framework, which in turn rests upon a utilitarian approach to ethics. On one hand, this is not problematic. A regional director of the AFT, for example, remains confident that land will be farmed once preserved (D. Caneff, personal communication). That is, we need not worry about the institution of farming; so long as land is present, farming will continue. On the other hand, such a simplistic focus exposes a number of the movement's weak points, each of them linked to the utilitarian ethic.

To begin with, a reliance on utilitarianism exempts the preservation movement from one of the most salient critiques of the industrial agriculture paradigm that has emerged from the sustainable agriculture movement in recent decades. American agriculture has long held as its paramount goal an unremitting increase in crop yields – to "grow two blades of grass where one grew before." Since the 1970s, this belief has been attacked by a wide variety of writers – from academics such as Thompson (1995) and Zimdahl (2002), to Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen (1981), to more popular writers such as Lappé and Collins (1977). It is widely acknowledged among contemporary observers of agriculture that the productionist mentality is, in fact, a primary source of the present farm crisis, having precipitated calamitously low crop prices and the perpetuation of a "treadmill of technology," but preservationists cannot even enter the debate. Indeed, they condone this mentality by pegging the production of adequate supplies of food for a growing world population as the number one reason for preserving farmland.

The environmentalist critique, too, is strangely absent from the preservationist literature, except for the questionable insinuation that the continued existence of farmland is an invariable good for nature.

Renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold argued as far back as 1939 that what he called the “self-imposed doctrine of ruthless utilitarianism” was the culprit behind much of the environmental damage wrought by modern agriculture (Leopold, 1939: 298). Utilitarianism requires quantifiable measurements of benefit or harm. In agriculture, however, estimating the long-term consequences or externalities of a given policy or technology is extremely difficult, thus rendering utilitarianism less useful in this regard, if not outright deceptive (Thompson et al., 1991). One would certainly not accuse the farmland preservation movement of condoning an environmentally degrading agriculture, but given that the vast majority of farming is in the conventional mode, preservationists cannot tackle the environmental question without undermining their own platform.

For a third shortcoming of the preservationist argument, we can turn to the widely publicized loss of family farms. One would think that this would concern preservationists, but the issue of distributive equity can be safely ignored by someone relying on a utilitarian framework. If a given technology benefits large farmers, as well as the public, but pushes smaller farmers out of business, the benefit-to-cost ratio obtained from it might still be compatible with a utilitarian notion of good (Thompson et al., 1991). Indeed, there is little in the preservationist literature that indicates a normative difference between a 200-acre farm and a 2000-acre farm, a fact that seems glaringly negligent in light of the recent barrage of criticism on the topic.

To understand where these various flaws stem from, simply consider the mismatch between utilitarianism and the demographics of the farming population. Utilitarianism looks to satisfy “the greatest number” of a society’s members. Farmers, however, now constitute less than 2% of the nation’s citizens, while urban dwellers account for over 75% of the population. An initiative grounded in utilitarianism could not possibly be concerned with the interests of farmers, except to offer the claim that what benefits farmers benefits everyone. As an old-timer succinctly put it at a community meeting on preservation in Wayne County, Ohio, “I hear a lot of talk about saving farmland, saving farmland. What I want to know is, what about the farmer?” Preservationists speak romantically of farming communities and rural economies, but one is tempted to echo the critics’ query – for whom, in fact, is farmland being preserved?

While preservationists remain silent about the very economic and technological forces that brought about the farmland crisis in the first place, agrarian writers critique them vociferously. This is especially true of the New Agrarians. Berry, for example, explicitly makes the connection between the rise of the productionist

paradigm and the fall of the moral element in the agricultural dialogue by bemoaning “the absolute divorce that the industrial economy has achieved between itself and all ideals and standards outside itself Once that is established, all its ties to principles of morality or religion or government necessarily fall slack” (1987: 352). Or again, while preservationists remain mute about the issue of farm scale, Berry (1987) and Hightower (1987) take an avowedly moral stand in defense of small family farms.

It is not at all clear that agrarians would take sides with the farmland preservation movement. Certainly agrarian writers of any age would be alarmed at the increasing percentage of land being lost to non-agricultural uses, but they would likely remain unimpressed by a counter-initiative that focused only on land. Though speaking of wilderness rather than farmland, Berry (2002b) declared in a recent article that he would no longer support preservation measures that excluded the surrounding economic systems and human communities. Freyfogle reminds us that “agrarians have generally been reluctant to transform moral duties into binding legal ones. Land-use laws in particular are often suspect, given their perceived use by outsiders as tools to disrupt and restrict local life” (2001: xxvii). More to the point, agrarians are “less interested in preserving farms than ... in preserving the philosophical values of a farming people” (Thompson, 1990b: 6). One suspects that the national movement to protect farmland would be viewed by agrarians in the same way that it is critiqued by economists – as a narrow approach that confuses means and ends in its haste to stem an unpleasant trend.

I do not wish to imply that agrarianism is a panacea for all of agriculture’s ills. As a philosophy, it suffers from its own unique set of problems. Several scholars, for example, have recently critiqued various elements of agrarianism, including its historiography (Montmarquet, 1989), its fostering of a sense of moral complacency and victimhood among farmers (Peterson, 1990), and its frequent oversimplification by a public enamored of the romantic ideal of farming (Thompson, 1990a; 2000). However, by placing the farmland preservation argument within the wider context of an agricultural dialogue that was once dominated by agrarianism, one can more insightfully critique the highly relevant issue of preservation. Agrarians take a moral stand that goes beyond economics and utilitarianism both. Preservationists, meanwhile, accept the economic doctrine as their own and thus paint themselves into a corner, for a steely-eyed economist “understand[s] the present rural crisis not as much as a moral dilemma but rather as an unfortunate episode in the continuing saga of economic expansion and contraction” (Comstock, 1987: xix).

Conclusion

Agrarians and farmland preservationists have ostensibly similar goals – essentially to maintain farming as a viable and respected occupation. It is strange, then, that the scope of their arguments is so markedly different. The preservationists' obeisance to economic forces is nowhere to be seen in the agrarian literature, while the agrarian call for a renewed sense of ethical responsibility and stewardship within farming is absent, or nearly so, from preservationist works. The two movements should certainly not merge into one, but preservationists would do well to listen to the agrarian call. To live up to the full bill of their own stated motives, preservationists must recognize that the present farm crisis stems from far more than a shortage of land.

To be fair, preservationists are fighting against a set of deeply entrenched cultural mores that resists economic reform and regards any critique of technical progress with hostility. From its beginning the movement has endeavored to establish respectability in the public eye by working from within the conventional political process. A radical critique of the industrial economic system would be a hard sell for preservationists, considering that they push market-based rather than market-manipulating schemes for preserving land. It would also alienate the group whose support they most crave – farmers, who tend toward a conservative mentality to begin with. Indeed, though cropland loss continues, the movement has made significant inroads on the political landscape. Agrarianism has certainly never been mentioned in a farm bill, while hundreds of millions of dollars have been earmarked by the federal government for preserving farmland.

Nevertheless, the preservationist argument does not seem fully in keeping with the movement's broader goals. To be a proponent of land conservation is a simple enough matter; to add the prefix "farm" brings an entirely new level of association. Preservationists hitch their fate to an impending shortage of productive cropland, arguing that such a crisis is detrimental to all of society. But if their opponents succeed in demonstrating that cropland is not in short supply and shows no signs of becoming that way, then the preservationist argument is rendered toothless. As currently manifested, farmland preservation risks morphing into little more than a polemical tool for stopping urban sprawl. Housing developments and strip malls may be the face of the threat, but its heart and lungs are powered by far more profound forces that preservation, unhitched from a deeper ethical commitment, does not ameliorate. The very rationale that underpins the bulk of the preservationists' argument will ultimately work against their cause unless they expand it to include a more distinctly moral argument for the existence of farming and farmers, in addition to farmland.

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Note

1. Thompson (1990b) prefers the word "consequentialist" to "utilitarian" when talking about the dominant agricultural discourse. In a more recent analysis, Zimdahl (2002) stands by "utilitarian," asserting that it has also been the underlying ethic of agricultural science since its beginning. I have chosen to stay with the more well-known term.

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