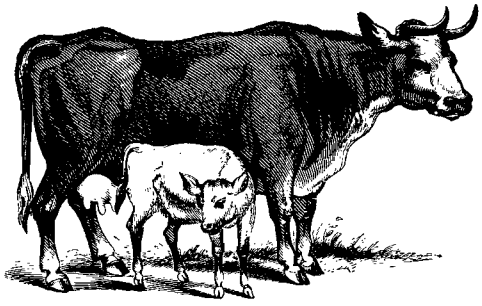
Defending a Way of Life

A Critical Review of: *Is There a Moral Obligation to Save the Family Farm?*

Kathryn P. George
University of Idaho

***Is There a Moral Obligation to Save the Family Farm?* Gary Comstock, editor (Iowa State University Press, 1987)**



The farm crisis of the 1980's precipitated much discussion from persons in all walks of life, especially in the Midwest where everyone knows someone who lost a farm or a business dependent on farming. Of special concern to the contributors to *Is There a Moral Obligation to Save the Family Farm?* is the decline of medium-sized farms which are operated by a family and/or extended family on a full-time basis.[1] It is the loss of a way of life, of farms passed from generation to generation, that is disturbing to most of the commentators who argue for the preservation of family farming. Economists bent on cost-benefit analyses with efficiency in dollars and cents terms are often cast as the opposition, although nobody *that* hardnosed is represented in this volume. On the affirmative side are those who try to give good reasons for what finally must be political and financial intervention to save a way of life that is fast-fading from American society.

This collection of thirty-one essays brings together some of the best-known commentators and critics of agricultural policy, such as Wendell Berry, Gregg Easterbrook, Jim Hightower, Glenn Johnson, Richard Kirkendall, and Luther Tweeten. Expositions of the 1985 Farm Bill by Jesse Helms and of the alternative Save the Family Farm Act, by Tom Harkin, provide a useful discussion of the options Congress has considered. To my knowledge this volume is the only one of its kind, and despite my reservations about some of the essays, it should serve as a valuable source for anyone interested in the farm crisis of the 1980's. It should also serve well as a text for courses in which agricultural problems are considered.

About two-thirds of the essays consist of papers written for a 1985 Iowa State University Conference, and one-third are reprinted from other sources. Comstock has contributed a brief preface to each of the eight parts with additional suggested readings at the end of each, a general introduction, conclusion, and an index.

The title notwithstanding, the essays do not constitute a sustained ethical or philosophical analysis of the question posed. Taken together, the articles *do* attempt to define the problems associated with family farming in the 1980's. The volume has two apparent themes: (1) to show why failing small and medium-sized farmers cannot be assigned complete responsibility for their plight, and (2) to give positive arguments for saving these farms and traditional rural American life. There is almost no one arguing for

REVIEW

plowing under the family farm, and only Easterbrook's article, which opens the debate, could be classed in the negative. Even Luther Tweeten in his rigorous economic analysis sets pure economic efficiency aside to claim that we ought to save the family farm on grounds that it is an important American tradition. So, the main debate here is not whether we have an obligation to save the family farm, but rather, which are the best reasons for fulfilling that obligation.

The first theme is apparent in Parts III and IV. Kirkendall's excellent short history of American agriculture gives the reader an even-handed look at how family farms came to decline from once accounting for over 70 percent of all households to less than 2 percent today. He focuses on broad trends and policies in many sectors of the U.S. Mechanization, hybrid seed technology, chemicals, commodity programs, and a general tendency of Americans to encourage big business have all played a part in making it possible for one person to farm many more acres than ever before, for subsequent increase in farm size concomitant with a decrease in farm numbers. Paul Lasley, a sociologist who has done extensive research on Iowa farm life, continues with an informative financial history of the policies leading up to the farm crisis. The 1970's brought a decline in world food production, and U.S. agricultural policies encouraged expansion of production. Heavy investment in machinery and equipment followed, and farmers bought more land in an era of continued inflation. Bankers even encouraged farmers to take high-leverage loans. Near the end of the decade the Federal Reserve attacked inflation by raising interest rates, which increased costs of production. Simultaneously, exports began to decline, and land values fell precipitously, pushing a large number of family farmers to the brink of financial insolvency.

In addition to the theme of acquitting farmers of complete responsibility, Lasley tackles "some tough ethical questions," wondering how to provide a justification for saving the family farm. He notes that the much-prized rural virtues of independence and self-reliance have become less valuable to a society that is increasingly interdependent. Worse yet, those once esteemed virtues may lead to a "tragedy of the commons" when each person seeking his or her own self-interest may lead to the downfall of the whole group (p. 108). For these reasons, Lasley thinks any argument for saving the family farm must be one which encompasses the values of both the farm and nonfarm population. Unfortunately, the question of how to balance the interests, suffering, and values of these two sectors is nowhere discussed in the book. The reason for this omission may be that such issues were beyond the scope of this volume.

Neil Harl, an economist, gives a broad overview of the consequences to the national economy and to agriculture of political intervention in the form of commodity price supports, loans, and other government programs. Documenting the nature and extent of the financial stress experienced by farmers during the crisis, he notes that some of the vulnerability experienced by agriculture is not unique to it but instead is shared by "any sector or subsector that is both capital-intensive and export sensitive..." (p. 124). Harl's essay is important because it emphasizes the economic interdependence of farmers with other sectors of society. So, he concludes that it might be wise to save family farms in order to save a myriad of other institutions that interconnect with them.

Glenn Johnson gives a clear exposition of the economic consequences of leverage and its relation to efficiency. He points out, in opposition to the claims of many economists, that leveraged and nonleveraged farms do not differ in their efficiency, since each may produce the same yield per acre of crop. Moreover, society does not benefit from leveraged farms going bankrupt. The assets and labor of that farm may be worth more to society on the farm than anyone is willing to pay for them at auction (p. 156). So, the myth that the farmers who are squeezed out of business by being heavily leveraged in times of deflation are really just the bad managers and the inefficient farmers is dispelled. The real problem is not that we have too many farmers, but rather, that there is too much acreage in production.

Jim Hightower repeats his well-known criticisms of the land-grant institutions for their apparent failure to carry out their mission to advance the cause of rural life. Established to aid the small farmer, the colleges have instead devoted considerable research time and money to the development of technologies which benefit large corporate farms and put smaller farmers out of business.

Thus, in Parts III and IV we find the reasons to understand why those who are losing their farms are not simply bad managers who could be expected to fail. We are also introduced to several arguments for saving the family farm. Part V considers some of these

arguments more closely. Hightower continues his argument for the family farm, and one can infer from his remarks that family farmers are owed a redress for past injustices in the failure of land-grants to aid them through research. That takes the form of a societal promise unfulfilled. Luther Tweeten disagrees with Hightower, using statistics which should be compared with those in Hightower's earlier essay. Tweeten concludes that "public research, education, and extension programs have provided a massive contribution to social justice by reducing costs of food" (p. 228). Low income people both here and abroad have enjoyed the greatest benefits.

Tweeten's argument is based on a stated attempt to correlate his economic arguments with a utilitarian version of social justice. This will doubtless provide little comfort to Hightower and his supporters. Essentially, Tweeten has to agree that even if it is true that the land grants have not provided rural America with the benefits promised in the establishment of these institutions, no wrong has been done, since *other* people who are also needy were benefitted instead. Perhaps even more good (in economic terms) has been done by *not* fulfilling the mission originally prescribed. But Tweeten defines social justice solely in economic terms. Although Hightower does not make an argument for redress in just this way, I think it is open to him and others to reject Tweeten's argument on the basis that social justice involves not merely economic redistributions from high to low income groups but also questions of *desert*. The creation of social institutions brings concomitant justifications for their creation, which in turn bring into existence valid expectations in the populace for which the institution was created. These take the form of a contractual obligation on the part of government to provide specified benefits. Although utilitarian versions of social justice seem initially appealing, we do not think that justice should be gotten by false promises whether or not it maximizes economic profit or even societal conditions.

In essence, rural Americans have trusted the land-grants to benefit *them* while they, in turn, work and farm to benefit those others in need of low-cost food. Instead, rural America and family farms have been made worse off while others have benefitted. This is an injustice not simply because some are better off at the expense of others, but because farmers have a *right* to expect what has been promised them in the Morrill Act and subsequent legislation. Hightower does not use the language of rights; his focus is on the failure of leadership of the universities. But to claim a right here for rural Americans would have moral and legal force not open to a utilitarian. While such an argument would not argue for preservation of family farms because of their intrinsic value, it would provide a basis for continued public financial support until such time as the land-grant institutions do attend to their original mission.

Tweeten comments that mid-sized farms do realize the best economies of size but "lean toward inefficiency...due to greater costs of federal commodity programs, slightly higher food costs, and less exports," but these are offset by better rural social life than could be expected in an area populated only by larger farms (p. 228). Perhaps research directed to truly benefit the small and mid-sized farms would give them the competitive edge they need. This is a commitment that was made to rural Americans by the legislators in setting aside the land grants, the experiment stations, and extension service. They have every *right* to demand their due.

The above argument from justice is not made explicitly in the book, although Comstock notes that Hightower is making claims based on the notion of desert. Its omission may be partially explained by its not having been represented in the speakers' talks of the 1985 conference. From a philosophical point of view, though, the book would be considerably improved by the addition of a thorough discussion of the most important ethical theoretical frameworks being debated in applied ethics today. Philosophers in this century have made an intense study of the relative strengths, coherence, and consistency of the nature and interrelationship of ethical claims. Especially well-studied are moral rights theories, Kantian duty-based ethics, and utilitarianism. Despite the claims of Tweeten and Comstock that utilitarianism is "the most widely shared ethical system in America" (p. 246: cf. p. 407), a look at the philosophical literature, at the legal system, and at the Bill of Rights of the Constitution will cast that claim into considerable doubt. Even ordinary people who think it right to bring about the most good will not agree that this should be accomplished without limitations that protect individual rights. A discussion of ethical frameworks could also shed light on the questions of distributive and retributive justice that underlie many of the other essays. While it is understandable that a 400-plus-page volume would have

little space for such additional material, one still cannot help feel its absence.

As part of the conference papers, a section on religious ethics appears as Part VI. This section may have value to those who already accept the religious premises that underlie any further claims, but for others it may have less value. The problem is that to have any validity at all, one must first accept that God exists and that God is a law-giver and that those laws are open to clear understanding by all. The arguments have little meaning for one who rejects any of these conditions. In fact, the essays included in this volume exhibit a wide variation of interpretations of a Scripture which makes no explicit or direct comment on the complex issues facing farmers and policymakers today. Moreover, only the Christian tradition is represented, and these arguments may have little validity for those of other faiths.

Comstock closes the volume with his own very nice summary of five arguments for saving the family farm. The first four he finds represented in the essays in the volume, and the fifth is his own contribution. These he titles the arguments from emotion, from efficiency, from stewardship, from cultural identity, and from responsibility. He thinks all but the last fail. The argument from emotion is expressed by those who would incite our sympathy, national pride, feelings of tradition, and the like. Comstock rehearses the reasons that such feelings alone do not constitute sufficient reason for a judgment of moral obligation. Commenting that emotions are important to moral reasoning, he leaves the issue of how important they are or in what way they function unanswered.

The argument from efficiency he finds wanting also, and here his criticisms take the form of invoking the standard objections to utilitarianism. This section is important because it is one of the few places in the volume where a systematic analysis of the consistency of our moral claims is attempted. However, Comstock appears at times to conflate utilitarianism and economics. A thoughtful utilitarian need not count economic efficiency as her sole value, and indeed, most do not. Classical utilitarians (Bentham, Mill) argue for the promotion of pleasure or happiness, and many contemporary utilitarians argue for the promotion of preference-satisfactions (e.g., Hare, Bennett). The latter group are neutral on value claims and would not make economic efficiency the primary value. Still, it would probably remain *a* value among other values, and could be an important consideration in concerns about equity. Utilitarians can reject monetary economic efficiency as a supreme value, since it is well-known that such arrangements may not maximize preference-satisfactions or even produce the most happiness overall. So, given the chance, a utilitarian could easily counter many of Comstock's claims, although I do agree that making arguments from economic efficiency alone fails as a justification for saving the family farm.

Comstock also makes the claim that since arguments from efficiency are contingent in nature, they cannot be *moral* arguments. Apparently, a moral argument must be categorical in nature, and this is consistent with a Kantian view of morality and may be consistent with Comstock's own preference for a Christian moral framework, though he espouses a preference for a utilitarianism in combination with the Christian view. Still, the claim that arguments based on contingency cannot be moral arguments is false. The concern with what we ought to do always brings in considerations of fact, and no facts about the world are categorical—all are contingent. No arguments from efficiency are wholly contingent, however, since all make categorical claims about the value of efficiency itself. Perhaps what Comstock is concerned about is the absence of a categorical moral claim that would link the categorical value of efficiency to a categorical *virtue* extent in the activity of family farming. Only that link would allow us to conclude that family farms ought to be saved because they are most efficient. The problem is that we do not think such a virtue exists, and so the argument fails.

Comstock's discussion of the argument from stewardship concerns secular and religious arguments for supporting family farmers as protectors of the land and domesticated species. In keeping with my comments above about the absence of an adequate discussion of moral rights frameworks, I have several concerns about this section. The secular position for this argument he takes to rest on rights-claims, and he mentions rights in the environment and Regan's view of animal rights. Unfortunately, there is no exposition of these arguments. Instead, he states that "it is extremely difficult to generate philosophical arguments that would convince most persons that land and animals have rights" (p. 409), and in the next sentence he reiterates that "the case is extremely difficult to make." The reader is not told why this should be so nor what Regan's reasons are for making his case. Instead, Comstock tells us that "most persons" don't believe

animals have rights, that Kant didn't think animals had rights, nor did Mill and Bentham. We are not told that Kant's theory would not allow the senile and insane rights either nor that Mill and Bentham would not ascribe rights to anyone, much less to animals. We are also told that "most philosophers" think animals do not have rights, a statement unsupported by data and irrelevant unless we assume that these philosophers have all read Regan's works and are prepared to refute his claims with sound arguments of their own.

Comstock does think we should be concerned with animal welfare, but he gives theological reasons for this. They remain our tools, but we should not treat them cruelly. He does not admit a utilitarian duty to weigh the interests of animals along with those of humans. What we find in this section is a reiteration of the common belief that "there is nothing wrong with killing animals to feed ourselves so long as we do not cause them to suffer in the meantime" (p. 410). He does encourage development of farm practices which will insure the health and happiness of farm animals. Comstock does claim that animals and even some ways of life have intrinsic worth. That, combined with his apparent preference for categorical claims, suggests that, if he were to free himself from what appears to be theological permission to use animals to fulfill our needs, he might find that a consistent moral and even theological view would place him closer to Regan's camp than he supposes.

Finally, Comstock attacks the question of whether family farmers are *necessarily* good stewards. Although Comstock thinks that "the case can be made...that family farmers treat their animals best and are the best stewards of the land," he offers no data to support this claim. In fact, data offered in an earlier article showed that family farmers were no more likely to practice soil conservation than large corporate farmers, and Comstock's claim here apparently rests on the theoretical claim that family farmers should care more about the land, since they will be thinking about passing the farm on to their offspring. Apparently, this psychological factor does not carry enough weight to motivate all or almost all family farmers to be good stewards.

But Comstock does not avail himself of this reason to reject the argument from stewardship. Again, he rejects the argument based on its contingency. Because we should preserve family farms *only if* it is the best arrangement for preserving the land and protecting domestic animals, Comstock finds this argument failing. But, as pointed out above, contingent arguments can be moral arguments. It is simply that Comstock wishes to narrow the kind of answer we are seeking to that of a *categorical imperative* that such arguments fail. If what we wish to know is whether we should save the family farm *for the time being* (something legislators might want to know), then an argument from stewardship, coupled with data showing family farmers are actually or even more likely to be good stewards, would present a good moral reason for preserving the institution. Unfortunately, the data are either lacking or unsupportive of the conclusion. However, since moral arguments are supposed to move persons to action, it might still be true that family farmers are more open to being motivated by the claim that they *ought* to be good stewards. If that were true (and it seems to me such a claim is testable), then we might still make a claim that we ought to save the family farm as long as sufficient ways can be found to make family farmers behave as responsible stewards. Although I am not as convinced as Comstock that the argument from stewardship fails, a more thorough treatment of this subject deserves more space than can be given here.

The fourth argument that is discussed Comstock dubs the argument from cultural identity. Most of what is discussed is the supposed link between democracy and family farm ownership. Comstock accedes that Thomas Jefferson's claim of a necessary connection between private farm property ownership and democracy seems refuted. Nevertheless, he is concerned about the concentration of power that may result if farm operations come into the hands solely of large corporations. This is a serious problem that should concern us all. Still, it does not provide a basis for saying the family farm as such should be saved. Again, the reasons apparently connect to Comstock's requirement of a categorical reason. Another aspect of the cultural identity argument seems to be linked to the argument from emotion—that the family farm is "a structure that keeps us in touch with our emotions and our past, and thereby with ourselves" (p. 415).

Comstock thinks that all of the good reasons offered in the four arguments above—caring and concern, efficiency, stewardship, and cultural identity—while insufficient individually can work together to offer a strong argument (from responsibility) for preserving the family farm. Here, he invokes our responsibilities to future generations to pass on a good environment

and a cultural heritage. He does not get what he had hoped for, namely, a categorical argument for saving the family farm. But this does not seem necessary anyway for reasons noted above.

The question of what we ought to do as a nation seems to me to be more complex, however. Preservation of the traditional family farm and rural life will require the outlay of public funds; all are in agreement about that. Decisions about the rightness or wrongness of providing such funds must be made within the context of shrinking economic and natural resources and of other claims for the protection of many different kinds of interests. Some of these interests are based on the prior commitments of the government to serve the population in certain ways, and other interests take the form of claims concerning basic human rights. Family farmers must make their claims about justice within an ongoing social sphere that is populated, for instance, by the inner city poor and homeless, the increasing poverty of our children, high infant mortality, inequity in health care and education, and the continued mistreatment of animals and the environment. It may well be that we should save family farms, but there will be a price to pay in unmet needs of others. Thus, we must have a clearer understanding of the interrelationship of these interests and of how to give them just consideration. I think this precludes categorical conclusions about the fate of the family farm but leaves open the possibility for making good arguments about how our institutions should be arranged to protect the public interest and individual rights.

Notwithstanding my reservations noted above, I recommend this book to those who are interested in exploring these issues in some depth. No text or anthology can encompass all views. Most of the essays are clear, well-written, and accessible to even the novice. I have no doubt that as a classroom text it will provoke a large amount of useful debate and enlightenment.

Notes

[1] The definition of just what constitutes a "family-farm" has been the center of contention, since many large corporate farms, such as Cargill, are owned and operated by a family. In the "Introduction," Comstock accepts Luther Tweeten's definition with a modification noted here in italics: "a family farm is an agricultural operation *loved, worked, and* owned by a family or family corporation, with gross annual sales of forty thousand dollars to two hundred thousand dollars, hiring less than 1.5 person-years of labor" (p. xxv).

Response:
The Rights of Animals and Family Farmers

Gary Comstock
Iowa State University

It is a pleasure to be asked to comment on Kathryn P. George's review, and not only because she so insightfully criticizes the book I edited. Her review provides me the additional opportunity to declare in public that I have changed my mind about the respective rights of animals and family farmers. As George points out, I argue in my conclusion that you can defend traditional family farms and animals. My reason is that, even though the backbone of family farming is the raising and slaughtering of food animals, smaller sized "family" farms seem more likely than larger sized "factory" farms to provide animals with humane care, room to exercise, and quick, painless deaths.

Since finishing *Family Farm*, I have come to believe that humane care and slaughter are not the issues. The issues are whether we harm animals with central nervous systems when we kill them, and whether we have the right to continue breeding mammals, with no other purpose in mind than to carve them into steaks at a young age. This is likely to be the issue of most concern to readers of *BTS*, so I begin here, reserving for later my comments on George's criticisms of my family farm argument.

I have learned from feminists and narrativists the value of first person stories in ethical discourse, and I think it is important for ethicists to tell their stories, especially when they have given up major parts of their background beliefs. I have given up a major part of my background beliefs, and I must tell you how it happened. I was not motivated by professional considerations

DISCUSSION