

THE MYTH OF AUTONOMY IN FAMILY FARM PRODUCTION

Bonnie Ward

Agricultural practice on family farms throughout Ontario history provides an example of independent commodity production. According to this description, farm producers own, operate and control the means of production (Hedley, 1976:415; Johnson, 1979:91). The autonomy of farm producers is derived from their ability to determine the conditions of production, for example, the type and quantity of commodity produced and application of technological innovation. The capacity of producers to influence the conditions of the sale and purchase of agricultural goods significantly influences the degree of productive autonomy characteristic of farming. In a capitalist society where private ownership prevails, and the autonomy of owners is seen as providing scope for the expansion of production and innovation, the real relation between ownership and autonomy must be made explicit. It will be argued that the real relationship between ownership and autonomy in farm practice is an historical relationship which is determined and conditioned by: 1. the transformation of the mode of production in society, 2. the transformation of the relations of production immediate to farming, 3. the role of the state in these transformations. Through the examination of these historical processes it appears that the autonomy of small farm producers at present is a myth. Farm production seems to be increasingly characterized not by autonomy but by dependency; dependency among members of farm families and of small farmers on the state.

The transformation of the mode of production may be more precisely described as the process by which a particular mode of production emerges as dominant in a society. In Ontario history, the most significant transformation in this regard is the emergence of the

* Revised version of a paper presented to the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Saskatoon, June, 1979.

capitalist mode of production. The rise of capitalism has two effects: capitalist relations may replace previously existing relations of production, or previously existing relations of production may be retained but in a new relation to the capitalist market. In Ontario farm history both effects can be observed. At present, in Ontario, there is evidence that the production of agricultural commodities is increasingly organized by capitalist relations (Warnock:123; Johnson, 1979:94). The replacement of the family farm by corporate (capitalist) farming occurs after the incorporation of family farm production into the capitalist market. In fact, it is incorporation of the family farm into capitalist market relations which results in the eventual elimination of increasing numbers of small farms. The process by which family farm production is transformed by the emergence of capitalism is the context for the analysis of the relation between ownership and autonomy.

H. Saffioti, describing the emergence to dominance of the capitalist mode of production, states:

A mode of production is dominant insofar as it interferes vertically in other modes of production thus provoking the latter's loss of autonomy and redefining their specific activities ... Hence they are only able to survive thanks to a process of redefinition governed by the capitalist mode of production ... what remains are precapitalist work relations which now have new connotations.

(1977:30)

Vertical interference by the capitalist mode of production describes the process which has transformed independent commodity production in agriculture. The family farm persists but under conditions substantially altered by the capitalist market. Competitive conditions for marketing agricultural produce confront the farmer as pressure for specialization, with consequent risks of overproduction, and loss in real income in addition to the natural/biological risks of agricultural production

(Smith, 1978:19-23; Mitchell, 1975:18-21; Hedley, 1976:417). What is clearly suggested by the vertical interference of capitalism is the possibility of retaining individual ownership while experiencing significant alteration in other conditions of production. The alteration of market conditions and pressure for specialization with its concomitant risks, result in risk minimizing practices which may in themselves limit productivity (Hedley, 1976:418). The double bind that emerges with transformed productive conditions limits the autonomy of the farmer in terms of the type and quantity of goods produced, the scale of operation and the necessity of adopting technological innovations in order to remain competitive.

Vertical interference of the capitalist mode of production limits autonomy further in the sphere of ownership of the means of production. The necessity of greater investment in land and machinery in order to maintain competitive levels of production leads to ever increasing dependence on credit and corporate controlled production and marketing of farm machinery, fertilizer and fuel. That is, there emerges a dependence of the farmer on capitalist relations for the necessities of productive consumption. The increasing determination by capitalist market relations of not only the type and quantity of product but also the costs of production continually narrows the sphere of autonomy of agricultural producers.

Is the integration of independent commodity production in agriculture into capitalist market relations simply a precursor to the eventual demise of all "family farm" production? Evidence of the increasing corporatization of agriculture and the decrease in small farms have led some to conclude that this is the case (Johnson, 1979:98). There are, however, factors and conditions which mediate the tendency to corporatization and the erosion of small farm production.

It appears that certain types of agricultural production (e.g. fruit, tobacco) are particularly amenable to organization on capitalist lines, whereas other sectors retain more traditional forms of productive organization. Region also appears to be a mediating factor in the corporatization process. The comparison of the rate of corporatization of agriculture in Ontario and Quebec reveals that Quebec agricultural practice may be more resistant to change (Johnson, 1979:98). Protective legislation and tax concessions which benefit individual farmers may be understood as legitimating activities of the state which affect the corporatization process. To the extent that tradition, region and ideology may influence the rate of corporatization of agriculture, their relationship to the transformation of the mode of production needs clarification.

Saffioti, in her analysis of the process of vertical interference with precapitalist forms of productive organization by the capitalist mode of production, postulates that this process has the effect of retaining only the economic aspect of precapitalist work relations and eliminating their ideological aspect, which it replaces with bourgeois ideology (Saffioti:30). Such a hypothesized replacement of one ideology with another does not appear to adequately reflect the way in which world views change. While it seems likely that new productive relations generate new ideological counterparts, some aspects of traditional world views persist and continue to be reproduced. If ideas are viewed as singularly determined by productive relations, then the transformation of productive relations ought to lead directly to the transformation of ideas. However, this appears not necessarily to be the case. In the preceding discussion it was suggested that the conditions of farming have been significantly transformed such that the margin of autonomy of the small producer is increasingly reduced. In spite of the altered

conditions of production, autonomy persists ideologically as the counterpart of private ownership. Belief in the autonomy of individual owners may persist as a result of the reluctance of individuals to alter their beliefs in accordance with changes in the world. Alternately, this belief may be reproduced ideologically and serve to justify practices related to capitalist expansion. (Owners of capitalist enterprises may have considerable autonomy). Ideological reproduction of the relation of ownership to autonomy in the context of capitalist development mystifies the real effects of that development for small agricultural producers. The latter explanation can be examined by reference to the degree of autonomy which existed in family farming historically.

The myth of autonomy in agricultural production has its historical origins in the notion of the self sufficient agriculture of pioneer families. V. Fowke has argued that self sufficiency is itself a myth "which is an integral part of Canadian folklore" (Fowke, 1962:23). Far from self sufficiency, pioneer agriculture was characterized by the need for capital as a precondition for settlement, barter and the extension of credit as a means to provide for domestic and productive consumption, and the need for markets for surplus products (Fowke, 1962). Settlement of the Canadian frontier was not the culmination of the pioneering dream of daring individuals. It was rather, a means to escape industrial labour, famine and political revolution (Loyalists) and for some, the chance to acquire greater wealth and position.

Ontario pioneer settlements were not located by chance but were a product of British interest in providing defense for trade routes and for the provisioning of military personnel and traders (Fowke, 1946:118). From the outset, it became apparent that settlement provided an excellent investment opportunity, not through agricultural production but in the movement of settlers. "There were profitable investment opportunities

associated with the original transfer and installation of prospective farm populations" (Fowke, 1946:118). This relation is further evidenced by the responsibility of the Bureau of Agriculture established in 1852, for immigration policy (Fowke, 1946:121). The combination of the dependence of farmers on market conditions (capital, barter, credit) and on the state for acquiring land is evidence of the interconnectedness of agricultural production with political and economic interests from its inception. While this interconnectedness does not necessarily imply a lack of autonomy, it does create a basis from which historical relations of dependence may be seen to emerge. V. Fowke, in identifying the historical pattern in Canadian agricultural policy states:

The clearest and most significant uniformity regarding Canadian agriculture for more than three hundred years has been its deliberate and consistent use as a basis for economic and political empire.

(1978:3)

While economic and political interests are significant in the determination of agricultural settlement, it would appear that at least for a time, a period of relative autonomy of agricultural producers could be said to have existed. This is in part due to periods of favourable market conditions and minimally due to the protective actions of the state (Jones:196, 307). In addition, it could be argued that productive relations organized on the basis of collective labours of family members contributed to the possibility of a relative degree of autonomy in agricultural production.

The family constitutes a basis for production from which a considerable number of benefits can be derived. The division of labour among family members facilitated the diversification of production which contributed both to domestic consumption and to the production of commodities. The work of women, often associated with production closer

to the home, could be drawn upon at times when additional labour was required in the fields. The contribution of children to agricultural production beginning at an early age provided additional necessary labour (Johnson, 1974:17). When inadequate resources were available for establishing a farm, family members worked for wages before or during the early years of settlement (Fowke, 1962:32-33). The intense labour required and the need for financial resources in agriculture prior to 1850 necessitated a co-operative productive unit like the family for survival (Johnson, 1974:15-22). However, these conditions would change.

The introduction of mass education and use of technology in agricultural production were significant in the change in participation of family members (Johnson, 1974:23). With increasing specialization and transformation of productive relations, women (and children) became increasingly separated from the production of commodities. This separation was enhanced ideologically by the emergent role of 'chatelaine', the wife of the 'better class' of entrepreneur. The agricultural practice of the wealthiest settlers was thus set up as the model for all agricultural practice. This point is illustrated by the tendency for the wealthiest settlers to be the organizers of agricultural societies and the initiators of technological innovation (Jones:157, 174). Similarly, the separation of the "chatelaine" from the production of commodities may have exerted ideological pre-eminence over relations of interdependence of family members which characterized most farming.

At this point I would like to note that I am somewhat skeptical about historical accounts of the time and degree of separation of women from agricultural commodity production. It is unclear whether the productive relations described are those of the majority of farmers or of "ideal" (affluent) farmers. For the moment, this question must be

suspended pending further investigation. What is clear however, is that while there may be evidence of the decreasing role of women in commodity production (Hedley, 1977:6; Johnson, 1974:24) the work of women in creating conditions for continued commodity production is significant. Women have often taken on tasks of bookkeeping and business management (Kohl, 1978:52). Women's role in reproduction and domestic work also provides the basis for long and short run production of labour power required by the enterprise. Further, the efforts of the family, particularly of women, toward decreasing consumption of commodities and the production of use value offers a measure of protection in "lean" times.

More relevant in recent times would be the contribution by family members of wages. As input of capital comes to have ever increasing importance, family members more frequently have off-farm employment. It may be argued that the shift from interdependence of family members in agricultural labour to dependence on family members for wage inputs is a qualitative change. Analysis of the significance of wage inputs to the persistence of many family farm operations in Ontario warrants further investigation and evidence.

In all of the above ways, the productive interdependence of family members has contributed greatly to creating conditions of flexibility in an enterprise vulnerable to "Acts of God", of the market and of the state. This flexibility could be said to account for the relative degree of autonomy differentially experienced by farm producers historically.

As is implicit in the foregoing discussion, the capacity of internal relations of family farm production to offer protection from transformed market conditions is limited. M. Hedley states, "The significance of the involvement of domestic producers in commodity production is that reproduction of the mode of production is unavoidably

dependent on the process of exchange" (Hedley, 1977:4). This dependency is at present mediated by the state through agricultural policy, trade policy, supervision of marketing boards, and tax, succession and zoning laws, to name a few examples. Fowkes' thesis of the dependence of farm producers on dominant economic and political interests, extended into the present, suggests there is little basis for believing that small producers will, in the long run, be offered any measure of protection. This skepticism is well founded, as an examination of the Report of the Task Force on Agriculture, (1967) reveals.

The recommendations of this report include:

1. Reduction of the number of farms with about 2/3 of farm families removed.
2. Increase in farm size.
3. Greater rationalization of farming with an increase in "backward, forward, horizontal integration" with agricultural business interests.
4. "a clearcut separation of welfare and commercial farm policy".

(Summarized from Warnock, 1971:126)
- my emphasis

The government disowned this report without providing a substitute policy (Cayley, 1973:8). However, a detailed analysis of the historical conditions which give rise to recommendations of this sort is required. Points like the emergence of an overlap in "welfare and commercial policy" obviously need to be examined. These recommendations are indicative of the extensive involvement of the state in the reproduction and transformation of agricultural production and certainly suggest the emergence of dependency and the almost complete erosion of the autonomy of small producers.

Some further, and perhaps less obvious, characteristics of the role of the state may be suggested. If in fact an appropriation of ideologies of pre-capitalist modes of production occurs, what is the concrete

character of that appropriation? One example would be the continued affirmation of individual patriarchal ownership (see Hedley, 1977:7). This clearly denies the history of productive interdependence of family members in favour of a definition which reproduces an individualistic ideology and the legal subordination of women. At the interpersonal level, this relation is reproduced in the reluctance of Federal and Provincial bureaucratic agents to deal with farmers' wives in business matters (Kohl, 1978:51). Kohl states: "The formal definition of the male role as the official 'producer' in North American society is based on and reinforced by the embodiment of that status in Law" (1978:51).

In marketing, the state has played a primary mediating role in the establishment and control of production quotas through marketing boards. The protection offered to farmers through these agencies is useful only insofar as increases in productivity and conditions of the purchase of quota facilitate the expansion necessary for survival. This places the small producers in an increasingly vulnerable position (Cayley, 1973:5).

It appears that autonomy in agricultural production has been progressively eroded by the transformation of market conditions. The internal relations of production of the family farm offer a limited amount of protection from these tendencies. The state, while periodically offering limited protection to individual producers, ultimately functions to facilitate that development and expansion of capitalist interests. In spite of these developmental tendencies, the ideology of autonomy derived from private ownership of the means of production persists and is reproduced. In terms of highly visible cultural tendencies, the "back to nature" movement and the purchase of hobby farms by members of high income groups reaffirm the myth of autonomy.

Loss of ownership (the final loss of autonomy) is explained in terms of the "inefficiency" of producers. This explanation serves to

transpose a characteristic defined by the mode of production to a statement of the inadequacy of an individual producer. As long as the loss of autonomy of individual producers can be explained in terms of their individual shortcomings, changes at the level of the social organization of production remain unexamined.

The framework for analysis outlined in the preceding discussion yields several areas requiring further investigation:

1. The persistence of farm based independent commodity production in certain sectors delimited by type of production, geography and culture needs to be examined. To what extent does independent commodity production in these sectors serve the interests of capitalist expansion? That is, to what extent are the risks borne by the producers such that corporatization of that sector would be a poor investment? A further question raised is the extent that corporatization of agriculture is impeded by traditional practices and by cultural considerations. Research into these questions would contribute greatly to an understanding of the transformation of farming which occurs with the emergence of capitalism in Ontario.

2. The relations of production on the family farm, I have argued, offer certain limited protection to the enterprise by providing some flexibility. In the present day, the most significant contribution of family members residing on small farms may be the income they derive from other sources. A work-farm pattern is emerging in Canadian agriculture. In Ontario, it would be worthwhile to look at the wage contributions of farm wives as I suspect they may be significant for the persistence of many small farm operations. The transformation from interdependence in production of family members to dependence on wage inputs for security of the farm is a phenomenon which remains unexamined.

3. A third area requiring elaboration is the role of the state.

Critical analyses of the state are fairly recent and the complexity of this task makes it formidable. Such analyses as applied to farming would have to encompass the mediating role of the state in the market, the ideological function of the state and political parties, and the history and impact of agrarian protest movements, to mention only several aspects. This task is central to work in agricultural history because of the peculiar relation of political practice to agriculture from the first settlements.

While the scope of the analytic task here outlined is broad, a more comprehensive analysis of the determinants of agricultural production is required. It is essential that analyses cease to focus on "inefficiency" and "traditionalism" of individual producers and become recast at the level of explaining individual practice in terms of the social relations of production. The relation between autonomy and individual ownership must be demystified in order that the collective interests of farm producers can be articulated. The realities of productive organization rather than their ideological representations are the only adequate basis for political action of farm producers.

Department of Sociology/
Queen's University

REFERENCES

- Cayley, David
1973 "The Rise of the National Farmers Union." This Magazine, Vol. 7, No. 3.
- Fowke, Vernon C.
1946 Canadian Agricultural Policy - The Historical Pattern. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 1962 "The Myth of the Self Sufficient Canadian Pioneer." Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Vol. LVI, Series III.
- Hedley, Max J.
1976 "Independent Commodity Production and the Dynamics of Tradition." Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 13, 4.
- 1977 "Transformation of the Domestic Mode of Production." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Fredericton.
- Johnson, Leo.
1972 "The Development of Class in Canada in the Twentieth Century," in G. Teeple, ed., Capitalism and the National Question in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 1974 "The Political Economy of Ontario Women in the Nineteenth Century," in Women at Work - Ontario 1850-1930. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press.
- 1979 "Precapitalist Economic Formations and the Capitalist Market in Canada 1911-1971," in J. Curtis and W. G. Scott, eds., Social Stratification: Canada. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall.
- Jones, Robert L.
1977 The History of Agriculture in Ontario 1613-1880. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Kohl, Seena B.
1976 Working Together: Women and the Family in South Western Saskatchewan. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 1978 "Women's Participation in the North American Family Farm." Women's Studies International Quarterly, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- Mitchell, Don.
1975 The Politics of Food. Toronto: James Lorimer and Co.
- Saffioti, Heleith I. B.
1977 "Women, Mode of Production and Social Formations." Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2.

- Smith, Pamela
1978 "Comments on the Analysis of the Political Economy of Canadian Agriculture." Paper presented at the Political Economy Session, Learned Societies Meetings, London, Ont.
- Taylor, Norma
1976 "'All this for three and a half a day': The Farm Wife," in G. Matheson, ed., Women in the Canadian Mosaic. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates.
- Warnock, John W.
1971 "The Farm Crisis" in L. Lapierre, et. al., eds., Essays on the Left. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.