

FROM AGRARIAN TO GLOBAL VALUES: HOW 20TH CENTURY U.S. AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES CAME TO TERMS WITH AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIALIZATION

by

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Abstract

Little is known about cooperative adjustment to industrialized agriculture. This inductive study hypothesizes that cooperative adjustment to industrialization is a function of critical resource changes, managerial vision, and ideological change. Agrarian-oriented cooperatives sought to maintain farmer control over agriculture. They feared production from industrialized agriculture would displace family farm production, weakening cooperatives. “Top-down” corporate vertical integration presaged a new era of feudal control over agriculture. Open market decline would lock formerly independent, entrepreneurial producers into the feudal dependence of “serfdom” as contract growers—the equivalent of hired labor.

The “serfdom” metaphor motivated cooperatives to buffer producers from structural change by establishing more markets. As integrated, industrialized production grew commodity by commodity, cooperatives increasingly regarded producers as a scarce and critical resource. Yet, agrarian-oriented cooperatives did not foresee that the moral hazard associated with pork contracting would limit grower exploitation. Nor did such cooperatives recognize how productivity-enhancing technologies accelerated farmer attrition. Visionary cooperative managers compensated for agrarianism’s ideological weaknesses by creating new, global cooperative goals such as “feeding the world.” By the end of the 20th century, cooperatives had come to regard capital as their scarce and critical resource.

Keywords: agricultural cooperatives, agrarianism, agricultural industrialization, resource dependency