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BETWEEN THE NATURAL AND THE UNNATURAL – CHANGING PARADIGM OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL POLICY[1]

The purpose of this paper is to explain American agricultural policy in light of its evolution between the two extremes: the *pro-natural*, i.e. operating within the limits of reason, early policies prior to the 1930s and the *anti-natural*, i.e. running counter to reason, policies of the post New Deal era. Agriculture in the United States of America has evidenced a long history of governmental influence. American farming, probably as no other sector of the economy, and American farmers, probably as no other segment of American society, have both been exposed to dramatic changes in their federal government policy's approach to them over the decades of the American nationhood. During the course of the nation's history a whole range of programs regulating the farming sector has proliferated under the bureaucratization of the American government. The policy paradigm changed so as to conform to the growth and changes within America the changing position of agriculture in the American economy.

Early US Agricultural Policy

The era of the early agricultural policies was characterized by the qualitatively distinct role of agriculture in the country's economy – namely, it was the central sector of economy and provided the locomotion of the country's economic development. The United States was primarily an agricultural country – in 1790, 94% of all people in the United States lived in rural areas. Even a hundred years later the economy still favored agriculture – 58% of the labor force was engaged in farming-related labor. Effland (2000:22) distinguishes three periods within the era

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of early farm policies, all focusing on governmental assistance: facilitating the process of settlement, stimulating agricultural training and scientific research, and information and marketing support. Heady (1967:57) defined the early paradigm of agricultural policy as *developmental*. Its main objective was to assist farmers in raising production and maintaining competitive markets (Pasour 1990:72). Formulation of this policy model resulted directly from rise of the economic doctrine of *laisser-faire*, according to which the government was to assist the economy and businesses only, not to control their functioning.

Land Distribution (1785–1890)

In the early days of the American republic, the country expanded over an enormous stretch of land between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans as a result of purchases, military actions and treaties. Yet the US was fragile in its composition; the population was centered on the east coast, whereas westward areas remained either totally uninhabited or poorly populated by scattered settlements. Under these circumstances, the government for the first time formulated its policy towards agriculture – its role was to encourage movement to and settlement of the newly acquired lands to let the American nation and democracy take deeper roots and legitimize their territorial gains. Though the process began as early as America had sanctioned its independence, it was not until 1862 and the *Homestead Act* that it gained momentum. The act laid the last brick in the formulation of the land distribution policy, the very first paradigm of US agricultural policy. It helped populate the enormous territory of the Unites States with farms, and each new settler and their homestead on the American frontier secured the territorial status quo of the newborn country.

The Homestead Act legislation was momentous not only because for the first time in American history the national government had developed a paradigm of its agricultural policy but also, as Effland (ibid.) stresses, the federal policy of land distribution *created a precedent of Federal support for an independent family farm system, which has continued to be a prominent public goal of farm policy*. Moreover, she observes that:

> *Success in embedding this agrarian ideal in land policy, symbolized by passage of the Homestead Act, laid the basis for continued influence of that ideal in farm policy debates into the future. The national government had used its resources – in this case land – to encourage and support expansion of an agricultural structure of independent family farms.*

Undoubtedly, the policy did achieve its goals – it accelerated the process of settlement and within the following decades pushed the American frontier to the west coast of the United States. Although by the 1890s the American frontier had been declared closed, settlers went on to set up homes in the unsettled areas well into the 20th century.

Education and Research (1830–1914)

It soon turned out, however, that possessing land might not be enough to provide for the food security of the country. On the one hand, there were farmers who availed themselves of opportunity created by the land distribution legislation, and the Homestead Act in particular, and established farms in the western parts of the country. Many were set up on prairies and families living there often found it hard to support their families and livestock, despite the amount of land they possessed (160 acres a farm). On the other, farmers in the east experienced increased competition in the farm product market as a result of the land distribution legislation. Implementing a common and easily accessible system to improve the efficiency of farming through educating farmers in sound practices and conducting agricultural research could remedy the situation.

In this situation, the federal government, prompted by agricultural leaders who saw government partially bound to the situation, assumed responsibility for farmers' education. Legislation enacted by the American government in this period laid a solid foundation for the state-funded system of agricultural education and scientific research. The establishment of the *United States Department of Agriculture* (*USDA*), later via a network of agricultural and technical colleges which came to be known as *land-grant colleges,* and eventually the organization of a system of adult education, i.e. the *Cooperative Extension Service*, were the most notable achievements of the time. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this policy and its benefits for the advancement of agricultural knowledge. Nation-wide accessibility of the system let all independent farmers participate in it and overcome common misconceptions about farming methods. As a result, it helped farmers increase their efficiency, which was particularly important in the circumstance when they could no longer increase their yields through the increase of acreage. However, in this way the government took a more direct role in agricultural affairs. Uncontroversial as this intervention was considered at that time, the range of policies began to extend. Furthermore, for the first time, the government intervened in the agricultural sector since farmers demanded it and claimed to have suffered consequences of the earlier policy. That pattern of interaction was to become the cornerstone, though unwritten, of agricultural policy, called upon and followed whenever needed by farmers.

Information and Marketing Assistance (1870–1933)

The decades at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries were particularly unfavorable for American farmers since their lands were stricken, by one turn, with natural disasters like droughts (1887–97) and grasshopper plagues (1874–76) and, by another, with repeated food market downturns. That was about the time when farmers became more aware of their political power. Since the decline of their status as a social group coincided with a rise in the political power and affluence of railroad companies, food processors and the manufacturing sectors of the economy, several organizations were formed to mobilize farmers. Political pressure groups campaigning for pro-farm policies gained momentum in the 1880s when the Farmers' Alliance was formed. The movement reached the height of its political clout in the 1892 presidential election when supported by farmers the Populist Party candidate won 22 electoral votes (Michałek 1993:91). Though the following elections did not win the party more support, farmers did manage to bring their concerns to the forefront of the political agenda. Farmers continued to organize themselves and by the beginning of the 20th century had already gained enough political power not to be underestimated by any political actor. Henceforth, politicians would continue to pay close attention to farm issues and to continuously attempt to win farmers' backing by the introduction of new pro-farm federal policies. That would eventually lead to the growth in farm programs which have reached their present number.

The late 19th century and the early 20th century's rapid industrial development and consolidation of urban-based manufacturing industries put American agriculture in a comparatively disadvantaged position. High interest rates and tariffs strengthened the farmers' conviction that the federal policies protected interests of manufacturing industries at the expense of farmers. A restoration of balance between agriculture and other sectors of the American economy was attempted by means of information and marketing assistance provided to the agricultural sector. In that respect, the federal policies of the day focused mainly on enhancing the cooperative movement through either granting them legal immunity for consolidating their marketing efforts or the establishment of government agencies within or beyond the structures of the *USDA*, providing them with needed information, education and training. Moreover, the development of rural infrastructure through building farm-to-market roads and the introduction of federal regulations covering transportation and communication, coinciding with the invention of the refrigerator car, facilitated the sale of farm produce. Finally, due to fundamental changes in the banking system, farmers were able to avail themselves of credit to purchase machinery and increase their production.

The transformation of the American economy from agricultural to manufacturing that took place before the beginning of the 20th century created a basis for the formulation of a new paradigm of federal agricultural policy. Until the 1920s, the American government fostered the development of agriculture as one of the pillars of the economy and policies enacted at that time served this sole purpose. Though critics (Browne *et al.* 1992:127) of the policies censure them for the oversimplification in their solutions of the economic, political and social problems of the day, at the same time, the whole American economy and society did benefit from them. The list of gains is long: acceleration of the settlement process and strengthening the notion of American statehood; creating education opportunities for those whose access to schooling was limited; development of a research information system and making it widely available; improvements in rural infrastructure; standardizing regulations in food safety; not to mention the establishment of a sound banking and credit system. Unquestionably, these policies promoted the general public well-being, not only in agriculture. But for them the establishment of the 20th-century science-based agriculture would not have been possible. However, it would be a simplification not to illustrate any of the negative developments of the era. Despite their favorable impact upon the country's economy and society, each of the policies made the American federal government more committed to the idea of its influencing the economy, and the agricultural industry in particular. Each subsequent policy made the government more accountable and legitimized farmers' rights to demand the introduction of even more pro agricultural reforms in the future. Thus, stepping into agriculture initiated a still-ongoing process in which previous farm polices justify the existence of the present ones, simply because the old ones did not do well enough.

Modern US Agricultural Policy

In 1929 the Great Depression broke out and caused economic chaos to an extent never experienced before. The American economy collapsed and agriculture was no exception. In 1932, the average level of farm prices declined to less then a third of the 1920 level. Low farm prices made it impossible for farmers to tender their mortgage fees and in many cases banks had to foreclose on their properties. It became clear that the invisible hand of the market was unable to alleviate this devastating economic plight. Only a radical change of federal policy could counteract the wretched conditions American agriculture was experiencing. It demanded the forging of a new policy paradigm fit to cope with unforeseen challenges – in this way, for the first time the federal government introduced measures to curb farm production and raise farm product prices and incomes, instead of promoting increased production. Thus, the government's response to the crisis began a new era in American agriculture.

Compensation and support (1933–)

This new approach towards agricultural markets identified, in the first place, the inherent instability of commodity markets generating fluctuations in farm incomes, and secondly, the excesses in food supply and labor resources as the primary causes of agricultural problems in the years of the Great Depression. Heady (1967:97) defines this new agricultural paradigm as *compensation policy* since the government began to compensate farmers for the loss of their production and incomes by means of direct or indirect farm price supports and through imposing limits on farm production and food supply.[2] Hence, falling farm incomes were to be counteracted by price supports, possible through extensive reductions in supply. Supply control for basic agricultural commodities introduced payments for a reduction in land cultivation. Furthermore, the government began storing surpluses of agricultural production whenever they depressed the market and made prices fall below a predetermined level. It controlled supply by providing disincentives for producing beyond specified levels. In this way, price and income supports as well as supply control became the main tools of the new agricultural policy.

The institution and continuation of the above policy model was possible due to the prevalence of fragmented economic policies which perceived problems of the country in terms of given sectors of economy, exclusively. Therefore, agricultural problems were evaluated solely in the context of agriculture, with virtually no macroeconomic review of its connection to other sectors of economy like industry, environment, rural areas and social migration, whatsoever. This contributed to the fact that for as long as the American government used the compartmentalized policy framework for its decision making (until about the 1970s), agricultural problems were the exclusive concern of the USDA. It attempted to find simple cures for the disparity in farm incomes and the instability of commodity markets by, as aforementioned, resorting to income supports and supply controls. Thus, the US government failed to notice many important interdependencies between agriculture and other sectors of public life and the economy.

The paradigm established by the New Deal and post New Deal policies was extended due to the development of the American welfare state in the 1960s. Together with the passage of the *Food Stamp Act* (1964) the agricultural policy of the United States partially evolved into *food policy* to become the central policy for many years to come. The term *new agenda* was coined by Paarlberg (1978:139), to indicate a vast social spectrum which comprised the poor, racial minorities, small farmers and farm workers,

[2] Several legislative acts instituted the above measures. Among the most groundbreaking ones there were: the *Agricultural Adjustment Act* (*AAA*), passed in 1933 (repealed by the Supreme Court in 1936), and the establishment of the *Commodity Credit Corporation* (*CCC*), and finally passage of the 1938 *Agricultural Adjustment Act*. Agricultural policies of the day provided short-term benefits to farmers and considered short-term effects of the farm programs, yet they managed to shape the policy for several decades well after the 1930s. In the decades following the Great Depression, the system was amended several times; nonetheless, until 1996, farm price and income supports and supply control remained the principal elements of the policy.

consumers and environmentalists. This development was important since agricultural, and henceforth food policy, gained a vast group of supporters (or *shareholders* in American agriculture), who would vote in favor of such programs in the future and make, in spite of a diversified composition, one of the most notable and efficient lobbies.

However efficient and large the farm lobby was, inherent contradictions of the more and more convoluted US farm policies and the federal budget's bloated overspending flew in the face of increase in farm debt, predicament of small farms, decline in both the farmers' social status and of rural communities and the degradation of the natural environment,[3] and proved evident failure of the policies in the post New Deal period (cf. Pyrkosz 2002). Under these circumstances the anti-natural and anti-market measures were gradually abandoned and the period following 1985 saw a steady return of more market-oriented policies.

A new era? (1985–)

A belief that only a firm and long-lasting commitment to a free market would ensure the full recovery and development of American farming and rural economies became the ideological foundation of agricultural polices for the first time since the 1930s. This idea was gradually adopted in the 1985 and 1990 farm bills. The culmination of this approach came in 1996 with the passage of the *Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act* (*FAIR*). High prices for agricultural commodities at international markets helped the government take a decisive step in the process of changing the agricultural policy paradigm, i.e. placing American agriculture on a sound market footing. In that respect, the act went on to limit the level of federal spending for farming and assisted the agricultural sector through an introduction of pro-market policies, both in the domestic and international markets. Thus, government payments (fixed and independent of the level of market prices and which were expected to decline over time) to farmers were consequently decoupled from farmer's production decisions. Moreover, all supply control programs were terminated and farmers were given nearly complete planting flexibility. Finally, another qualitative change was the inclusion within the policy framework of the notion of

[3] Since the 1940s, American farm has promoted the proliferation in the use of artificial fertilizers and chemicals designed to kill weeds and insects as well as to protect against crop diseases. The data (Espelin *et al.* 1991:43) reveals the rate of proliferation – in 1964 about 320 million pounds of pesticide were used on American farms, in 1974 – 600 million, in 1984 – 850 million and 1989 – 810 million. The use of pesticides has also played a growing role in increasing crop yield – Heady (1959:718) points out that an extra ton of fertilizer is enough to compensate for the loss of 23 acres of arable soil.

promoting the ideas of sustainable agriculture and sustainable rural development. The government began to realize that agriculture was a part of a larger socio-economic-natural system and introduced programs promoting environmental stewardship.[4]

The wide-ranging measures of the act won acclaim from domestic and international communities. The FAIR Act, in spite of its shortcomings (Runge 1998:2), was praised by economists for its simplification of the complex and rigid subsidy system. Above all, its rationale was generally considered to be establishing a new policy paradigm for American agriculture for many years to come. The ideas of decoupled payments, making farmers more independent in their production decisions, and the gradual withdrawal of government from subsidizing agricultural production had been long-awaited (hence, the act was informally named *Freedom to Farm*) and fulfilled American commitments towards liberization of world trade made during the Uruguay Rounds negotiations of the *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* (GATT). Yet it soon turned out that the act's provisions were in the way of the political interests of a vast spectrum of agricultural shareholders, and farmers in particular. In 1998, in the face of record-high levels of production depressing the prices of agricultural commodities at international markets, coupled with the world financial crisis – the new federal policy was put to a test. The decline of farm prices brought about an unexpected increase in federal supports for farmers under the FAIR Act (contradicting the central provision of the act), yet American farmers still pressed for additional safety net provisions in the form of disaster payments. Congress and the president found themselves unable to resist the political clout of agricultural producers and keep the financial discipline imposed by the FAIR Act. As a result, in 1998 and the following years up to 2001, supplemental payments to farmers were enacted and contrary to the act's provisions, they boosted their overall outlay for farm programs.[5] In this light, the statement by Orden *et al*. (1999:7) that *dismantling past policies that are no longer needed, and are no longer working properly, is a formidable task in the face of organized interests prepared to defend them […]*, seems to have aptly summarized the policy's failure. The new policy model was abandoned, or at least distorted up to the level of its insignificance, since the government did not have the political

[4] New policy measures included: protection and improvement of soil quality; reduction of dependence on non-renewable resources, such as fuel, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and; minimization of adverse impacts on safety, wildlife, water quality and other environmental resources.

[5] Total direct government payments for agriculture in 1996 amounted to $7,340 million and in 1997 – $ 7,495.3 million, but in the following years they more than doubled: in 1998 – $12,380.1 million, 1999 – $21,513.2 million, 2000 – 22,896.4 million, 2001 – 20,013 million (McElroy 2001:17).

stamina to counteract factional interests and, as a result, the farmers' short-term benefits won over the country and the international community's long-term ones.

The political pressure of the farmers' lobby continued to mount as the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002 saw the introduction of a new farm bill for the forthcoming years. *The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act* (FSRIA) of 2002 directs US federal farm policy for the years 2002–2007. Although seemingly formulated on the grounds of the former policy's (FAIR) provisions, in effect, it sharply departed from institution of the market-oriented paradigm of farming policy. The act has been given a bad press from the start[6] – its critics fault the act for a lavish and sharp increase in overall federal outlays to agriculture. Following the *Congressional Budget Office* (CBO) moderate estimates, Runge (2003:87) observes that taking into account the $293 billion to be spent over the 2002–2007 period (which means at least a 22% average annual increase in total direct government payments, compared to the those under the 1996 Act), the law is likely to increase farmers' dependency on the federal purse and constitutes the center of controversy surrounding the act. Moreover, upholding the subsidy system undermines the long term competitiveness of US agriculture itself by insulating American farmers from global competition and world markets. In turn, such a system runs contrary to the course of trade liberization and furthermore aids all these countries opposing it. This was also the target for the bitterest criticism made by foreign governments, who attack the new farm policy while calling the USA a hypocrite in the light of its stated aspirations for trade liberization. On the other hand, as indicated by analyses carried out by the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (2001:32), the counter-cyclical income support payments (which replaced the FAIR emergency-assistance payments), like any other market price-related payments, augment the rate of decline of market prices and contribute to an increase in farm production. The problem of falling prices due to direct payments, according to the OECD, can furthermore aggravate the situation in the world markets by causing a further decline in prices for farm products corresponding to the growth of American agricultural outlays. Hence, Runge's (2003:85) comment in summary of the FSRIA: *[…] recent U.S. actions represent backsliding toward protectionist policies that will materially harm U.S. trading partners, especially developing countries, as well as U.S. farmers themselves.*

[6] Economists and journalists' reaction towards the bill was that of ambivalence in the least. The act was followed by various publications and research papers whose titles were illustrative of the prevailing dismay, e.g. *The New Farm Bill and Trade Policy: Bargaining Chip or Time Bomb?* (Green 2002); *Hanging By a Thread: In U.S., Cotton Farmers Thrive; In Africa, They Fight To Survive* (Thurow and Kilman 2002); *The 2002 Farm Bill: A Step Forward or a Step Backward?* (Eidman 2002); *Grudgingly, Farmers Take More Aid* and its subtitle, *The farm bill crafted Friday in Congress offers record subsidies, but few fixes for an ailing agricultural economy* (Belsie 2002) or *Agrivation. The Farm Bill from Hell* (Runge 2003), to cite just a handful of them.

Conclusions

American agricultural politics has covered a lot of ground in its transformation since the beginning of the American nationhood. Originally, farming policies fostered settlement on the newly acquired, uninhabited lands of this primarily agricultural nation in its youth. Soon, governmental assistance in agricultural research, education and marketing followed suit. Policies of the day were legitimized by economic progress, particularly those which affirmed the role of agriculture as the major industry of the country's economy. The federal government was the leading force precipitating reforms in the agricultural sector and their true founding father. Through its policies, government put to use the natural assets of American farming, i.e. the abundance of arable land and the ingenuity and diligence of the people in order to promote technological advancement, education and marketing. Despite being often mere consequences of policies enacted previously at farmers' request, agricultural programs invigorated farmers' enterprise and put agriculture on a more equal footing with nonagricultural industries. The changes both laid solid the institutional foundations for agriculture and, in turn, strengthened America's economy as well. The New Deal policies lead to the rise of a compensatory paradigm built on a platform of complex and wide-ranging federal programs of farm income support for the six following decades. Even though the original reasons for the institution of agricultural subsidy policies had long since disappeared in the post WWII years, it soon became evident that once instituted they were difficult to abandon; agriculture-related groups managed to exert considerable political pressure to continue and extend these programs throughout the 20th century. However, growing disillusionment among farmers and the general public towards the policy goal's achievements, mixed with the rise of a whole range of unintended negative effects and the growing instability of the federal budget precipitated a redefinition of the agricultural policy paradigm. Hence, the two last decades saw attempts to institute a more holistic model and set agricultural polices in the context of the whole economy, and the country in a global context as well. This change resulted in the rise of the models of sustainable agriculture and comprehensive rural policy, a market-oriented approach towards domestic farm production and liberization in international trade. In stark contrast to this trend, there stands the most recent farm bill which seems to have abandoned this policy course and sacrifice the above values for the sake of complying with the wishes of the agricultural pressure groups.

The course of development of the agricultural policy paradigm presents the pitfalls of public and economic policy reform, particularly when it means depriving certain lobbies of their former privileges. It proves how cautious political decision makers have to be in crafting their policies which must be fit to solve the problems of the day and to beware of not causing even more in the future. This seems to be particularly true when observing the path of the evolution of agricultural policies. In this case politics appears to be a one way street – prone to expand the scope of assistance in the face of crisis with the public's approval, but virtually impossible to roll back programs in the face of strong resistance by its beneficiaries, regardless of other reasonable circumstances.

The history of American agriculture demonstrates the fact that changes to the policy model have often been dictated by farm-related pressure groups. There are several possible reasons for this pattern of interaction. In the first place, over the decades American agriculture has become a complex system of economic and political interdependencies. That, in turn, has created ground for occasional conflicts of values and priorities between the two spheres of public life, so unlike in their nature and interests. After all, in America, economics is a long game of financial analysis and deficiency, whereas politics a short-term one of influence and power. Thus, the above pattern of development of an agricultural policy paradigm can have a twofold justification: economic and political. As for the first, Orden *et al*. (1999:228) suggest that three following reasons account for the above line of agricultural policy continuity versus change: fluctuating macroeconomic conditions, exposure to world-market customers and competition, and party control of government, especially in Congress. Political justification of the agricultural status quo leads us mainly to the analysis of the decision-making process in American politics. Its complexities, existence of various informal political procedures and concentration on short-term political goals creates opportunities for abuse of the political system and the promotion of particular interest groups at a cost to the general public (Pyrkosz 2003). This might explain why the agricultural policies of the last six decades, contrary to publicly declared governmental intentions, have confirmed to food producers that their well-being has depended mainly on governmental assistance, not the effects of their business decisions.

Agricultural policies attempted in the last years of the 20th century seemed not only to be a mere consequence of failure of the former policies but to be based on a better understanding of the essence of farm problems, its specific conditions and of the increasing role of international markets in particular – these features definitely constitute their natural strength. They tried to abandon the model which, despite its failure, prevailed for over sixty years – a model which was unsuccessful because it minimized the influence of the natural bounty of soil, farmer's diligence and farm development – paradoxically, the very same resources that brought about the success of American farming in the former decades. And it is this focus on inherent strengths and a better understanding of agricultural problems that is essential to establishing a successful policy paradigm in the years to come. The intricacy of the task is exemplified by the ups and downs of the agricultural policies of the last two hundred years. Introducing pro-natural market-oriented policies may therefore prove to be the biggest challenge American political decision-makers will ever have to take on.

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