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Edited by
Robert C. Marshall

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The Normative Construction of U.S. Agricultural Cooperatives, 1900–2008

Julie A. Hogeland, U. S. Department of Agriculture

This chapter explores how normative creation, conflict, and evolution shaped agricultural cooperatives' reaction to the market and to agricultural industrialization from 1900 to 2008. Little is known within new institutional economics (NIE) about how norms emerge, evolve, and stabilize. This chapter addresses that gap by analyzing how farmers' needs and cooperative experience coalesced into norms that took on a life of their own, beyond the interpretations and expectations of the people who formalized them. Such norms became a springboard for farmers to situate themselves collectively within a period marked by significant alterations in values within the food system as a whole.

Coming to terms with market failure, that is, markets less than ideally competitive in prices, service, and producer proximity (or market access) was a continuing challenge for farmers throughout the 20th century. Economist and cooperative philosopher Edwin Nourse considered turn-of-the-century agriculture to be as subservient to industrialism as the colonies once had been to England (1922a). In 1909, commercial livestock slaughter by the four largest firms—the so-called Big Four, which consisted of Swift, Wilson, Armour, and Cudahy—was 36 percent (Hogeland 1992:197). In the first half of the century, legislative challenges and structural inefficiencies weakened the market power of collusive combinations of firms known as "trusts" in industries like meatpacking. By 1971, four-firm concentration ratios bottomed out at 21 percent; according to this measure, the meatpacking industry was highly competitive.

Nevertheless, yet another phase of industry concentration would emerge later in the century based on the cumulative effect of technologies developed over several decades. These included the development of hybrid sorghum supporting cattle feeding in semiarid regions; the decentralization of packing industry from cities to rural areas (allowing more efficient single-story plant layouts); and the replacement of rail with truck transportation. The creation of boxed beef by Iowa Beef Packers (later IBP) in 1968 enabled steer and heifer slaughter to become a standard or model of low-cost competition within the food industry (Hogeland 2005). IBP's norm of "being a low-cost provider" became the capstone of agricultural industrialization and a path to the "cheap food" endorsed by agricultural policies of that era.

Boxed beef saved grocers money by eliminating the need for high-wage unionized retail butchers. With lower-wage rural labor, steer or heifer carcasses could be cut or fabricated at the plant, vacuum-packaged, and boxed into retail case-ready cuts. By 1988, four-firm concentration ratios had reached 57 percent for cattle slaughter, 70 percent for steer and heifer slaughter, and 79 percent for boxed beef production (Hogeland 1992:117). As multiple phases of production such as cattle feeding, slaughter, and boxed beef production began to be vertically integrated or coordinated under single-firm ownership, farmers became preoccupied with maintaining control over industries that seemed to be slipping out of their hands. Reallocation of control galvanized farmers more than cost reduction because they routinely reduced their standard of living to enable the overall farm enterprise to remain competitive (Nourse 1922b; Barlett 1987). Farming's high-equity, low-variable cost structure constituted farmers as a food-producing class exploited to stabilize food production (Barkley 1976:877).

The foundation for 20th-century collective marketing was established early. In 1923, California attorney Aaron Sapiro formalized the concept of "orderly marketing" through cooperatives (1993). In 1922, Nourse first hinted at the concept of cooperatives as a "competitive yardstick"; by 1945, he had fully developed the philosophy (1992). While both norms sought to make exchange more equitable for farmers, they contested over how much processing and marketing cooperatives should do.

"Orderly marketing" was based on the formative experiences of California cooperatives known today as Sunkist, Sun-Maid Raisin Growers of California, and Sunsweet. This collective marketing approach urged producers to extend the marketing season beyond a postharvest market glut through crop preservation or processing. A longer marketing season would stabilize prices. And, if the cooperative could garner a market share amounting to almost all the crop produced, it would have a strong financial foundation for intensive market development like product branding and advertising. Sapiro's ideas influenced the formation of specialty crop cooperatives such as almond cooperative Blue Diamond and cranberry cooperative Ocean Spray, among many others. Sapiro's concepts were also adopted by dairy and meatpacking cooperatives producing branded processed products.

Crops like grain and beef could not be differentiated; however, they were commodities. One bushel of No. 2 yellow corn was interchangeable with another. Intermittent talk of branding beef vaporized at the thought of the expense of market development weighed against the uncertainty of consumer acceptance. Rather, the problem facing midwestern producers was market structures defined by spatial monopolies, that is; the tendency of rural communities to contain a single firm that dominated agricultural buying or selling.

In 1945, Nourse argued that prices paid or received by farmers would improve if farmers formed a cooperative to provide an "extra bid" that could offset the market power of the (local) monopolist. The price differential (i.e., improvement) could be measured pre- and postcooperative: this was the competitive yardstick effect. Midwestern producers established grain elevators, feed mills, farm supply stores, livestock marketing cooperatives, and processing plants for dairy products, meat, fruits, and vegetables according to this philosophy. The cooperative yardstick philosophy gave producers marketing alternatives. In short, American cooperatives could compensate for market exploitation by becoming farmers' patrons—protecting them and providing support through fair prices and missing services—in return for members' production and loyalty. This exchange represented a variation on the norm of reciprocity observed by James Scott (1976) in peasant societies.

As early as 1922, Nourse saw emerging within agriculture market power so centralized and hierarchical it seemed feudal (1922b). This vivid trope implied that a dark age of feudal control could appropriate income and status from traditionally independent and entrepreneurial family farmers. This metaphor seemed appropriate to observers watching industries of small, scattered, independent producers selling through open markets become the basis for highly concentrated, integrated, and industrialized agricultural subsectors (Reimund et al. 1981:3). Industrialization disproportionately affected the small producers who represented the majority within the first subsectors to industrialize—broilers, fed cattle, and processing vegetables. Initially, these growers produced as a sideline; production was a risk-management strategy of diversifying the farm enterprise. Products were sold in local markets; producers could enter or exit production easily. Within 20 years (e.g., 1954–1974), economists observed industrialization's greater capital intensity raise productivity. Processors gained managerial and decision control through grower production contracts. Conditions of exit and entry became more difficult for growers (Reimund et al. 1981:iv).

The competitive yardstick norm became an implicit social contract between producer and cooperative. As agricultural industrialization relentlessly progressed sector by sector throughout agriculture, producers again turned to cooperatives. Loss of market access from the beef industry's transformation cast the industrialization of the pork industry into a watershed event for producers. As contract growers, hog farmers would no longer be independent entrepreneurs, their status and economic destiny dependent on their skill at managing risk; rather, they would be transformed into a modern-day equivalent of "serfs": hired hands told what to do by some distant corporate authority. Producers traditionally used cooperatives to "control their destiny." In practice, this meant using cooperatives to maintain family farming's economic viability. It seemed natural to extend cooperatives' local or regional protective role to the national level.

Experience of exploitation told farmers what it was like to exist within an emergent culture where others made the rules, where larger social forces dominated farmers' individual aspirations or preferences. The competitive yardstick norm offered producers a strategic choice of cooperatives as small rural utopias under unambiguous producer control or as expansive business enterprises potentially part of the larger economic forces hovering over farmers. These populist choices gave the competitive yardstick norm a cultural continuity with earlier farmer battles; from that perspective, the norm was reassuring and familiar. Nevertheless, the values of the competitive yardstick norm encouraged the cooperative sector to debate the question of who would control U.S. agriculture while others within agriculture were aligning with each other to realize their joint strengths (North Central Regional Extension Publication 32 1972).

Industrialization was market driven. Discovering, measuring, and responding to consumer preferences was an important feature of industrialization because it had the technological capability to engineer products to those preferences—to create lean pork or late-season blueberries, for example. Walmart's rapid growth based on "Everyday Low Prices"—the retail expression of the low-cost provider norm—was another expression of consumer sensitivity. A lens clouded by past and anticipated exploitation prevented cooperatives from seeing opportunities from industrialization. The promise of agricultural industrialization was fulfilled in the market; in the market, farmers and cooperatives found their nemesis: consumers and retailers who pressured food prices.

This chapter is a case study of how organizations adapt to inhospitable economic environments. NIE economic historian Douglass North proposes that cultural change occurs slowly and incrementally—a concept called "gradualism" —and so norms, as carriers of important cultural concepts and tensions, also change slowly (1990, 2005). North anticipates that social change will be slow and incremental in part because organizations will resist the difficulties presented by large-scale change. Nevertheless, the actual process of industrialization was rapid for broilers, fed cattle, and processing vegetables once sufficient mechanical, biological, and organizational restructuring had occurred. Economists somberly concluded that "gradual changes, however, do not create such harsh adjustment problems as those that occurred in the three subsectors under study" (Reimund et al. 1981:2).

North predicts that resistance raises costs. That is, institutions like norms have an effect on the prices individuals pay; those who perceive the rules governing exchange are fair and just will likely have lower transaction costs than those who perceive the system is unjust (North 1990:43, 76). Yet NIE also predicts that economic organizations evolve to minimize transaction costs (Eggertsson 1990:221). If they were to survive, cooperatives could not maintain a "producer oriented" culture indefinitely (Hogeland 2004). Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, many midwestern cooperatives formerly resistant to industrialization had crafted a new "value proposition" for members and customers from new crop opportunities recontextualizing the orderly marketing norm. By the beginning of the 21st century, virtually all cooperatives responding to the customer or market as a way to increase farmer returns began to identify themselves as "value-added."

This case study also offers social scientists a synopsis of the different ways norms inform social change. The transition from orderly marketing to value-added cooperative illustrates the pattern of normative evolution anticipated by North, that is, one norm emerging from or following another in an orderly progression. Like the British social structuralists, North and NIE in general are interested in how norms foster order, continuity, stability, and equilibrium conditions such as cost minimization (Hogeland 2008). Similarly, Nourse's vision of social order ascribed to farmers the role of producing crops and livestock, and to cooperatives the role of ensuring that markets remained competitive.

Identifying socially optimal structures of exchange is one goal of NIE; to this end, norms are considered coordinating mechanisms (Eggertsson 1990). Industrialization's goal of improving coordination sought to reduce conflict between the different stages of production and marketing. It also meant that "no supplier of a part of the system can make money unless all other parts of the system develop simultaneously" (Robison et al. 2002:16).

Nevertheless, the evolution of the competitive yardstick norm shows how much conflict may be an intrinsic, unavoidable aspect of profound social change. From 1945 to 1970, the competitive yardstick norm evolved from a statement on combating local market monopolies to become the intellectual foundation for widespread debate over the future structure of production agriculture (Carter and Johnston 1978). This debate intensified as industrialization made inroads in the midwestern pork industry during the 1980s. Judged by NIE standards partial to efficiency and social order, the competitive yardstick norm may appear as a maladaptive belief system that deterred cooperatives from responding to the low-cost producer norm.

Seen, rather, as a norm in competition with other norms, the evolutionary impact of the competitive yardstick norm on the cooperative sector becomes more apparent. In fact, Friedrich Hayek suggests that norms undergo a process of competitive selection (1960). In his 1945 exposition of the competitive yardstick norm, Nourse clearly regarded the Sapiro model as an inferior and competing example of collective action. Nourse also anticipated the low-cost provider norm by wondering when industrial leadership would supply their services to the public on a long-run cost basis. He believed competition from cooperatives could significantly accelerate this process (Nourse 1992:107). Nourse did not foresee how the capital-intensive concentrating and centralizing tendencies in agriculture would eventually limit the number of markets where farmer-owned cooperatives could be competitive, however. But normative conflict was clearly evident by 1972; this prompted economist Donald Paarlberg to ask whether a new and very different system of food production was necessary for increased efficiency even though family farmers had already reduced food expenditures to about 16 percent of income in an affluent nation (1973:5).

Cooperatives, as service providers, traditionally have not stressed profit maximization; indeed, some have considered "profit" a word incompatible with cooperative culture (Hogeland 2004:23). But debate over agriculture's future structure and control would reveal how much cooperatives' growth had been motivated by uniquely cooperative values. Change became inevitable when it became apparent that such values had put cooperatives out of sync with the larger economic system. Nourse's strong functionalist attempt to find a place for cooperatives in the nation's business did not recognize that industrialization was changing how firms compete. Economic theory equates (the condition of) cost minimization with profit maximization; therefore, cooperatives had to come to terms with both. The relationship between behavior and economic performance is demonstrated in the way norms attempt to resolve socially or morally complex questions, according to Nicholas Mercuro and Steven Medema (2007:322).

At the start of the 20th century, California fruit producers also experienced a problematic relationship to the market. The following section addresses how, despite these difficulties, these producers developed cooperative-based markets that anticipated the market-driven mores of the late 20th century. Following that, the competitive yardstick's normative reinforcement of a culture of market distrust and the implications for cooperative investment are explored. The chapter ends with conclusions based on cooperatives' reconciliation with the low-cost provider norm.

CONTROL THROUGH ORDERLY MARKETING

Large-scale agriculture tracing back to huge Spanish land grants allowed California to industrialize earlier some 50 years earlier than the Midwest. Hallmarks of industrialization such as a business attitude toward farming; contract production; large-scale, mechanized farming; and organization for export markets like London or Germany were evident by 1910 or 1920 (Fitzgerald 2003:15). "Chaos" is a word frequently used to describe California fruit marketing before cooperatives stabilized the marketplace (Cross 1911; Hardesty 2005). Harvey Weinstock, organizer and director of the California Fruit Union, often said that the "existing chaotic marketing of products was like placing a hundred men in a room, turning out the lights, and telling them to find the door and get out as quickly as possible" (Larsen 1958:192).

Weinstock traced the path of his fruit by train to discover "why, despite the Fruit Union's efforts to regulate shipments, fruit was rotting in San Francisco as it had rotted in Chicago before the [cooperative] marketing association was formed" (Larsen 1958:189). By tracing the route of a commodity from the shipping sheds to the final marketplace and by interviewing everyone who could offer possible reasons—pushcart operators, retailers, fruit jobbers, publicists, fruit brokers, and consumers—Weinstock displayed a systems approach of interacting with all marketing channel participants. The supply chains of the late 20th century would likewise rely on communication to improve coordination between the different stages of production and marketing.

Growers of Weinstock's era complained about their inability to affect price: they were forced to take whatever buyers offered. It was impossible to expand markets or stabilize prices when independent fruit packers restricted purchases to the amount they could profitably handle (Merritt 1924:7). Fresh fruit producers of the mid-1920s did not know how their fruit graded nor how different grades compared in market value. Shortages of market information made producers vulnerable to misleading rumors from packers intended to depress prices (Couchman 1967; Erdman 1958). Haphazard shipment by many growers and packers led to a mix of over- and undersupplied markets. When packers arbitrarily canceled contracts made early in the season, raisin growers had little legal recourse.

Formed in 1917, the California Prune and Apricot Growers Association (renamed Sunsweet in 1960) was constantly challenged by packers who feared that their fruit supply could be cut off if the association performed well. The association saw its efforts to market high-quality prune packs undone by packers who slipped in lower-quality, smaller fruit. Couchman describes the growers of 1928 as tending to mistrust any agency to which they turned over their crops, but their greater mistrust was in the packers (1967:75).

As the first state marketing director, Weinstock attempted to bring an age of collectivism to California agriculture. He used his office to organize California's producers by "publicizing as models the cooperatives formed by the raisin growers or orange growers" (Larsen 1958:192). In 1912, raisin growers formed the California Associated Raisin Company, renamed in 1925 the Sun-Maid Raisin Growers of California.

In cooperative marketing, growers pooled commodities of a similar grade and quality and received payments throughout the year as the pool was sold. The need to pool like quantities led cooperatives to initiate the development of standard grades and product brands (Wik 1958:184). With Weinstock's support, cooperative grades were documented through state certification to bring members better credit terms and prices.

Weinstock's staff attorney Aaron Sapiro drew on the collective marketing experience of prune, raisin, and citrus growers to formalize the "California Plan" of orderly marketing in 1923 (Sapiro 1993). Orderly marketing stabilized grower prices and provided market security by giving growers a home for their product. Growers raising perennial crops needed such security because they were less able to respond rapidly to fluctuating markets compared with producers of annual crops like wheat, corn, or soybeans. Sun-Maid uses raisin carryover from peak years to compensate growers when weather or other uncontrollable factors cause crop shortages.

Preservation through canning or drying made the commodity into a product that could be marketed year-round; this was the basis of orderly marketing. There were inherent limitations to the concept: nonperishable products like grain could be stored and released on the market to destabilize a cooperative (Hoffman and Libecap 1991:403). An immediate cash payment at harvest, rewarding a year's labor and investment, was irresistible to burley tobacco growers compared with pooling's partial and protracted payout schedule (Ellis 1982:109).

Sapiro's belief that production didn't count until it was sold contrasted with the more producer-oriented belief that cooperatives existed to sell whatever producers chose to grow (Larsen and Erdman 1962:255; Hogeland 2004). He may have learned sensitivity to consumer needs from the way Sun-Maid repositioned raisins from a product sold in bulk for baking to a convenient, pocket-sized snack, packaged in small red boxes called "Little Sun-Maids." Introduced in the summer of 1921, these boxes of raisins were a huge commercial success (Gary Marshburn, telephone conversation with author, July 24, 2008; Cotterill 1984). The box itself became a potent symbol; in 2005 the U.S. Department of Agriculture added a red box of dried fruit to its new food pyramid to reinforce the importance of raisins and other dried fruits within a healthy diet (Sanchez et al. 2008:364).

In developing the first pitted prune, Sunsweet saw how technology could expand the ways prunes were used as foods and as ingredients in foods. The cooperative's competitive advantage comes from the technological advantage offered by the most efficient drying and pitting systems worldwide. Sunsweet's newly developed proprietary pitter offers ingredient manufacturers and retailers a moist, attractive fruit without a doughnut hole. As cooperatives once led industry in developing fruit standards and grades, Sunsweet's goal is to edge industry into using a higher-quality product without a pit. The Sunsweet brand has become the cooperative's legacy and most valued asset because it has consistently represented fruit of the highest quality available. Sunsweet controls the world's largest supply of prunes.

Cooperative Market Dominance

California growers realized early that control over prices might be possible through gaining control over a significant proportion of their crop (Couchman 1967:31). Under the 1922 Capper-Volstead Act, agricultural producers have broad antitrust protection when they collectively market their products. Within California's microclimates, a few counties could represent almost all the growers of a particular specialty crop compared with the multistate span of midwestern grain and livestock production (Wik 1958:185). A large market share would offset the superior bargaining power of other processors, allowing cooperatives to go head-to-head with big business, as Sapiro noted in 1923:

> The egg marketing situation is today controlled by five men in Chicago—the five big packers. They use the great surplus of Midwest eggs to force down the market. Eggs are sold for future delivery just as wheat is, and the packers take a market position which makes their egg departments one of the most profitable divisions of the packing industry. In California the producers organized their own cooperative selling agency and broke the hold of the dealer. . . . They own the finest egg-packing plant in the world. . . . Their hens now lay eggs under contract, and these eggs outsell Midwest eggs constantly on the New York market, where they move at the rate of 800 carloads per year. (Prosperous Folks 1923:14)

Nevertheless, cooperatives could never attain control at the 80–95 percent commodity levels urged by Sapiro because growers were too independent (Sapiro 1993; Wik 1958). It was possible, as one speaker said, "to get one-third of the growers together in an organization; these can get another third to join; but no power outside the Almighty can draw the other one-third in" (Kraemer and Erdman 1933:120). Yet market dominance (even if imperfect) and orderly marketing still gave cooperatives the basis for significant accomplishment. In 2007, Sun-Maid represented approximately 36 percent of California's raisin growers and was the world's largest producer and processor of dried fruit.

Because overproduction is an inventory and price risk for cooperatives providing a home for the growers' product, Sapiro considered product innovation and advertising to be crucial. For that reason, Cotterill (1984) proposes that Sapiro cooperatives were driven more by innovations like contracting and product marketing than by becoming the "monopoly cooperative model" defined by Ruttan (1968:2). Industry evidence, both recent and historical, supports Cotterill's proposition. From the experience of exploitation, the forerunners of Sun-Maid saw as early as 1912 that effective collective marketing required safeguards like a "strong cooperative which would have the power to enforce crop contracts with grower-members" (Popovich 1958:13). That is, growers accepted contracting because only by banding together through a cooperative could their price exceed what they could get from the packers (Arthur Driscoll, telephone conversation with author, April 28, 2008).

THE COMPETITIVE YARDSTICK: PRODUCER PROTECTION

Systematically uniting production, processing, marketing, and distribution under the aegis of a cooperative refined the business orientation already prominent among California producers and protected them by assuring a demand for their products. To Nourse, however, cooperatives only protected producers insofar as they facilitated a market structure conducive to fair trade.

The competitive yardstick norm stated if concentrated markets failed to provide adequate prices or services for farmers, collective action could remedy the situation. Economists now regard the presence of cooperatives as evidence of market failure (Hoyt 2004). The yardstick cooperative would bring innovation to the industry, typically enhancing competition through a superior (alternative) method of distribution or processing. The cooperative's success would induce other industry entrants. As the industry became more competitive, the need for the cooperative would decline. At that point, the cooperative could either scale back operations to a "watchdog" yardstick level or terminate operations. Nourse warned that a successful cooperative could expand into a monopolist unless members checked its growth.

Rather, Nourse expected cooperatives, as the "pacesetters of competition," to define performance standards for their industries. This pacesetter role has been the most enduring, beneficial aspect of the competitive yardstick norm; as Sun-Maid stated, it forces cooperatives to continuously justify their existence (Marshburn, telephone conversation). Through this role, cooperatives establish industry "best practices" or provide industry price leadership, often with a public-good, free-rider dimension (Coffey 1992:112). Ocean Spray Cooperative has funded research investigating how cranberries reduce urinary tract infections. Sun-Maid has provided research, leadership, and education open to all raisin producers to implement dried-on-the-vine (DOV) technology. This "best practice" technology increases raisin yields per acre, lowers production costs, and, by reducing harvest labor requirements, minimizes rain damage during the drying process.

Yardstick cooperatives traditionally focus on price as a measure of comparative performance. The Raisin Bargaining Association bargains with all industry packers to establish an independent field price; this industry pricing reference establishes the commodity value for that crop year. In general, noncooperative growers who sell raisins at harvest for cash receive the field price. Sun-Maid has established a long-standing goal to return to its grower-members at least $100 per ton above the field price to reflect their equity investment in the plant processing and packing facilities, and the marketing, sales, and distribution functions that constitute Sun-Maid. In the last 20 years, Sun-Maid has exceeded the field price every year by a premium of some $100–$200 per ton. These higher grower returns are possible due to the strength of Sun-Maid's brand and its strong retail consumer business (Marshburn, telephone conversation).

The competitive yardstick norm emphasized that it was inappropriate for cooperatives to be aggressive in the marketplace. Nourse noted how growth in size and power had led some cooperators to "throw their weight around":

> Remembering flagrant abuses from which farmers suffered in the past, or chafing under a sense of present wrong, these people look to cooperatives as a power device to be used militantly to improve the farmer position. . . . This was the essence of the old Sapiro doctrine that each commodity should form its trust or domestic cartel and turn to collective bargaining with a "big stick." It was to repeat for the farmer the pattern of monopoly power first developed by tightly organized corporate business" (1992:108).

Growth, popularly known among cooperators as "growth for the sake of growth," violated Nourse's agrarian-based vision of social order because it injected the values of corporate business into cooperatives. Nourse tried to preserve cooperative integrity and "difference" against the "other," the outsider, the nonfarmer (1922b). Fearing that nonfarmer stakeholders would use cooperatives solely as yield-producing investments, he recommended that cooperatives self-protectively "rigidly exclude" investment from "outsiders" (1922b:586).

Cooperatives are presented as a rustic David confronting an armored Goliath in Nourse's explanation of the norm. David, armed simply with river stones, represented small cooperatives performing "simple local services"; the armored Goliath is encased in manufactured complexity (Nourse 1992:108). Cooperatives were "small Davids" who did "a great job breaking down the Goliaths of various market monopolies" (Nourse 1992:108). Nourse's assumption that the ideal cooperative is small and rural centered is an example of the "ideologies of scale" described by Anna Tsing (2000). His tendency to automatically associate large or expanding cooperatives with monopolistic behavior is an assumption that growth will eliminate values like fairness and egalitarianism popularly considered "the cooperative difference" (Hogeland 2006).

In contrast to Sapiro's optimistic presentation of orderly marketing where mention of competitors' marketing power occurs almost as an afterthought, the mood of the yardstick is dark, colored by the potential for cooperative betrayal. Although Goliath is a product of industrialization, his manufactured armor is nevertheless helpless against the stones that are David's rural weapons. Yet my (2007) intertextual, extended reading of the biblical text indicates that David secretly took Goliath's armor into his tent; likewise; cooperatives could be betrayed from the inside, as suggested by a *News for Farmer Cooperatives* editorial: "Over the years, farmers have seen largeness as an evil, manifest in the forces which have historically competed against them in their business. It is natural, therefore, that some farmers even today feel uncomfortable with the size of an organization they own and control" (Ingalsbe 1974:8).

Nourse's argument can be seen as an example of what Mark Purcell and J. Christopher Brown call "the local trap," that is, an assumption that "local-scale decision-making is inherently more likely to yield outcomes that are socially just or ecologically sustainable than decision-making at other scales" (2005:280). Purcell and Brown argue that scale is independent of political agendas; consequently, a larger scale is not by itself an inherent barrier to the democratic values and popular sovereignty typically associated with localization.

Producer Distrust of the Market

Cultural conflict is inherent in Americans' attitudes toward agriculture because Americans are of two minds: valuing agriculture and the family farm to the same extent as the free enterprise system and democratic choice (Tweeten 2003). The competitive yardstick norm can be regarded as an expression of this conflict because it endorses the survival of the family farm through the market choice offered by the free enterprise system. Sapiro clearly endorsed commitment to a specific cooperative; Nourse put the survival of the farm above the cooperative by suggesting that a cooperative formed by producers should be regarded, as cooperative observers often say, as "just another supplier." By requiring cooperatives to compete for business the same way as any other supplier, Nourse situated cooperatives at the same arm's-length distance from farmers as other firms. Farmers' wary relationship to the marketplace is evident from a 1923 editorial in *Successful Farming*: "Just as sure as the [meat]packers, the great bankers, the leading manufacturers or the big corporations propose something that their business experience has shown would be beneficial to . . . the farmers . . . the farmers assume an aloofness that is dramatic."

By setting the welfare of the producer above the cooperative, Nourse arguably contributed to Babcock's famous description of farmer-owned, farmer-controlled cooperatives as a "legal, practical means by which a group of self-selected, selfish capitalists seek to improve their individual economic positions in a competitive society" (Babcock 1935:153). Farmers, who considered themselves at the bottom of the economic totem pole with respect to consumers, now were sovereign, as they evaluated buyers and suppliers according to their needs and preferences, according cooperatives no special loyalty (Breimyer 1986:54).

An adversarial attitude toward further processors or processing led farmers to concentrate on production and let "marketing" end with the sale at the farm gate. At that point, cooperatives or other intermediaries would take over to perform the low-level processing functions such as the grain conditioning, grading, and sorting required by the next level of the marketing chain (Barkley 1976; Hogeland 2001:iii). Bulk buying from many producers, and commingling and blending lots for an average (No. 2) quality was also typical grain industry practice. This mass marketing strategy required end users to adopt grains to their specific requirements. The need for even these minimal services was not well understood even though cooperatives predominated in this end of the marketing channel. In 1976, Barkley commented on farmers' adversarial attitudes toward middlemen: "Farm operators, especially those in the family farm class, have continually heaped wrath on those processors . . . the wrath is surely unwarranted" (1976:814).

In 1922, Nourse suggested that the "despised middleman system" added an unnecessary layer of costs that could be eliminated if farmers controlled the (agricultural) system and operated on a strict cost-of-service-basis (1922b:590, 583). He saw middlemen and further processors adding commissions and monopoly profits to the food system through product and brand proliferation. Nourse complained, "Why this duplication of brands so indistinguishable from one another as far as their essential qualities are concerned?" (1922b:579). Since his breakfast cereal was perfectly adequate, he considered money spent on advertising other brands wasteful. His attitude that "I already know what I want, I don't need anyone to tell me" made product differentiation seem frivolous and pointless. Nourse sourly concluded, "'Salesmanship' so-called has become our god" (1922b:580). Likewise, the 1971 edition of *American Cooperation* includes the complaint that the introduction, promotion, and advertising of so-called new foods do little more than to add to the cost of food. Said the commentator, "There are very few really new products—with frozen orange juice, instant mashed potatoes, and now a new fried milk curd product being the only really new food products" (Behre 1971:248).

Farmer withdrawal from the market had become an entrenched behavioral pattern, as this 1972 *News for Farmer Cooperatives* editorial suggests:

> The degree of compatibility of cooperative concept and "contract farming" depends on the farmer redefining his operation and giving it a new perspective consistent with the developing food system. As a matter of survival, his operation needs to be viewed less as an independent family farm, isolated from the market and oppressed by stronger economic forces, and more as a production division of a cooperative enterprise complex and powerful enough to profitably do battle in the final marketplace. (Editor's Corner 1972:2)

Seeing the potential loss of income from retail markets that offered some 5,000–6,000 products, in 1972, Harvard Business School's Ray Goldberg recommended that cooperatives' business partners compensate for farmers' market isolation. Farmers' marketing ignorance resulted in too many dollars spent promoting basic agricultural products and too few on measuring the impact of advertising and research and product development, said Goldberg (1972:5).

Nevertheless, such a shift would not be easy. In a 1973 interview with *News for Cooperative Farmers*, a cooperative executive discussed joint ventures with food manufacturers. Noting the prominent firms involved in agricultural production, the executive suggested it would take "a miracle" for them to be sufficiently open to disclose critical financial details such as cost allocations and profit rates. He concluded, "The natural thought is, 'Why don't they let us alone in agriculture?'" (Ingalsbe 1973:24)

Not cooperating usually means to withdraw, according to Partha Dasgupta (2007).

COOPERATIVE RECONCILIATION WITH THE LOW-COST PRODUCER NORM: CONCLUSION

Legitimacy is essential to survival because it defines an organization's right to exist (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975:123). Norms legitimized cooperatives by defining a goal or purpose endorsed and supported by producer-members through their equity investment in the cooperative. The competitive yardstick norm directed cooperative investment toward a procompetitive effect on the market. The orderly market norm supported cooperative investment in further processing because returns from processed products were expected to exceed those from raw commodities.

To NIE, norms are culturally based traditions, conventions, or expectations that constrain property rights. This constraining role is evident from the way the competitive yardstick norm prioritized investment in the farm compared with the cooperative. In 1922, Nourse wrote, "The farmer's need of capital in his own business dictates that he go no farther afield than necessary in marketing or processing undertakings" (1922b:597). Industrialization's increased scale and global outlook brought cooperatives into competition with agribusinesses like Cargill, Continental, and Archer Daniels Midland (ADM). To compete at this level, cooperatives supplemented member equity with debt capital.

The capital requirements of cooperatives more than doubled between 1954 and 1970, and after 1962, capital was supplied by debt financing, not by members and patrons (Griffin 1973:8). In 1973, the culture established by Nourse was endorsed by Farmland Industries, then the second-largest U.S. cooperative: "The high cost of capital investment in agriculture requires that a farmer and his local cooperative use as much of their own funds as possible, on his farm and at the local grain or farm supply cooperative. That means if a regional [cooperative] can borrow money elsewhere, it should do so. Indeed, it has a responsibility to do so" (Lindsey 1973:10). To grow despite the 1970s energy crisis and inflation, large regional cooperatives incurred further debt; this was a pattern that continued throughout the 1990s (Duft 1985; Gherty 2003).

By the early 1990s, agricultural lending regulations had tightened and traditional lending resources like the Farm Credit System were no longer sufficient to supply cooperatives' capital requirements (Gherty 2003). This negative externality, or external cost, fostered a more inclusive and receptive attitude toward outside investment. In 2001, several states began creating so-called hybrid cooperatives with features of limited liability companies to facilitate outside investment. Outside equity has been instrumental in the formation of ethanol and other renewable energy cooperatives because communities want to invest in their economic future.

Eventually, the costs and consequences of extensive cooperative control—having cooperatives could "do it all," or, as Ocean Spray Cooperative would say, go from "bog to bottle"—became less important than creating value. "Succeeding today is more about getting the job done than owning the entire infrastructure," said John Johnson, CEO of CHS Inc. (Johnson 2003).

"No longer able to operate in a silo called a cooperative," Johnson initiated a meeting with Cargill in 1995 that would bring the largest U.S. cooperative into a multidimensional relationship with the agribusiness giant. Through its "Country Operations," CHS, the largest U.S. grain cooperative, competes with Cargill to purchase grain at the retail level. Through Horizon Milling, a joint venture established in 2002, CHS supplies wheat to Cargill, the nation's largest flour miller; this gives CHS a national reach in adding value to grain.

Political relations in foreign countries, fluctuating corn and oil prices, and central banking credit policies are among the unpredictable factors now exerting a decisive impact on agriculture. Situating producers in global agriculture through a well-managed cooperative has replaced 20th-century aspirations to turn back the clock on industrialization. John Campbell of Ag Processing Inc. (AGP), a regional soybean processing cooperative, has said, "We are focused on not being the biggest but being the lowest-cost producer" (Campbell 2007). Welch's president and CEO Dave Lukiewski has announced, "We're not in business just to move cases; we're here to make a profit, and we're committed to selling the right mix of products necessary for profitability" (Lukiewski 2007).

North saw norms as an attempt to solve recurring economic problems. Evidence suggests that farmers will continue to confront the concentrated markets that defined market failure for Nourse. Farmers are expected to experience a significant reduction in buyers in a wide range of markets, based on 1990s merger data from railroads, supermarket chains, and seed, equipment, and agricultural chemical providers (MacDonald 2002:177). Of particular note has been the sharp reduction in the number of different chains competing to buy produce from agricultural shippers. Fewer customers for cooperatives' products and potentially lower prices paid to growers are the implications of the 55.7 percent market share held in 2005 by the leading five U.S. grocery retailers according to Sanchez et al. (2008:366). These economists note that Walmart, essentially nonexistent in the grocery industry 15 years ago, had a 35.1 percent sales increase between 2004 and 2005. Through Walmart's mandate of "Everyday Low Prices," industrialization's cost leadership has spread to the retail sector with "overwhelming success" (Epperson and Estes 1999:39). Intensive price competition exacerbates the effect of retailer consolidation, eliminating many small farmers or forcing them to farm part-time (Fulmer 2000; Mamen 2007).

Consequently, the connection between the early 20th century and the future seems to be that farmers, through their cooperatives, will continue to encounter a high degree of buyer market power. Although market power is not market failure, the emerging retail market structure will strongly affect cooperatives' market access. Thomas Reardon predicts that suppliers will face fewer and more powerful buyers, and over the long term, as their bargaining power declines, suppliers will risk being "de-listed" by a retailer or its specialized or dedicated wholesaler (2007:29). Retail market power appears to have intensified compared with the 1970s, when control of shelf space and product exposure to the consumer was sufficient basis for cooperative observers to conclude that grocery chains represented the greatest market power within agriculture (Garoian 1972:8).

Fiercely competing for market share, chains seek strong suppliers who can, with minimal risk, assure product and offer an exciting customer mix, and do so cheaply. Suppliers can become relevant to chains, suggests Reardon, by developing procurement networks or handling processes that make international trade less challenging or costly (2007:30). Sun-Maid targets better than a 99 percent order fulfillment rate and 95 percent on-time delivery, for example (Marshburn, telephone interview). Effective global marketing is relationship based; chains need suppliers who will connect growers in one emerging market with markets in another (Reardon 2007:16). To this end, Sunsweet participates in local Chilean prune markets with advertising, industry research, and export market development. Defining food safety standards and traceability across regional and global networks is also increasingly important (Reardon 2007:21). Such tasks suggest cooperatives can make industrialization work for them by transforming the 20th-century norm of "orderly marketing" into a 21st-century norm of being a "reliable supplier."

Cooperative norms were an effort by farmers to come to terms with an economic system that contained both threat and opportunity. Nourse stressed both withdrawal (by limiting cooperative growth) and engagement ("cooperatives as pacesetters of competition"). Only when value-added potential emerged locally in grains (identity preservation) and corn (ethanol) in the late 20th century did midwestern producers (other than dairy and pork farmers) become as market driven as California specialty crop producers were some 50 years earlier. This suggests that values and norms are endogenous to the local setting.

Until that occurred, this chapter suggests that market evolution like the industrialization of agriculture was, to a notable degree, resisted by producers and their cooperatives. Such producers spent considerable effort trying to find a control that was illusory. In retrospect, Sun-Maid president Barry Kriebel said, "Nobody controls their destiny; the person who owns the store sets the rules" (Barry Kriebel, telephone conversation with author, August 2, 2007). Because new institutions or norms inevitably develop when people are dependent on forces outside their control, further normative change among cooperatives is likely.

Cooperatives needed to discipline other firms, as Nourse made clear. In turn, cooperatives needed competition from other firms to prevent them, as

Nourse said, from resting on their oars and lapsing back into the easy ways of inefficiency (1922a:86). Paradoxically, the industrialization he so feared was ultimately a conduit to contemporary retail discipline, lower prices, and improved system efficiency.

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