Cultivating Discourse: The Social Construction of Agricultural Legislation

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In this article we initiate a critical analysis of the discursive geographies from which U.S. agricultural legislation has been constructed. First, we refer to the geography of discourse, which consists of the production, dissemination, and consumption of ideas, concepts, theories, and understandings. Specifically, we trace the emergence and development of an American agrarian discourse, constituted from a wealth of ideas and theories concerning the place of farming in American society and the embodiment of these lines of thought in the agricultural legislation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We highlight particular discursive sites and the establishment of expert groups and associated institutions, as well as time and place specific understandings of farmers and farming. The second dimension we draw out focuses on the semantic geography of discourse itself: It is through discourse that objects of debate—such as people and place—are demarcated and placed in relation to each other. In this case, farming and farmers have been understood in relation to a series of binaries (free/fettered, family/corporate, rural/urban, welfare/investment, safety/risk, individual/social, us/them), one side of which becomes valorized as “ideal” or the “norm.” We explore the semantic geography of agricultural legislation by focusing on one discursive site, namely the U.S. Senate, and the debates leading to the passage of the 1996 Freedom to Farm Bill. Key words: discourse, social construction, U.S. agriculture.

I am signing HR2854 [the Freedom to Farm Bill] with reservation because I believe the bill fails to provide an adequate safety net for family farmers . . . [H]owever . . . At long last, farmers will be free to plant for the market, not for government programs. The expansion of planting flexibility will improve U.S. competitiveness in world markets.

—President Bill Clinton in White House, 1996

This article intends to make visible the discursive geographies from which U.S. agricultural legislation has been formulated, focusing in particular on the Freedom to Farm Bill, which was signed into law in 1996 as the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act. By invoking the term “geography,” we employ a metaphor that highlights the complex and relational network of constructs that make communication possible. More familiar terms within the poststructuralist literature include Derrida’s “semantic horizon” and Deleuze’s “rhizome,” both of which refer to the ensemble of meanings that can be brought together as constructs, endowed with positive or negative connotations, and presented as “commonsense” or “obvious” definitions upon which an argument can safely rest. The term “geography,” however, highlights not only the “horizontality” of meaning—whereby conceptual boundaries are always and everywhere permeable—but also those practices via which constructs are actively shaped and reshaped. Geography brings to mind processes of exclusion, marginalization, disruption, transgression, outlaw, reversal, and displacement, all of which are just as appropriate to a description of the shifting symbolism of the epistemological realm as they are to the relations between and among people in the ontological realm. Furthermore, those same ontological relations—often described as “material”—are predicated upon the construction of meaning. As Dixon and Jones (1996, 767) suggest, “Relations of social power enable and are derived from the organizational structure and differential deployment of epistemological categories,” a comment that emphasizes the dynamic and open-ended discursive geography that makes possible economic and political relations and from which our knowledge of those relations is constructed.

In order to provide a framework for discussion, we separate out the notion of discursive geographies along two dimensions.1 First, we refer to the geography of discourse, which consists of the production, dissemination and consumption of ideas, concepts, theories, and understandings. Key to this geography are discursive sites—such as research centers, media organizations, policy fora and religious centers—at which ideas and concepts are brought together in the formulation of knowledge concerning the world, which is then disseminated via various means, such as the media. In the process, new institutions and cadres of “experts” can be proposed as the appropriate caretakers, teachers, and practitioners of this knowledge. As Peck (1998) notes in his etymology of the
term "workfare," scale is crucial to the dissemination of this kind of knowledge, as ideas and concepts produced within discursive sites can be "upscaled," or "re-encoded," as the foundation for central state policies. As knowledge is transferred from one scale to another, the particular social, political, and economic context within which it was produced is stripped away, allowing the presentation of abstract programmatic statements that are valorized as universally applicable.

The second dimension we draw out focuses on the semantic geography of discourse itself: it is through discourse that objects of debate—such as people and place—are demarcated and placed in relation to each other. Put succinctly, this argument suggests that constructs do not stand independently from other ideas/beliefs, but are always contextualized in relation to concepts and ideas that are "unstated." For example, a line of demarcation can be drawn between those meanings that appropriately define a construct and those that do not. This line is established via the play of binaries—for example, free/fettered, family/corporate, rural/urban, welfare/investment, safety/risk, individual/social, us/Them—one side of each of which becomes prioritized to the detriment of its opposite.2 Indeed, some meanings can become so embedded in the definition of a construct that they reach an iconic or mythic (Barthes [1957] 1994) status; to question them would be to undermine the viability of the construct itself. Alternatively, a construct can be so embedded in a diversity of discursive contexts that it holds no stability. As Hall (1996) has argued in regard to "race," a concept can be attached to and detached from so many different places, groups, and ideas that it operates as a free-floating signifier. A relevant example for our argument is the term "rurality," which has been mobilized by a diverse array of groups over time and through space.

What particularly interests us about agricultural legislation is its mythic character. While the deployment of terms relating to rurality, such as the "rural idyll," have come increasingly under critical scrutiny by geographers (see, for example, Halfacree 1993, 1995; Jones 1995; Little and Austin 1996), legislation pertaining to the economic, political, and social viability of what is still the foremost industry in most rural communities has not been similarly addressed.3 In large part, this reflects current concerns within the subfield to locate and represent previously excluded or marginalized groups, an effort underwritten by a postmodern interest in difference and diversity as well as empowerment (see, for example, Philo 1992, 1993; Murdoch and Pratt 1993; Cloke and Little 1995; Milbourne 1996). Where legislation has been noted, it has usually been presented as a backdrop to current events, effectively providing a context against which the practices of actors, groups, and institutions can be demarcated. And yet, this process of foregrounding—and simultaneous backgrounding—further mythologizes the discursive framing of constructs within legislation: they become "facts of life," to be acknowledged and accommodated. We suggest that for rural geographers, the examination of agricultural legislation is crucial, because it has such an extensive impact upon the lives not only of farmers but also of rural residents, migrant workers, consumers, businesses at home and abroad, and a host of other groups.

In this article, we initiate a critical analysis of agricultural legislation along the two dimensions noted above. In the next section, we trace the emergence and development of an American agrarian discourse, constituted from a wealth of ideas and theories concerning the place of farming in American society and the embodiment of these lines of thought in the agricultural legislation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We highlight particular discursive sites, the establishment of expert groups and associated institutions, and the time- and place-specific understandings of farmers and farming. In doing so, we point to a legislative bias that reflects largely midwestern forms of agriculture and, to a lesser extent, some trends within southern agriculture. This bias stems largely from the fact that many of the major agricultural legislation proposals originated in these regions and thus reflect particular socioeconomic contexts, that congressional leaders from these regions have been especially influential in shaping agricultural legislation at particular times, that the leadership of major farm organizations has often been oriented toward one particular region (the Midwest), and that farmer unrest has been more vigorous in some regions than in others.4 It is interesting to note, for example, that the commodities most protected by U.S. agricultural programs (wheat, corn, cotton, peanuts, sugar, tobacco, and dairy) are concentrated in particular regions of the country (that is, the Midwest and South).5 Northeastern, urban interest groups have also contributed to the discursive geography shaping agricultural policy, while the specific concerns of successive political parties, such as Keynesian welfare economics and Cold War politics, have at times been crucial in defining the appropriate place of farmers and farming in the U.S.

In section three, we open out the second dimension of the discursive geographies of agricultural legislation by focusing on one discursive site—namely, the U.S. Senate—and the semantic geography underpinning debates leading to the passage of the 1996 Farm Bill.6 This bill can be considered a site of transformation, constructed from diverse and oftentimes conflicting articulations of the character of the "farmer," the "farm," and "farming" and their places within the rural community and the national
and international marketplace. In short, the proponents of the bill sought to replace the commodity supports guaranteed to U.S. farmers for the last sixty years with declining fixed payments over the next seven years. At the end of this period, U.S. farming will either return to the permanent agricultural legislation of 1949, become subject to yet more state-legislated amendments, or become fully oriented toward the national and international “marketplace.”

We focus on the discursive placement of farming within three spatialized constructs: the marketplace, the rural, and the United States. First, we note how the bill’s supporters posited and privileged the market as a realm of individualized economic transactions, over and against the more traditional understanding of the market as a dense web of economic, political, and cultural relations riven with inequalities. Then we draw out how, given this general libertarian understanding of the market, the retention of some form of subsidy was justified via recourse to the argument that the rural is a morally superior space to the urban, such that a limited level of “investment,” as opposed to “welfare,” was warranted. Last but not least, we highlight how advocates of the bill envisioned an unfettered global marketplace, and the repercussions of this for the formulation of an American national identity.

For our analysis, we have utilized comments offered in the Senate debate of 1 February 1996, as well as various speeches made over the period between June 1995 and April 1996, as reported in the Congressional Digest. This private monthly publication is comprised of news summaries and verbatim transcripts of key congressional debates and speeches. We have also drawn upon other news summaries of committee meetings and floor debates appearing in the Congressional Quarterly Weekly, a private publication employing over 130 reporters, editors, and researchers to cover Capitol Hill.

A Partial Genealogy of U.S. Agricultural Policy

In this section, we provide an overview of the dominant discourse concerning farms, farmers, and the place of farming in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: namely, agrarianism. Before doing so, we reiterate two caveats. First, the “object” of debate—agriculture in the United States—exhibits tremendous regional diversity in scale, operation, and major crops produced. Even within particular regions, significant differences in scale and operation exist, such that there is no “typical” form or model of the American farm. Furthermore, farm operations have undergone multiple transformations in organizational form through time. As such, it is not our intent to undertake a comprehensive review of U.S. farming policies and practices. Rather, we focus on the construction of these discourses, noting how particular ideas and practices become dominant in the sense that they are upscaled from the regional to the national level and subsequently form the basis for federal agricultural policy. It is precisely through such debates that the “object” is identified, classified, and targeted for action.

Second, the chronological framework of this section allows merely a hint of the complex discursive fields from which successive rounds of agricultural legislation were drawn. In laying out this partial genealogy of agricultural policy, we strive to avoid a “blow-by-blow” account, which would imply a necessary trajectory to the development of a definition of farmers and farming. Instead, we emphasize the ways in which such constructs were always open-ended and dynamic, noting how, for example, the farmer has been diversely understood according to time and place as homesteader, businessman, patriarch of farm and family, and the embodiment and defender of democratic ideals.

Agrarianism and the Development of American Agriculture

The most pervasive (and contradictory) discourse that has been brought to bear on the formulation of agricultural policy is agrarianism. Over the past three centuries, it has provided a particularly complex set of ideas that have entered into agricultural policy in a number of different ways. At the risk of reifying Thomas Jefferson as the “source” of American agrarianism, we can utilize his articulation of the “place” of farmers and farming as an entry point into this discussion. For Jefferson, agrarianism consisted of five principles: (1) a belief in the independence and virtue of the yeoman farmer, (2) the concept of private property as a natural right, (3) land ownership without restrictions on use or disposition, (4) the use of land as a safety valve to ensure justice in the city, and (5) the conviction that with hard work, anyone could thrive in farming. Jefferson also believed that the existence of independent, landowning farmers was pivotal to the creation and maintenance of a democratic society. Shorn of their particular spatial and temporal setting, these ideas can and have been upscaled at various points in history and by various groups to promote not only conflicting arguments on the ideal character of farming as an activity, but also quite contradictory understandings of the appropriate place of farming as an economic, political, and cultural activity within American society. Proffered under the heading of “agrarianism,” these diverse ideas gain
political currency from their positioning as the "legacy" of Jeffersonian ideals. As Paalberg (1980), Fink (1992), Hurt (1994), Danbom (1995), and Bradley (1995) observe, Jefferson's agrarianism—summarily defined as a belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over industry—stands firmly at the base of Americans' collective ideological framework. As various groups deploy agrarianism in order to justify particular projects and policies, this nexus of ideas and beliefs continues to mutate, acquiring a discursive complexity that belies any attempt to contain the meaning of the term (Bradley, 242). Furthermore, as the state has sought to legislate on agriculture, various strands of Jefferson's agrarianism have become embedded in policies that, when put into practice, have had quite contradictory impacts.

The upscaling of particular ideas and understandings of the "place" of farming via the deployment of agrarianism as a discourse can be seen, for example, in the Homestead Act of 1862. One of the groups that had strongly backed the Homestead Act was the National Reform Movement, led by George Henry Evans and newspaper editor, Horace Greeley. This movement represented northeastern workers and drew upon Jefferson's idea that the wide availability of free land would counteract exploitation of workers in the city. Arguing that labor on the land constituted the only legitimate title to land, the national reformers lobbied for a bill that would set an upper limit on individual land holdings and make provisions for inalienability of land (see Fink 1992). Business interests, however, were attracted to the fee-simple nature of the act's land grants and, drawing on Jefferson's notion of property rights, argued that such provisions violated the founding principles on which the nation was based (Fink). In the end, no limitations were placed on individual land holdings, and provisions for inalienation failed to pass. As a result, the Homestead Act did little to reduce the power of land speculators and corporate economic interests that had already become entrenched in the agricultural sector—interests that continued to be exerted economically and politically throughout the rest of the century.

Commercial interests were also facilitated in 1862 by the establishment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the passage of the Morrill Act (which established land-grant colleges for researching and teaching agricultural and mechanical arts), and the Pacific Railroad Act (which authorized and provided funds for the construction of a rail line between Iowa and California). Together, these events ostensibly marked a congressional commitment to nurturing independent, landowning farmer-households. At the same time, however, they promoted a particular, commercial form of Jeffersonian agrarianism. According to Danbom (1995, 115), "[T]ogether these actions foresaw a dynamic, rapidly expanding, and increasingly commercial, scientific, and technologically complex agriculture in the nation's future. By envisioning this sort of agriculture, these measures helped bring it to life." Such measures also, of course, initiated debates on the appropriate role of the state in the development of agriculture—debates that would resonate throughout the next century. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for example, a strong counterargument emerged, one that presented the family farm not only as an integrated economic unit but also as the fulcrum around which American society in general was organized. As such, the family farm was afforded a key role in the articulation and performance of American national identity.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization in Europe and the U.S. stimulated a dramatic expansion of American agriculture from 1870 to 1900. While the material situation of many farm households improved during this period, commercialization also rendered farmers increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of the market and control by middlemen such as merchants, railroads, loan brokers, and speculators (see Cochrane 1979; Danbom 1995). The boom-and-bust nature of commodity agriculture propelled a series of popular protest movements throughout the late nineteenth century that advocated broad economic reforms to control market forces and attempted to empower farmers against moneyed interests (Fink 1992). Tapping into the strain of agrarianism that portrayed the farmer as the most worthy and virtuous member of society, they asserted the economic superiority of farming, arguing that "When farmers went broke... it was not just too bad, ... it was uniquely unfair because [they], more than any other worker, should be rewarded as the one from whom all other wealth derived" (Fink, 23). These political movements had their base of support among small and medium-sized farmers, who voiced their concerns in terms of the welfare of the farm family. According to their understanding, farming was subsumed within the sphere of family life and thus was necessarily connected to broader-scale cultural issues and concerns. Farming was more than a business; it was a way of life.

By 1900, then, at least two competing arguments about the nature and source of farmers' problems had taken root that would resonate throughout the next century. The first, emanating from business interests, advocated one strand of Jeffersonian puritanism concerned with keeping the state out of the marketplace and citizens' affairs (although it must be borne in mind that not all business interests were antithetical to state involvement). The second emerged from farmers' movements and advocated the need for state intervention in market relations (again,
However, such sentiments were by no means characteristic of all farmer opinions. As Danbom (1995, 160) notes:

The heirs of Populism continued to believe that the source of the farmers’ economic difficulties lay outside agriculture and that government action was required to rectify the situation ... And conservatives continued to believe that the farmers were the authors of their own problems and that they could advance by becoming better business people and more skilled producers. The lines drawn in the late 19th century remain clear in the rural community today.

Such debates became further complicated, however, by the emergence of a third argument, in which the fate of the agricultural sector became a concern of national economic policy. In this view, agricultural productivity was seen to provide the necessary foundation for urban-based industrial productivity. If the wealth of the nation were to increase, agriculture must be forced to become entrepreneurial.

Between 1900 and 1920, prices for agricultural products rose, and farm households experienced unprecedented prosperity. The high prices fueling farming’s prosperity, however, rested on domestic demand outstripping supply, and the U.S. administration became increasingly worried about the ability of an inefficient agricultural sector to feed a rapidly growing urban population and facilitate industrial development. Concomitant with the government’s national economic concerns were those of an urban-based reform movement that had become alarmed about rural-urban migration and its potential impact on the nation. The government’s economic interests converged with the concerns of the urban reformers in the Country Life Movement formed in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt. Country Lifers believed that the nation would be imperiled if farmer prosperity continued to be rooted in low productive efficiency. They called for “better farming, better living, better business” for rural Americans to keep pace with their urban counterparts and make their contribution to the U.S. (Danbom 1995, 168). Farmers, then, were to be understood as entrepreneurs, a term that had developed within an urban setting and carried with it connotations such as “progressive” and “trend-setting.” Transplanted into a rural environment, the term was associated with increased productivity via scientific agriculture and technological innovation. The legislative measure to accomplish this goal was the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which provided federal funds for agriculture extension services. The Agricultural Extension Service, in tandem with land-grant universities and the USDA, provided the institutional mechanism to diffuse new agricultural methods.

While some farmers embraced the new technology and mechanization, a significant number feared the impact of increased commodity supplies on their incomes. Low prices can be weathered if the scale of operation is large, but in the 1920s many farms were relatively small or medium-sized family operations not well placed to take advantage of economies of scale. Increased productivity and supply did indeed force commodity prices down in 1920, and they remained low throughout the decade. Heavily indebted farmers and those who had not mechanized suffered most. The crisis deepened with the crash of the stock market in 1929, and hundreds of thousands of families lost their farms. U.S. agriculture underwent a dramatic structural transformation as the number of farms and farmers declined and medium-sized operators were pushed out. The resulting dual model (minority rich-majority poor) of U.S. agriculture can still be seen today.

The closure of so many farms created a dilemma for the government because of the pervasiveness of the Jeffersonian notion of the farmer as the fundamental unit of American democracy. As Sachs (1983, 65) notes, “[T]he demise of the family farm poses an ideological threat to the foundation of traditional American values. The government finds itself in a legitimacy crisis as its policies force more and more people off the land and one of the basic premises of American democracy begins to disappear.” The spectacle of thousands of farmers being forced off the land pushed the government to intervene forcefully in the market via the development and passage of a comprehensive agricultural policy in 1933.

Meeting the Demands of the State—Agriculture in the National and International Economies

The New Deal era represented a dramatic shift in the federal government’s role in agriculture. Whereas previously the government had been loathe to interfere in market processes, preferring instead an encouraging, supportive role, the program initiated by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 began an era of government activism and direct intervention in the agrarian economy, giving government a permanent presence in U.S. agriculture (see Table 1 for a summary of government agricultural legislation from 1933 to 1990). The subsequent rounds of agricultural legislation illuminate the myriad interests at work in shaping government policy, but also the diverse and often contradictory ideas and beliefs such interests bring with them in order to shape the very constructs—farmers, farms, and farming—that lie at the heart of such legislation. As argued in the introduction, these people/objects/practices are articulated via the constant
Table 1. Comprehensive Agricultural Legislation, 1933–1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Intent</th>
<th>Mechanisms</th>
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<tr>
<td>1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act</td>
<td>Return rural incomes and spending power to their 1909–1914 level via (1) supply controls and (2) establishment of parity with urban incomes</td>
<td>(1) Federally imposed acreage controls on wheat, corn, rice, cotton, tobacco, hogs, and milk, and (2) guarantee minimum price levels via federal subsidies, calculated at 50% parity</td>
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<td>1938 Agricultural Adjustment Act</td>
<td>Boost rural incomes and produce an agricultural surplus to offset periodic drought-induced food shortages</td>
<td>(1) Federally imposed acreage allotments and market quotas, and (2) price supports through nonrecourse loans, funded through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) and administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941 Steagall Amendment</td>
<td>Increase agricultural production</td>
<td>Parity established at 85% on many nonbasic commodities (later amended to 90%, 1942–1947)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948 Agricultural Adjustment Act</td>
<td>Reduce overproduction</td>
<td>Shift from fixed to flexible parity, at 60–90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949 Agricultural Act</td>
<td>Retain agricultural incomes</td>
<td>Re-establishment of fixed parity rate of 90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954 Agricultural Act</td>
<td>Reduce overproduction as well as state subsidization of agriculture</td>
<td>(1) Shift to flexible parity range of 85–90% and (2) establishment of CCC reserve for domestic and foreign relief</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act</td>
<td>Facilitate foreign policy and reduce storage costs</td>
<td>CCC to use surplus (1) to buy foreign currency or U.S. dollars, (2) to barter, and (3) for overseas relief</td>
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<td>1956 Agricultural Act</td>
<td>Reduce production through retirement of inefficient farmers' land, conservation of land</td>
<td>Soil Bank program for long- and short-term removal of land from production, in return for payments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962 Food and Agriculture Act</td>
<td>Reduce production and maintain agricultural incomes</td>
<td>Feed grain acreage reduction in return for Payment in Kind (PIK) and price-support payments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965 Food and Agriculture Act</td>
<td>Reduce production and maintain agricultural incomes</td>
<td>Extends acreage controls through PIK programs for wheat and cotton</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973 Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act</td>
<td>Expand production and lower state subsidies</td>
<td>(1) Replacement of price support payments with target prices and deficiency payments, and (2) payment limit of U.S.$20,000 per crop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977 Food and Agriculture Act</td>
<td>Maintain agricultural incomes</td>
<td>Increase in price and income supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Agriculture and Food Act</td>
<td>Reduce state subsidization</td>
<td>(1) Specification of target prices for next four years, (2) lowered dairy supports, and (3) elimination rice allotments and quotas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act</td>
<td>Reduce state subsidization</td>
<td>Dairy supports frozen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983 Dairy and Tobacco Adjustment Act</td>
<td>Reduce state subsidization</td>
<td>(1) Tobacco supports frozen and (2) voluntary dairy-diversion program established</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984 Agricultural Programs Adjustments Act</td>
<td>Reduce state subsidization</td>
<td>Target prices specified in 1981 frozen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 Food Security Act</td>
<td>Boost agricultural incomes and conserve land</td>
<td>(1) Loan rates lowered, (2) target prices raised, and (3) Conservation Reserve Program established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act</td>
<td>Reduce state subsidization and extend foreign trade</td>
<td>(1) Elimination of deficiency payments on 15% of crop base, and (2) imposition of marketing assessments on price-supported commodities</td>
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Sources: Cochrane and Ryan (1976); Rapp (1988); Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier (1992); Bradley (1995); Congressional Digest (1996).
(re)assembly of epistemological categories, or boundaries. In the process, a definitive meaning of each is asserted. For example, farming has been linked to, among other things, the notions of economic viability, productive capacity, environmental conservation, and personal freedom. Consequently, the agricultural policies summarized in Table 1 cannot be simply explained via reference to party rhetoric; they must be understood as an inherently dynamic discursive site wherein a host of other concerns, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs are brought to bear.

In the 1930s, for example, economic viability became the primary trope through which farming was defined. Many of the USDA's programs during this period were crafted by agrarian intellectuals hailing from farming backgrounds in the Midwest, a region hit hard by the Depression. The USDA understood farms first and foremost as economic concerns that were vulnerable to the vagaries of an uncontrolled market. Furthermore, the state was itself understood as the appropriate agent through which economic dislocations could and should be ameliorated. The causal problem was identified as oversupply, which, it was believed, deflated prices and reduced farm incomes; the appropriate solution was to establish state control over supply (Paarlberg and Paarlberg 2000). In 1933, these ideas and theories concerning the state of farming were upcaled to the federal level via the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which established a voluntary program to limit supply by cutting the acreage under production for seven "key" commodities: wheat, corn, rice, cotton, tobacco, hogs, and milk. Later, barley, sugar, cattle, flax, peanuts, potatoes, rye, and sorghum were added to the program. The AAA guaranteed participating farmers minimum price levels and paid farmers a per-acre rent based on parity prices and average production for acreage withheld from production. Through the newly established Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), loans were also provided to farmers who participated in the acreage reduction program. These loans were set at a percent of parity and used farmers' crops—not land—as collateral.

During Harry S Truman's administration, production control was no longer the solution of choice, although the need to stabilize farm incomes remained an axiomatic part of agricultural policy. There was a general consensus among party leaders that flexible price supports and direct payments to farmers in distress would gently propel agriculture back into the free market while retaining some form of state-funded and administered safety net (Cochrane and Ryan 1976). Though Democrats from southern farm states continued to favor high, fixed supports, Congress passed the Agriculture Act of 1948, which gradually reduced the fixed 90-percent parity ratio to a flexible range of 60 to 90 percent. Desperate to get re-elected later that same year, however, Truman reversed his earlier position and promised farmers a return to 90-percent parity. This was later enacted in the Agricultural Act of 1949.

The debate around the Agricultural Act of 1949 is a particularly interesting one in that two proposals for agricultural reform were developed, leading politicians to debate several issues relating to “free trade," "welfare" payments to farmers, and the economic viability of the "family farm." Indeed, in regard to the ideas presented, this debate foreshadowed in large part the 1996 Farm Bill discussions. The two plans presented to Congress were the Brannan plan, proposed by then Secretary of Agriculture, Charles Brannan, and the Aiken Plan, named after the Republican then-senator from Vermont, which eventually passed. Brannan, a New Dealer concerned with the social impacts of agricultural consolidation and the plight of low-income farmers, proposed a series of broad reforms to agricultural policy. First, he proposed widening the number of crops that would receive support and subsidizing perishable crops through production payments rather than surplus purchases.11 Second, he proposed redefining parity along income rather than price, realizing that the parity price system was biased toward large-scale producers and actually exacerbated inequalities. Third, he advocated a cap on aid, defining limits in terms of production as opposed to acreage or gross income. In contrast, the Aiken plan provided support only to storable, staple crops, maintained parity based on price, and did not limit levels of aid. What was common between the two plans was the subsidizing of storable crops through surplus purchase, the utilization of acreage allotments to control production, and their overall costs.

Bradley (1995) notes that farmers across the entire spectrum opposed the Brannan plan, arguing that it failed because it undermined agrarian myths. The representative voices of agribusiness and the "family farmer" "called for the defeat of Brannan's plan in the name of free enterprise and free markets, while they supported the Aiken plan, which was itself a system of heavy subsidies and widespread regulation of production" (Bradley, 248). While the "agribusiness agrarians" deployed concepts of individual mobility, capitalist entrepreneurship, and political freedom, family farmers rejected Brannan's plan because it threatened their yeoman identity of self-reliance and independence. In short, the Brannan plan was too obviously a welfare program, while the Aiken plan hid government payouts behind the guise of independent agency in a free (albeit supported) market.

Under the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the role of the state in propping up particular groups was still
under question. However, critics articulated their concerns not around welfare, but around a particular understanding of geopolitics and the “freedom” of the U.S. citizen. Shaped by the broader concerns of the Cold War, the state control of supply and demand became associated with an invasion of the personal liberty of the farmer, akin to what was then considered the evil intent of Communism. Indeed, the then-Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, saw his appointment as a religious mission and declared: “Freedom is a God-given eternal principle vouchsafed to U.S. under the Constitution . . . . It is doubtful if any man can be politically free who depends on the state for sustenance. A completely planned and subsidized economy weakens initiative, discourages industry, destroys character, and demoralizes the people” (cited in Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier 1992, 151).

Government intervention in the national agricultural market was identified as the principal problem. Thus, the first part of the farm bill sent to Congress in 1954 requested flexibility of parity ratios and a gradual reduction of price supports to a range of 82.5–90 percent. The Agricultural Act of 1958 gradually reduced parity levels for supports to 65 percent by 1961. The second aspect of Eisenhower’s 1954 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act centered on the supply program. The solution of choice when dealing with government-owned surpluses was the development of international agricultural trade. Such surpluses could be used for foreign aid (again, the pattern of which would be shaped by a particular understanding of geopolitics) or sold abroad for dollars or foreign currency.

In attempting to make agriculture more responsive to a “free” market, however, policy-makers encountered the problem that science and technology were improving the efficiency of farming at the same time as gluts of particular commodities existed. The emerging technological regime required greater outlays of capital and economies of scale. Pushing agriculture toward a free market under these conditions forced small farmers to fail: through the 1950s and 1960s, the number of farms declined by over 50 percent (Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier 1992). While Eisenhower was concerned about the fate of family farms, he also welcomed the transformation toward large-scale agribusiness. According to Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier (1992, 155), “National welfare dictated the need for agriculture to adjust to contemporary conditions at home and abroad . . . . Ike’s legacy . . . was to establish firmly the principle of perpetual flexibility and relative freedom for farmers to react realistically to changing conditions.”

From the 1960s onwards, contradictory articulations of the appropriate “place” of the American farmer continued to mark agricultural policy. While state support for the family farm as a social concern continued to enter into debates, farming was also characterized as an economic activity akin to every other economic sector that should take place within a free market both at home and abroad. These two arguments would be differentially brought into play in accord with, among other factors, the prevailing state of the national and international commodities markets and the broader-scale rhetoric of whichever party was in office.

For example, in the 1970s, when U.S. farmers benefited from low worldwide productivity, the federal government under Richard Nixon encouraged “fence-row to fence-row” production (Friedberger 1988) and promoted the expansion of farm operations through tax breaks. Indeed, for Earl Butz, then the Secretary of Agriculture, farming was an appropriate activity only for those able and willing to take advantage of the current market conditions: his advice was to “Get bigger, get better, or get out.” Encouraged by government as well as educational institutions, large farmers and some medium-scale farmers took the opportunity to expand their operations by increasing land holdings, acquiring more equipment, and adopting a high-risk farm-management style, which increased their debt burden (see Friedberger 1988; Barlett 1993). Consequently, farm debt rose from U.S.$50 billion in 1970 to $120 billion in 1980 (Friedberger 1988).

By 1979, however, world production had recovered from adverse climatic conditions and high interest rates strengthened the U.S. dollar, making American agricultural products more expensive than those of their foreign competitors. By 1984, it was clear to many that farms were in crisis. Insolvency was rampant, as the number of farms going out of business tripled from 1982 to 1986 (Barlett 1993). The potential impact of these developments on the viability of rural communities was viewed with alarm, as many small banks and retail outlets failed or threatened foreclosure. The outcome was a public outcry at the national level, as a variety of groups attempted to respond to the situation.

Assessment of and proposed solutions to the crisis differed between two principal camps, which articulated their positions according to whether farming was an economic or social activity. On the one hand, a loose alliance of church organizations, social activists, sympathetic lawyers, social-service providers, and other concerned community-based individuals adopted a neopopulist perspective. Taking a cue from critics such as Wendell Berry (see, for example, Berry 1977), these groups viewed the crisis as an outcome of agribusiness complexes taking over agriculture and the food-delivery system in the country. They criticized government for pursuing policies
that pushed farmers off the land by encouraging increased production, and they advocated policy that included acreage controls, higher levels of government-supported loans, and a moratorium on farm foreclosures. They also proposed a supply-management program that would estimate production needs in a given year and divide allotments equally among farmers. This understanding of the problem was firmly underwritten by the declaration that farming was a culturally important way of life, such that the loss of what was considered the American "family farming" system amounted to a national tragedy (see Friedberger 1988).

In contrast, mainstream, conservative agricultural organizations such as the Farm Bureau considered the free market and revival of farm exports as the best solution to the farm problem. According to their analysis, government policies, not corporations, caused the problem by hindering farmers' ability to compete in the world market. They saw crop reduction schemes as detrimental to grain trade; they advocated lowering support levels and other free-market responses to resolve the crisis. For these groups, the departure of individuals from farming was a career choice; they sought to provide advice on this issue, suggesting that farmers in the 1980s should balance their efforts in farming with other off-farm work and investments (see Friedberger 1988).

In terms of agricultural policy, the media-savvy neo-populists won this particular debate, and the resulting 1985 Farm Security Act proved the most expensive outlay on agriculture in U.S. history. Indeed, it is ironic that the discursive power of the "family farm" was such that it drove the form and extent of agricultural legislation during the administration of a president (Reagan) who prided himself on his cost-cutting and deregulatory policies. Up until the 1996 Freedom to Farm Bill, that form of agrarianism that posited the farmer as the bulwark of American society, as well as the exceptional character of farming itself, remained predominant.

However, as the debates surrounding the 1996 bill progressed, agriculture became one site among many (including Social Security, Medicare, and housing) to be targeted for reform. Under the aegis of Newt Gingrich, then the Speaker of the House, many Republicans questioned not only state subsidy of agriculture per se, but also what they considered to be an emotionally driven commitment to the family farm. In doing so, they picked up on and deployed to good effect that variant of agrarianism that emphasized the personal liberty of the farmer and the fundamental right of American citizens to engage in the market unhindered by government.

**Shifting the Terms of Debate Once More: The 1996 Freedom to Farm Bill**

In order to orient the reader as to the progression of congressional debates on the Freedom to Farm legislation, we include a timeline (Table 2), noting the chronology of significant events in the drawing up and passage of the 1996 Farm Bill, as well as comments offered by politicians and lobbyists concerning an appropriate agricultural policy. In the aftermath of the 1994 elections, both the House and the Senate came under the control of the Republican Party, allowing members the opportunity to introduce and — they hoped — pass legislation that would cut federal spending in a number of areas. Significantly, then, agricultural policy became intertwined with broader-scale debates on Capitol Hill concerning the appropriate role and scope of the state as well as the mechanisms of government. Crucially, this was the period during which the "Contract with America" was formulated, which promised Americans a balanced budget, welfare reform, individual liberty, economic opportunity, and deregulation (see Gillespie and Schelhas 1994). The ensuing farm-bill debate placed Republican presidential candidates Richard Lugar (R-IN) and Bob Dole (R-KS) in a particularly difficult position. Not only did they have to appeal to a variety of constituent interests, but they were also obliged to work within the confines of this vociferous party-line rhetoric.

As can be seen in Table 2, two separate farm bills were proposed: one by the Senate Agricultural Committee (S854), chaired by Lugar and co-sponsored by Lugar and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), and one sponsored by the House Agricultural Committee Chair (HR2195), Pat Roberts (R-KS). While the former offered only to redirect federal funds away from commodity supports toward conservation efforts, the latter offered a wholesale transformation in the character and amount of subsidies for agriculture. In offering the Freedom to Farm Bill, Roberts sought to reduce state subsidization of agriculture via the replacement of commodity-support programs with declining fixed payments to farmers. His bill also severely cut back nutrition programs, primarily food stamps. After a seven-year transition period, Roberts argued, farmers should be fully geared towards producing for the market.

In this section, we focus in depth on the U.S. Senate as a discursive site in order to address the semantic geography underpinning the 1996 Freedom to Farm debates. We suggest that through these debates a series of spatialized constructs were invoked (and simultaneously contested) as a means of "fixing" the character of farmers and farming. First and foremost, we note the importance in
these debates of the “marketplace” as the arena within which farming and farmers can be appropriately labeled and defined. We draw out two contrasting visions of the marketplace. On the one hand, we note the more traditionally dominant understanding of the marketplace as a trans-scalar, power-laden web of family, regional, national, and international relationships within which individuals are embedded. If each farmer is to be ensured of reasonable access to this marketplace, a higher order — namely, the state — must have the authority and capacity to monitor and intervene in this sector. Hence, farming is framed not simply as a means of producing commodities, but as a complex series of economic and political and cultural activities. On the other hand, we note how supporters of the bill envisioned the marketplace as a transcendent space that could be reached by releasing individuals from their politically engineered state of dependency. Economic transactions, then, are understood as conceptually distinct from the broader social context within which they are produced. Within this transcendent space, individuals succeed or fail according to their innate ability to negotiate with others, an ability also considered distinct from the broader social context within which farmers operate.

Next, we note how this intricately imagined marketplace intersected with two other constructs — namely, the “rural” and the “U.S.,” each of which figures prominently in Senate debates on “Freedom to Farm.” As noted above, the rural has predominantly been associated with a moral superiority over the urban in U.S. agricultural debates. In regard to Freedom to Farm, this presumption was once again articulated, but in a very particular manner. Detouring from the party line on a free-market economy, those Republicans based in agricultural states successfully articulated the need to retain some form of subsidy for the farming sector by virtue of its “exceptional” character. Harkening back to the heroic characterization of the yeoman farmer who must deal with Nature in order to make a living, they made an explicit distinction between the farmer — framed as a worthy recipient of government “investment” — and urban-based recipients of “welfare.” Not only does this argument reiterate the moral superiority of the rural over the urban, it also works to a sublime aesthetic in that risk is firmly laid at the door of an unpredictable and uncaring Nature.

Freedom to Farm also necessitated a shift in how an “American” (and, by default, “foreign”) space was understood to exist. Given that the bill’s supporters were ideologically committed to a free-market economy tenanted by agricultural entrepreneurs, the usual means by which agricultural legislation was pronounced “American” were no longer tenable. As noted above, family farmers have traditionally been framed as the bedrock of American society, such that by supporting this group financially the U.S. government had, arguably, preserved a particularly American form of democracy. With the demise of the formerly iconic family farm in the Freedom to Farm debates, emphasis shifted to the international marketplace as the arena wherein national identity was to be formed and preserved. Foreign governments and trading blocs, it was argued, deformed this (potentially pure) international space of economic transactions. The appropriate solution was to force — via sanctions, if necessary — the removal of such protectionist practices. Not only were the principles of free trade to be upscaled to the international arena, therefore, but also the supervisory role of the U.S. government. Interestingly, within this understanding of the international marketplace, the U.S. retains no inherent form of national identity other than as the proponent and guarantor of free trade. The “we” of the U.S. FAIR Act are distinct from “them” only in relation to the level of support given to an unfettered global economic system.

Before beginning our exploration of how the “marketplace,” the “rural” and the “U.S.” have been framed within the Freedom to Farm debates, however, we emphasize one particular aspect of discourse analysis. As Barthes ([1957] 1994) cautions, in unpacking the series of connotations that frame a construct, analysts can “stretch” the semiotic resonance of the rhetoric in question beyond that of the intended audience. In other words, more can be made out of the associations a particular term or image generates than is warranted. A critique of overinterpretation, though, would be misdirected in light of the intent of such an analysis. In this case, our objective is not to “fix” the connotations assigned to farmers and farming within agricultural legislation, but rather to emphasize that they are indeed part and parcel of a fully relational semantic geography. While there is potentially a great deal of disagreement over the connotations we draw out from the following quotes, we hope that when read in tandem with the previous section on the geography of farming discourse, our analysis demonstrates the dynamism involved in the social construction of agricultural legislation.

**Imagining the Marketplace**

The immense significance of the “marketplace” to debates on the character of farming can be evaluated from its taken-for-grantedness in the rounds of debate summarized in the preceding section. Actors and organizations as diverse as Jefferson and Roosevelt, the Grange and the USDA have presumed the existence of the marketplace in one form or another as the key arena within which
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<td>November 1994</td>
<td>Republicans win control of both the House and the Senate</td>
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<td>December 1994</td>
<td>Pat Roberts (R-KS) is elected Chair of the House Agricultural Committee, and Richard Lugar (R-IN), Chair of the Senate Agricultural Committee</td>
<td>President, National Association of Wheat Growers, Ros Hansen: “Conservation is deserving of public support but not at the expense of basic commodity program.”</td>
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<td>January 1995</td>
<td>Lugar and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) propose bill (S854) that will cut $11 billion from farm programs over five years, primarily through reduced target prices, and redirect money to conservation programs</td>
<td>Bill is supported by midwestern rural Republicans who want more planting flexibility. Bill is opposed by southern and northeast rural Republicans.</td>
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<td>July 1995</td>
<td>Roberts (R-KS) proposes the Freedom to Farm Bill (HR2195), offering declining seven-year fixed payments to farmers in place of price supports</td>
<td>Agricultural Committee member Richard H. Baker (R-LA): “I think the consequences of this to my state are devastating.”</td>
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<td>October 1995</td>
<td>Roberts (R-KS) loses support of five cotton-state Republicans on the House Agricultural Committee. Bill HR2195 fails 22-27 Roberts (R-KS) presents his bill to the Budget Committee regardless of the Agricultural Committee vote</td>
<td>Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich (R-GA): “Obviously, it is unfair for one part of agriculture to block reform in its programs as we pursue change across the rest of agriculture.”</td>
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<td>November 1995</td>
<td>Thad Cochran (R-MS) inserts provision retaining marketing loans for cotton into the farm bill legislation. Dairy supports are retained. Legislation is placed into the Budget Reconciliation Bill (HR2491) Democratic opposition mounts, spearheaded by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD). House and Senate pass the Budget Reconciliation Bill (HR2491), which contains the Freedom to Farm legislation</td>
<td>Chief of Staff, Department of Agriculture, Greg Frazier: “That’s what’s wrong with entitlement programs. No matter what your needs are, and other demands on the federal Treasury, we’re going to give you this payment.”</td>
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<td>December 1995</td>
<td>President Bill Clinton (D) vetoes budget bill, citing concerns over cuts to Medicaid and Medicare</td>
<td>Secretary for Agriculture Dan Glickman: “Giving people payments when times are good is foreign to farm policy ... It does seem like an anomaly...at a time when you’re cutting everything else back.”</td>
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<td>January 1996</td>
<td>House Agricultural Committee passes new Freedom to Farm Bill HR2854, which incorporates Robert’s fixed payment plan and subsequent Republican amendments, by a vote of 29-17. Full House fails to discuss it before recessing</td>
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For supporters of the bill, the removal of state support for agriculture was considered key. In accordance with a methodological individualism, farmers must be considered equal in light of the marketplace and will succeed or fail accordingly. Specifically, to attain their full potential, farmers must be allowed to produce for the market, and, therefore, must be “unfettered” by state planting regulations. For Senator Lugar, who had originally co-sponsored a much more traditional farm bill that continued state subsidies:

The [Freedom to Farm] bill we consider today offers a straightforward, commonsense policy ... With this bill, agriculture has done its part to help balance the federal budget in seven years ... Farmers will have full planting
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| February 1996 | Senate Democrats mount filibuster against new Senate version of Freedom to Farm Bill (S1541) | Earl Pomeroy (D-ND): “I think Freedom to Farm is essentially a bait-and-switch proposition. By the year 2003 you’ve got nothing—no check, no protection against price collapse.”  
Pat Roberts (R-KS): “It’s going to be difficult to explain to the farmer who has to sit down with his lender and wants to make his normal cropping decisions why we don’t have a farm bill.”   
Republican: “The label given to this act, the “Freedom to Farm,” the ability to manage your land, to make decisions for the market.”   
Senator Grassley: “This is really a signal victory and a change of course that no one expected.”   
President Clinton: “I am signing HR2854 with reservation because I believe the bill fails to provide an adequate safety net for family farmers… however… At long last, farmers will be free to plant for the market, not for government programs. The expansion of planting flexibility will improve U.S. competitiveness in world markets.”  
President, National Grains Trade Council, Robert Petersen: “With surging global food demand and shrinking world food stocks, the opportunities for U.S. agriculture are unprecedented, provided farmers are freed up to produce far more of the world wants.”  
Harold Volkmer (D-MO): “We are talking about some farmers over a period of seven years getting well over a quarter of a million dollars and they do not have to farm.”  
Richard Lugar (R-IN): “The most important thing about this bill is the unleashing of American agriculture to make more money.”  
Pat Roberts (R-KS): “Free at last, free at last…” |
debates, however, was borrowed from the then-popular libertarian line of argument encapsulated in the "Contract with America," which called for the removal of the state from the everyday spaces of people's lives. For Senator Grassley, for example, it was no longer the "family farmer" who stood as the pivot around which rural communities were organized, but the individual agricultural entrepreneur. Furthermore, he allied himself and his party with this collection of individuals by explicitly denouncing the "Washington bureaucrats" who organize the subsidy system, thereby proposing not only a particular vision of farmers, but also a vision of the Republicans in government as the defenders of individual rights.

The primary criticism raised by opponents of the Freedom to Farm bill was that it would remove a state-sponsored "safety net" that had been in place for the last sixty years. In presenting this line of argument, a very different understanding of the marketplace was proffered, one characterized by a complex web of relationships and alliances between individuals and organizations and fraught with unequal power relationships. The imaginative geography summoned up by the bill's critics is a detailed and complex one, in that it is composed of ideas and assumptions, images and sound bites from over sixty years of agricultural debates, as well as the broader agrarian discourse within which these debates were embedded. In laying out their defense of subsidies, senators drew on these prior rhetorics, as well as current concerns over the status of the global economy, in order to stress the fact that farming was indeed a livelihood as opposed to an occupation. In contrast to the Republican emphasis on the singular "farmer" and its connotation of an independent yeoman figure, for example, Democrats made reference to the social context within which farmers are embedded by repeatedly using the term "community" as well as "family farm." According to Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA),

This bill is being sold to the agriculture community as the best vehicle to guarantee an income safety net to farmers...[but u]nder this bill, one farmer could be receiving windfall gains while another hardworking farmer could go bankrupt in a bad year because of lack of assistance. Furthermore, the owners of the corporate farming enterprises do not even have to produce to make money—they can become absentee landlords.

As her argument unfolded, Senator Boxer distanced the "owners of the corporate farming enterprises" from the category of "farmers," signifying the gulf that exists between farming for a living and farming for profit.

Indeed, for opponents of Freedom to Farm, the rhetorical distinction between "family" and "corporate" farm became a key line of defense in the Senate debates. Given the unequal distribution of resources within the agricultural community, it was argued, only large-scale agribusiness could take advantage of the planting flexibility and risk-training programs offered in the Freedom to Farm Bill. As Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND) argued,

Today we are considering what will prove to be one of the most important and most disastrous pieces of legislation affecting...family farms across this Nation...We are going to see the small fail and the large and powerful prevail...The big landowner should love the Freedom to Farm bill because their farms are going to get bigger, their farms are going to become richer, their farms are going to produce more and more, and the small family farmers are going to be there with less and less...This takes a safety net we have had for fifty years and yanks it right out from under family farmers.

In the absence of state control of the economy, small-scale farmers—who, for Senator Dorgan, were synonymous with family farmers—would necessarily lose out to their nonfamily, or corporate, counterparts. In the following quote, Senator Dorgan expands on the wider context within which farmers work, echoing the Jeffersonian understanding of family farms as the bedrock of American society:

I believe in the future of this country there ought to be a network of family-sized farms. I also believe that we will not see a network of family-sized farms in America if we decide that...there should be no program for a safety net to continue family farming. We will have corporate farming from California to Maine under this proposal. I hope we will reach a compromise that is much better for the future of family farmers.

This line of reasoning draws explicitly upon the dual structure model of the agricultural sector, wherein roughly 18 percent of farms are responsible for 75 percent of all U.S. farm commodity sales. The remainder (72 percent) are operations that gross $100,000 or less per year and rely on off-farm sources to maintain household income (Congressional Digest 1996, 106). Significantly, this argument is also premised upon an egalitarian view of society reminiscent of the New Deal, wherein it is the role of the state to counter this state of affairs, ensuring that, for the good of the "public" in general, family farms are preserved.

A similar argument was put forth by Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN), who suggested that the Freedom to Farm Bill would lead not only to "markets that are dominated by large multinational companies," but also to ones that are easily controlled by the grain companies and the railroads.19 In contrasting the family farmer with such
rapacious capitalist enterprises, Senator Wellstone’s comments hearkened back to the populist movement of the late nineteenth century, wherein the plight of the family farmer was laid firmly at the door of greedy middlemen who “fixed” commodity prices. Freedom to Farm “will leave farmers to the tender mercies of the grain companies and the railroads and the Chicago Board of Trade during years when prices are low. In the long term, I believe it may have disastrous effects on family farmers and our rural economy” (emphasis added). Like his political counterparts Grassley and Dole, Wellstone firmly positioned himself as the true representative of farmers, though in this case the farmers in question were the heirs of agrarian populism.

In addition to pointing out the inherent inequality of the marketplace, Democratic opponents of the bill also highlighted the emergent cadre of “experts” who would be responsible for monitoring and proffering advice on the “unfettered” marketplace. According to Senator David Pryor (D-AZ), for example, “We are entrusting the future of the farmers of this country with some guess by economists down at the Congressional Budget Office. And, if they guess wrong—for instance the price of rice in the year 2001—the farmers in my state will be left with little recourse and less help.” Whereas Senator Grassley, as noted above, was keen to characterize the removal of one particular group of Washington “experts” responsible for planting controls as the stripping away of layers of government, Pryor was just as keen to highlight the new relationship farmers—already understood to be embedded in a complex network of power-laden relationships—would in fact become involved in if the Freedom to Farm Bill is passed, namely market analysts.

Within the Freedom to Farm bill debates, then, we can draw out the stated goals of its proponents—that is, the removal of commodity price supports and other forms of state subsidy. More importantly, we can note how this policy shift was predicated on a revisioning of the marketplace as a space of pure economic transactions between individuals. In the process, the more traditionally dominant understanding of the marketplace as a complex web of power relations between individuals and groups was dismissed as unnecessarily emotive and unrealistic in today’s global economy. The triumphant emergence of Freedom to Farm advocates’ understanding of the marketplace wrought a simultaneous revisioning of the two other spatial constructs at work in agricultural legislation—namely, the “rural” and the “U.S.”—prompting the delineation of a particular set of roles not only for farmers, but also for rural residents in general and even for the state itself.

Retaining a Rural Space

In the face of concerted opposition from southern and northeastern farm-state Republicans, a joint Republican House-Senate conference group subsequently added amendments to the proposed bill to retain supports for dairy, cotton, sugar, and peanuts. The draft legislation was then placed within the proposed Budget Reconciliation Bill (HR2491), a maneuver that emphasizes just how much this “freedom to farm” bill was played out within broader-scale debates over government spending. The Budget Reconciliation bill was itself subsequently vetoed by President Clinton in December of 1995. Reintroduced into the Senate as stand-alone Bill S1541, however, and amended to provide not only for nutrition programs, but also for a host of new conservation and rural development programs, the bill was eventually passed. In March, the House also passed Freedom to Farm legislation (HR2854) with further amendments to retain dairy, sugar, and peanut supports. Finally, after a House-Senate conference ironed out differences between S1541 and HR2854, President Clinton signed the Freedom to Farm Bill into law in April 1996. Table 3 presents the key provisions of this legislation.

This history, somewhat at odds with the free-market philosophy espoused by the Republican party, points to the continued significance of the “rural” as a space within which farming is understood to take place. In the Senate debates, we can draw out how the understanding of the marketplace noted above is fine-tuned so as to accommodate a positive framing of the rural. First, the rural is imagined as a combat arena, wherein the heroic farmer is pitted against a merciless Nature. Hence, farming is framed as an “exceptional” economic activity. Second, the inhabitants of the rural (farmers and nonfarmers) are noted as morally superior (by default to their urban counterparts), in that financial handouts can be considered as investments, as opposed to welfare. According to Senator Dole, for example, farmers are exposed to the vagaries of an unpredictable and uncaring Nature:

[N]ow we are trying to have a little safety net here to make certain that there will be some protection. Farming looks pretty to some. But we know the tremendous amount of work required by not only farmers but their families. . . . Farmers make a lot of sacrifices. They have hailstorms, winter kill, a lot of other things to contend with. Sometimes they do not have any crop at all, sometimes they live from crop to crop, and sometimes they borrow money every year.

The characterization Senator Dole provides here is of a small-scale family-run operation out on the frontier, as opposed to a corporate enterprise. Within this framing, the
argument that some farmers may go bankrupt because of their participation in a capitalist economy riddled with power relations is forestalled because it simply does not fit with the given terms of debate. The notion of a transcendent marketplace, then, is supplemented within this subsidiary debate on subsidies: while farming as a series of economic transaction is conceptually distinct from any broader social context, it takes place in rural areas where Nature can provide both opportunities and obstacles.

This presentation of the farmer as hero was certainly in accord with the broader-scale methodological individualism at work in the Republican party. However, for those Republicans committed to cutting back state intervention in the marketplace, regardless of such "real-life" considerations, these views were ideologically incorrect. As House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) intoned, "Obviously, it is unfair for one part of agriculture to block reform in its programs as we are pursuing change across the rest of American agriculture" (Hosansky 1995e, 3523).

Representative Christopher Shays (R-CT), however, was clearly aware of the positive connotations associated with farming, and the impact of this on legislators, when he noted that: "This [series of subsidies] is a system that I believe most Republicans would find repugnant if it did not have the name farmer attached to it" (Hosansky 1996d, 543). For those Republicans in favor of providing some form of subsidy for the farming sector, it was the moral superiority of the "rural" over and against the "urban" that justified this deviation from libertarian economics.

Crucially, as noted above, for supporters of the bill, class-based differences were understood not to exist within the marketplace, within which all are "free" to calculate the risks involved in commerce and to produce and trade to the best of their abilities. On the basis of this ability alone, individuals will either succeed or fail. For many Republicans, personal failure is located firmly in the urban. This active emplacement of failure became evident in the Senate discussions over the "welfare" character of the proposed fixed payments to farmers. Such payments would uncouple state subsidies from actual production and, thereby, from the operation of the market. In legitimizing this position, many Republican supporters of the bill made extensive use of an urban/rural binary. Fixed payments to farmers, they argued, are a form of investment, rather than welfare. Because farmers are efficient, driven, productive members of society, the money would not be wasted (as it is, the argument implied, by other, urban-based groups), but would be put to good use. According to Senator Kit Bond (R-MO), such payments would be anything but welfare: "Farmers can manage a predictable

seven-year income stream... just as well or better than Washington can do it on their behalf... I know there are some who may call this welfare... Farmers know it is not welfare and most senators do not consider the existing program welfare." And, for Senator Grassley, investment was quite different from welfare:

The legislation that is before us will guarantee an investment... in rural America... an investment in rural America at a time when there is a tremendous transition from the agriculture of the last half of the 20th century to the more free market, international trade-oriented agriculture of the 21st century... Some people have said on the floor of this body that we are giving welfare to farmers... How ironic...

By invoking the spatial construct of the rural, Grassley gained currency from that strand of agrarianism that positions rural residents as morally superior to their urban counterparts. Even the nonfarming inhabitants of the rural would be worthy of the $6 billion earmarked for Rural Development Programs, as outlined in Table 3.

This positive, discursive framing of the rural was echoed by Democrats Wellstone and Pryor, who, as noted above, had also commented on the fundamental role of farmers within American civil life. Underlying their particular deployment of agrarianism, however, was the assumption that social order and harmony are derived from a rural economy constituted by small-scale, family farms. Threatening this is a corporate culture nourished in the cities, the logic of which must be opposed if America is to retain not only its own democratic ideological foundations, but also its flagship status as the global advocate and defender of democracy. For Senator Pryor, subsidized agricultural commodities given as overseas relief by the U.S. government had fostered democracy elsewhere in the world, such that "we pass this legislation we will be going on a cheap drunk. We will be sorry and we will rue the day that we totally dismantled the farm programs that have served this country and this world so well."

Key to many of the suggested programs in the FAIR Act was the fostering of "human capital." Over the past ten years, the term "human capital" has gained visibility in urban-based, business circles (see, for example, Kanter 1993; Davenport 1999; Dess and Picken 1999). It can be summarized as a loose catch-all term for the practical knowledge, acquired skills, and learned abilities embodied in an individual that make him or her potentially productive and thus equip him or her to earn income in exchange for labor. The term also builds on conservative notions of what constitutes appropriate "personal" development, in that it valorizes a particular set of moral behavior and attitudes, including independence, motivation, and flexibility. Within this understanding of
commerce, varying levels of past investment in human capital provide an explanation for the size of wage and salary differentials among individuals.

This emphasis on individual development is certainly in accord with the Republican argument, noted above, that farmers should be allowed to operate as agricultural entrepreneurs. The rhetoric used to describe this model of economic performance, however, has clear origins in an urban-based corporate culture. It is surely ironic that in the midst of this positive framing of the rural, there is this simultaneous characterization of rural residents (farmers and nonfarmers) as lagging behind their (successful) urban counterparts in regard to knowing how to work within the marketplace. According to the logic of Freedom to Farm, the role of the state is to facilitate the diffusion of (universally applicable) business-management ideas and practices into this space, thereby ensuring appropriate rural development.

Taken as a whole, the FAIR Act can be understood as a somewhat paradoxical articulation of the “rural,” in that while it involves a clear desire to retain a distinctiveness for this spatial construct, the traditional means by which this is accomplished—state support for the family farm—is no longer acceptable. Disattached from this traditionally positive signifier in the Freedom to Farm debates, the rural has, instead, been framed as a space made distinct by its current lack of something—namely, a corporate culture. This rendering of space is effectively accomplished via the argument that business strategies developed in urban areas are not only the key to progress, but also transportable to a countryside inhabited by potential entrepreneurs. Paradoxically, by arguing for the retention of some form of subsidy for rural areas, the bill’s supporters, by default, characterized the urban as a morally inferior space wherein personal failure could and did exist. Hence, in advocating such a business model, Freedom to Farm supporters were implicitly pushing for the “down side” of such economic practices to diffuse from the urban to the rural. By locating failure firmly within the individual, however, advocates were able to sidestep responsibility for such an outcome. While we may note, in the human-capital rhetoric, an echo of the technocratic ideals of the Country Life Movement active at the turn of the twentieth century, the goal of agricultural legislation is no longer “better farming, better living, better business,” but simply better business.

Revisioning an American Space

Though the family farm clearly lost its “anchor” position in debates over the character of farming, the importance of an “American” space embodied in the form of the nation-state was not similarly diminished. Indeed, the most explicit and certainly taken-for-granted binary to cut across party line rhetoric was “us” versus “them,” or the U.S. versus the rest of the world. The manner in which this was accomplished did, however, vary according to how the international marketplace was construed. For Grassley, for example, Freedom to Farm would “unfetter” American farmers, allowing them to undertake economic transactions across the globe:

Not only does [this bill] guarantee an investment in agriculture of about $43.5 billion over the next seven years in this transition from a government-controlled agriculture to a free market agriculture, but it goes from an agriculture system inclined toward domestic production for domestic consumption to a farm program for production to meet the competition and the demand of international trade. There is no more important time to do that.

Supporters of the bill noted the financial opportunities presented by current world demand and the unique position of American farmers to take advantage of them. As Lugar observed, “In this particular year of the farm bill, suddenly, export demand took off in a very dynamic way. The Chinese changed from becoming exporters to very strong importers. That provided new opportunities for the United States in Southeast Asia, but our traditional customers in Europe and in Japan come in for much stronger orders across the border.” The argument went on to consider the fact that these opportunities were only made possible, however, when the privileged position of foreign competitors was countered by the U.S. government’s active intervention in the global economy. In order to achieve this marketplace of pure economic transactions, protectionist barriers erected by foreign governments had to be removed. In contrast to the earlier Eisenhower administration’s trade policy, which was shaped in large part by Cold War geopolitics, by 1996 countries were to be considered “friendly” if they were willing to open up to American exports. If countries did not do so, then the U.S. government would be required to bring pressure to bear through sanctions.22 Significantly, the argument that “foreign” farmers are a competitive threat because of their abilities to calculate the risks involved in commerce was strikingly absent.

Opponents of the bill also noted subsidized foreign competitors as a threat. The proposed solution, however, was to weld American farmers into a trading bloc and subsidize their efforts to penetrate foreign markets. Speaking specifically to the bill’s cap on payments to foster markets overseas, Boxer stated:

The Market Promotion Program is an important tool in expanding markets for our agricultural products. The Export
### Table 3. Key Provisions of the 1996 Farm Bill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Payments/Savings</th>
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| Direct payments              | Agricultural Department will offer to sign seven-year "production flexibility contracts" with farmers of wheat, corn, cotton, rice, sorghum, barley, and oats. Eligible farmers must have participated in government programs in at least one of the past five years. The contracts will guarantee farmers fixed, declining payments every year based on 85% of their base acreage and program yield, regardless of market conditions. Payments will be apportioned on a per-bushel basis, based on how much farmers received in subsidies over the past five years. | Total annual fixed payments:  
• 1996: $5.6 billion  
• 1997: $5.4 billion  
• 1998: $5.8 billion  
• 1999: $5.6 billion  
• 2000: $5.1 billion  
• 2001: $4.1 billion  
• 2002: $4.0 billion  
Gradual savings  
Estimated increase in revenue of $250 million  
A drop in market prices will reduce income derived from payments made on marketing loans |
| Commodity loans              | Loan rates for wheat and feed grains will be capped at 1995 levels. Loans will be set at 85% of the average of the past five years, excluding the highest and the lowest, up to the cap. Rice, cotton, and soybeans will also be at 85%. The agricultural secretary will be allowed to reduce those loans by no more than 10%.  
New loans will be increased by 1%  
Payments on marketing loans will be linked to market conditions and not capped, as under present law. | Gradual savings |
| Planting flexibility         | Participating farmers will be allowed to plant any program crop on their base acreage while receiving payments. They cannot, however, plant fruits, vegetables, or potatoes, except in areas with a history of these crops. In these cases, payments will be reduced by one acre for each contract acre planted. Double cropping with fruit, vegetables, or potatoes in areas with a history of this practice will be allowed without penalty. | Immediate savings |
| Land-idling programs         | Acreage reduction programs are repealed.                                                                                                                                                                       | Immediate savings |
| Price supports               | Supports for butter, cheese, and powdered milk will be phased out over four years, to be replaced with a recourse loan program. Marketing allotments on cane and beet are repealed, while sugar loan rates will be frozen.  
Quotas on peanuts are repealed, while loans will be frozen for seven years  
Supports for honey are repealed  
Tobacco will continue to receive price supports.                                                                                           | Gradual savings over four years  
No net cost  
Save an estimated $412 million over seven years  
Immediate savings  
No savings |
| Crop insurance and risk      | Farmers can waive catastrophic crop insurance.  
Emergency Feed Assistance repealed  
Agriculture Secretary may develop pilot programs to determine whether trading in the futures and options markets can be used by producers to reduce the risk of price fluctuations. Establishment of Office of Risk Management | Save an estimated $153 million over seven years due to reduced liability  
Save an estimated $520 million  
Administrative costs |
| Trade                        | Food for Peace continued  
Export Enhancement Program capped annually  
Market Promotion Program capped.                                                                                                           | Funds increased from $13.5 to $28 million  
Payment:  
• 1996: $350 million  
• 1997: $250 million  
• 1998: $500 million  
• 1999: $550 million  
• 2000: $579 million  
• 2001: $478 million  
• 2002: $478 million  
Annual payment of $90 million |

(continued)
Table 3. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Payments/Savings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>Seven new conservation programs established</td>
<td>Estimated cost of $650 million over seven years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>Food Stamp Program extended to end of fiscal year 1997</td>
<td>Estimated cost of $6 billion over seven years. Of that, over $4 billion will consist of grants for water and waste treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>Guaranteed and direct loans increased</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural development</td>
<td>Nine new programs established, including the Fund for Rural America, the Rural Community Advancement Program, the Telemedicine and Distant Learning Program, and the Rural Venture Capital Demonstration Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Research, extension and education programs reauthorized through fiscal year 1997</td>
<td>Estimated annual cost of $2.3 billion</td>
</tr>
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Enhancement Program is used to subsidize export sales to more than 80 foreign countries. It is the primary means by which the United States has attempted to meet price competition in world markets when domestic policies supported prices above the world market or to counter subsidies used by foreign competitors.

For Boxer, the international marketplace was constituted by an even more complex web of power-laden relationships than was the domestic marketplace; the role of the state, however, was the same, in that it had to monitor these relationships and intervene to ensure some measure of equality.

Regardless of the proposed mechanisms by which this "level" international playing field could be achieved, what is striking about these calls for a competitive farming sector is the fundamental nationalism involved. Both supporters and opponents of the Freedom to Farm Bill understood the U.S. federal policy as the appropriate apparatus to regulate the international marketplace and ensure the success of U.S. farmers. Despite the diverse international flows of capital, labor, commodities, and information that characterize capitalism, such that it is difficult to sustain the notion that there exists a purely "American" enterprise, an explicit emotional commitment existed in the Freedom to Farm debates and in the FAIR Act to protecting an American nation-state consisting of citizens and their democratically elected government. Leaving aside the complex question of how "Americanness" as a national identity has been constructed and maintained over the centuries, we would merely note here that the defining characteristic associated with Americanness in these debates was vulnerability. American farmers and farming were consistently rendered as under threat from "foreign" competitors. This concern was undoubtedly fueled by a combination of factors, including the contemporaneous success of Asian economies in the international marketplace and the continued integration of trading blocs such as the European Union (EU). We suggest that, by emphasizing the relatively strong position of "foreign" business interests supported and enabled by their governments, U.S. senators were able to position their own institution as a necessary part of international trade relations. Logically redundant in the abstract world of the marketplace envisioned by Freedom to Farm supporters, the U.S. government existed to counteract the presence of these foreign governments. Ironically, what is signified here is not an intrinsic value to being "American," but rather a defensive positioning of citizens and government as nonforeign.23

This constant iteration of the need to defend American farmers points to a significant undercurrent in the Freedom to Farm debates, namely, the fate of the nation-state in a global economy. As long as the family farm was accepted as the fundamental building block of American democratic society, the state could be presented as the embodiment of this holistic entity. As noted above, however, the family farm was summarily dismissed as the fulcrum around which farming, the rural, and society at large are organized. In the process, that vision of society as a complex web of power relations was also dismantled and replaced with the vision of a collection of potential entrepreneurs, some more able than others to participate successfully in commerce. If the family farm was no longer the bedrock of American society, then the state as the protector of the family farm would lose some of its former identity. Instead, the U.S. state was presented as the entity responsible for guaranteeing and protecting individualism, both at home and abroad. It is interesting to note that while broader-scale debates in academia and business dwell on globalization and the "hollowing out" of the
nation state, institutions such as the U.S. Senate seem to be staking out their claim to existence and authority on the continued presence of "other" nation-states and the perceived need to counteract "their" policies and practices.

Conclusion

According to its supporters, the Freedom to Farm Bill was a "watershed" development in agricultural legislation, in that it would transform the entire sector. In light of the fact that this was the first time in forty years that the House of Representatives had been controlled by the Republican Party, this insistence on the revolutionary character of Freedom to Farm is not too surprising. However, since the signing into law of the FAIR Act in 1996, various groups have continued to lobby for the return of state subsidies, particularly in light of the downward turn in agricultural prices. At the time Freedom to Farm was being debated, crop prices were generally high, and Asian markets were expected to provide an expanding outlet for American farm products. Since 1998, however, farm prices have declined, and Asian markets have contracted in response to a regional economic recession. The state has responded, once again, to the spectacle of American "family farmers" in distress. In 1998, for example, Congress allocated about $6 billion to agricultural appropriations above the monies already committed in the FAIR Act. Most of the monies went to the Commodity Credit Corporation, which funds price supports and loan programs, while $4.2 million consisted of emergency funding for farmers suffering financial hardship due to natural disasters or poor export markets (Congressional Quarterly Weekly 1998, 2769). As one agricultural economist remarked to us at the time, as a means of weaning farmers off state subsidies, "Freedom to Farm is a failure" (J. Nyberg, agricultural economist, Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations, interview, 1 October 1999).

By May 2002, even the "family farm" had been resurrected as a positive frame of reference, as Republican President George Bush signed a farm bill that earmarked more than $100 billion for farm subsidy payments over a ten-year period. With two-thirds of payments going to just 10 percent of the largest farming enterprises, growing primarily corn, soybean, wheat, rice and cotton, Bush promised that "[t]he farm bill will strengthen the farm economy over the long term. It helps farmers' independence and preserves the farming way of life for generations. It helps America's farmers and so helps America" (USDA 2002).

Rather than establishing a "revolutionary" pathway for U.S. farming, what the 1996 Freedom to Farm debates highlight is just how relational our understandings of farmers and farming are. As discussed in the historical section above, agrarianism has a complex genealogy and has been utilized by a diverse range of groups through time and over space as a means of upscaling the notions of both a close-knit network of family farmers and a collection of agricultural entrepreneurs. In 1996, this discourse intersected with another, just as pervasive within government circles—a libertarian discourse on the rights of the individual and the appropriate role of the state—to powerful effect. The ensuing emphasis on "freedom" to farm was translated into policy in the form of the removal of commodity supports, a legislative decision that has had an impact on the daily lives of millions of farmers and nonfarmers alike.

The particular geography of the 1996 Freedom to Farm debates, however, wherein extreme Republican ideas on free trade were successfully upscaled to become federal agricultural policy, has been indicated rather than highlighted in our analysis. We have intended to demonstrate the broader geography of American agrarian discourse, constituted from a range of interest groups (such as the National Reform Movement, the Grange, and the Country Life Movement) but also constitutive of cadres of experts emplaced and authoritative agencies (such as the USDA and land-grant colleges). In doing so, we have limited our analysis to American actors and institutions. In practice, of course, the circulation of ideas and assumptions concerning American farming does not cease at the U.S. border. Over time, international groups—such as the World Trade Organization and the EU, as well as other nation-states—have been influential in the particular framing of American agricultural policy, while the form and function of such entities has, in turn, been affected by American farming interests and concerns.

By focusing in depth on the semantic geography of one discursive site through which knowledge concerning U.S. farming has been (and continues to be) articulated and rearticulated—the U.S. Senate—we hope to have drawn out how such sites "fix" the meaning of constructs. We have noted how the 1996 Senate debates "placed" farmers within three imagined spaces—the market, the rural, and the U.S.—as a means of demarcating who farmers are, the appropriate practices associated with farming, and the appropriate role of the state in regard to the farming sector. Whereas critics of the bill understood "real" farming to take place in a complex web of social relations clustered around family farms and communities, supporters envisioned a marketplace of individualized agricultural entrepreneurs informed by a corporate business culture and undertaking pure economic transactions. The latter vision proved triumphant and was transposed into policy as the
removal of state-sponsored subsidies. For some Republican senators, the rural was further understood as a positive space, inhabited by heroic farmers struggling against an unpredictable and uncaring Nature and other worthwhile citizens. This affirmation of the moral superiority of the rural was transposed into a series of commodity-based subsidies and a set of fixed payments for the farming sector, as well as a number of Rural Development Initiatives. Last but not least, both supporters and critics of the bill posited a vulnerable American space over and against the negative reach of other nation-states and supranational entities such as the EU. In passing the Freedom to Farm bill, the U.S. Senate allotted itself the task of supervising not only the national, but also the global marketplace.

As we look to the next round of debates on U.S. agricultural policy, this last imagined space looms large. Whereas in 1996, U.S. policy-makers sought to establish control over the international marketplace by upscaling the principles of free trade, the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act is heavily protectionist. As Representative Larry Combest (R-TX), Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, noted, “This is for rural America. This is not for rural Mexico. This is not for rural Canada, and this is not for rural Europe” (quoted in Bluestein 2002, A24). Will this inward gaze, which neatly cuts America off from the rest of the world, become even more explicit in agricultural policy? Or will the U.S. government once again use agricultural policy to drive a global mission?

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the constructive comments offered by seven anonymous reviewers on previous drafts of this article.

Notes

1. This separation is for analytic purposes only. Clearly, given the poststructuralist framing of the essay, there is no intent to ally the geography of discourse with the “material” realm, which somehow “produces” such discourse. The discursive sites wherein knowledge is actively produced—and the “social,” “political,” and “economic” processes within which they are embedded—are just as much the product of social construction. In similar vein to legislation, such sites are usually taken for granted, and are rarely the focus of investigation into how they were constituted.

2. On the play of binaries, see Willems-Braun (1997).

3. In general, poststructuralism as an organizing framework for discussion is much more visible in overviews of the discipline (see, for example, Dixon and Jones 1996, 1998) and subfields such as cultural geography (see, for example, Willems-Braun 1997; Sparke 1998) and urban geography (see, for example, Clarke 1997). And its application to specifically agricultural subjects is more apparent outside of the discipline. In sociology, for example, an interest in deconstructing agricultural legislation has emerged (DuPuis 1999), while other analyses of the construction of rural discourse have addressed environmental and nature issues (see Bell 1994; DuPuis and Vandergeest 1996). In history, Bradley’s (1995) deconstruction of agrarian mythology illuminates the connections between broader-scale ideologies and the production of agricultural policy.

4. For example, Grant (1979) notes that southern congressional leaders were heavily influential in shaping agricultural legislation in the 1920s and early 1930s, and Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier (1979) discuss the significant involvement of southerners in farm policy from 1933 to 1961. According to Saloutous (1979), the American Farm Bureau Federation gained its earliest strength in the Midwest and East. Finally, whereas farmer unrest in the South became less visible and demonstrative after World War II, in the Midwest “farmers seem to have been in a perpetual state of agitation” (Saloutous, 380).

5. California agriculture, for example, differs considerably from agriculture in most of the country in both the commodities it produces (specialty fruits and vegetables) and in organizational form (heavily corporate employing wage laborers). Farmers are not heavily subsidized, and, according to Vaught (1997) their discursive understandings of farms, farming, and farmers/farm workers, while certainly definitive at the regional level, are not formative of post–World War II federal agricultural policy.

6. We emphasize that in this article we are dealing only with selective circuits of knowledge. Certainly one could considerably broaden the discursive geography within which knowledge concerning U.S. farming is constructed, drawing in contributions from other groups such as congressional committees (particularly the Appropriations and Budget committees) and lobbyists representing a variety of interests (e.g., the Farm Bureau, social reformers/activists, environmental groups). The policies and pronouncements highlighted in this article are but one particular nexus of meanings, indicating the infinite discursive geography within which farmers and farming are “placed.”

7. Hurt (1994, 73) argues that the agrarian ideal of American farming and rural life is “more fiction than fact”: it bears little resemblance to the actual nature and organization of farming in the U.S. and is highly exclusionary. For example, “[S]harecroppers and tenants . . . had no freedom of production or independence born of landownership. . . . For them, agrarian life meant hardship, poverty, and subordination so that the landowner could enjoy wealth, independence, and leisure” (Hurt, 74). Furthermore, while “agrarian life offered prosperity and civil rights to men, it promised only hard work and continued subservience for rural women, white and black, slave and free” (Hurt, 74).

8. These included The Patrons of Husbandry (“The Grange”) in the 1870s, the Farmers’ Alliance in the mid-1880s, and the Populist Party in the 1890s.

9. Such concerns were premised upon the belief that a dynamic agrarian sector is necessary to fuel industrialization by facilitating the transfer of labor and capital from the countryside to the city. If agriculture lags, so will industrialization (see Bonnen 1992).
10. Efforts to bolster household production in the nineteenth century were connected to fears about a peasant class reasserting itself in the rural landscape (see Bonnen 1992; Danbom 1995).

11. The plan was to set a target or hypothetical price at income parity in advance and then make up the difference between the actual price received on the market with a direct payment to the farmer (see Bradley 1995).

12. The grain embargo against the Soviet Union in 1980 further cut into the markets of U.S. farmers. Despite declining market outlets, the 1981 farm bill encouraged continued overproduction by setting target prices above plummeting market prices. From 1982 on, Ronald Reagan's economic policy of cutting taxes and fighting inflation with high interest rates was blamed for declining farm prices that were most pronounced in food and feed grains (Rapp 1988). This forced farmers to service massive debts with reduced incomes. Whereas farm prices had stood at 71 percent parity in 1979, by 1986 they had declined to 51 percent of parity—a lower level than during the Great Depression.

13. According to Barlett (1993), some farmers described their current crisis as worse than the Great Depression, primarily because the costs of production and debt had risen tremendously since the 1930s.

14. Films such as Country, the Farm Aid Concert in September 1985, and other media events brought the crisis to the attention of the public, which responded with support for government programs to assist farmers (see, for example, Anthan 1987).

15. One of the most visible and influential of such coalitions was the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, which operated out of Des Moines, Iowa.

16. As Roberts and Dean (1994) note, an understanding of the place of farmers within the broader environmental system was also embedded in this legislation, at the behest of the Conservation Coalition.

17. In this section, we primarily utilize comments made during the Senate debate that appear in a special issue of Congressional Digest 75 (4) (April 1996), which will not be individually referenced. Any quotations drawn from other sources are referenced separately.

18. The emphasis on the "individual" as opposed to "society" has, of course, a long history (see Kingdom 1992).

19. In 1995, Wellstone had proposed a targeted approach to marketing that would provide planting flexibility as well as long-term protection from uncertainties of weather and markets by raising loan rates and targeting benefits to family-sized farmers.

20. For some, no argument could justify state subsidization on this scale. According to the lone Republican to vote against the bill, Senator McCain (R-AZ): "We are acquiescing to the well-organized interests who are satisfied with nothing but a bigger trough from which to feed" (Hosansky 1996, 874).

21. Synonyms for "human capital" include "knowledge worker," "knowledge capital" and "intellectual capital." The notion that human beings may be regarded as analogous to physical capital (where capital is defined as a produced means of production) can be traced back to Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations (1776) 2000. The term "human capital" was more recently coined by economists Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) to draw an analogy between investing resources to increase the stock of ordinary physical capital (tools, machines, buildings, etc.) in order to increase the productivity of labor and investing in the education or training of the labor force as an alternative means of accomplishing the same general objective of higher productivity. Clearly, it is the abstraction of various industrial practices to the level of costs that allows the transplanting of such a strategy from one context to another.

22. U.S. companies, particularly those involved in agriculture, have used Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act to petition the government to intervene in trade relations. If it is found that "hidden" barriers to American exports exist, the U.S. can choose to impose sanctions against the country involved. Of course, U.S. legislation also allows for the protection of the "domestic" market. U.S. companies can appeal to the U.S. International Trade Commission for protection if they believe subsidized foreign imports are "unfairly" undercutting their market. Tariff-rate quotas can also be sustained under the 1994 General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs of the World Trade Organization—especially important in limiting imports of beef, sugar, peanuts, and many dairy products — and under the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

23. The pervasiveness of this us/them binary can be seen in subsequent comments on the 1996 FAIR Act. In the year following the passage of the act, for example, Gary Hanman (1997), Chairman of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC), stated in his address at the NCFC annual meeting:

While a farm bill is always a challenge, it was even more so this past year as a result of . . . an increasing awareness that U.S. agriculture must compete in a global economy . . . The key to the success of the new farm bill and the future growth of our industry depends heavily on U.S. agricultural exports . . . It's not enough to be economically competitive. Our policies and programs must also be competitive with those of other countries.


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