CHAPTER 10

ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING, ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND FARM FAMILY SUCCESSION IN BRITAIN

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Introduction

This chapter examines the changing aspirations of farm households in rural Britain, focusing upon two aspects of contemporary farming - the phenomenon of farm succession, whereby the farm is passed on within the farm family from one generation to the next, and the changing environmental sensibilities among farm households. Almost all farm businesses in Britain can be described as ‘family farms’ in the sense that the principals of the business are related by kinship or marriage, and business ownership is combined with managerial control (Gasson et al., 1988; Gasson and Errington, 1993). An important element in the ethos of family farming is continuity of occupation through succession. Once it is agreed that a younger member of a farm family will take over the business from their parents, succession typically emerges as a framing principle around which medium and long-term planning of the business takes place, often crucially affecting the way the family views the business. As Symes points out, a commitment to family succession ‘can imbue a sense of confidence and security and thus help to preserve harmony within the household’ (1990, p.280).

Economic restructuring has dramatically altered the context for agriculture in Britain since the 1970s. Farming’s profitability has been squeezed, as has its economic power within an increasingly oligopolistic food system. Public policy has shifted in emphasis from state support for a productivist and expansionist agriculture to the reduction of subsidised commodity prices towards world-market levels and the introduction of supply controls to tackle over-production. In this changing context, the desire to maintain family control and pass on an economically secure farm business to the next generation seems to be being eroded. For example, Harrison (1975) found that three-quarters of English farmers he surveyed in the late 1960s were planning to pass on their businesses to their heirs. These results can be
compared with those of a series of studies carried out by researchers at University College London during the mid-1980s in five different farming regions (see Marsden et al., 1989; 1992). When surveyed farmers were asked whether it was expected that the farm would be passed on to the next generation in the family, 66 percent of those who felt able to respond one way or the other said yes. The proportion was only 55 per cent in the study area where agriculture was under the greatest economic pressure, but was 77 per cent in the most agriculturally prosperous of the five study areas. Related surveys in 1991 found that only 58 per cent of farms were being managed with a succession to the next generation planned for (Ward and Lowe, 1994). These findings would appear to suggest that the falling profitability of some parts of the agricultural sector since the late 1960s, but more particularly since the mid-1980s, has gradually undermined confidence in the industry, and the proportion of farms where succession is planned is diminishing. Indeed, a survey of 26,000 UK farm businesses in 1991 found that almost a half (48 per cent) of respondents had no nominated successor for their farm (National Westminster Bank, 1992).

Succession and family farming

The dynamics of family enterprises stem from the interplay of household and business - production is organised through kinship and property and labour are combined. The unity of kin group and work group creates at least dual roles for each member and patterns a division of labour and inequalities of ownership and control based on gender and age relations (Whatmore, 1991). A commitment to succession helps to create certainty and common purpose in the running of a farm, and so helps farm families in coping with the contradictions that can arise between the family and the business, between the short and the long-term, and between individual and collective goals. These contradictions have been explored by Harriet Friedmann (1986) who has argued that,

the unity of property and labour in simple commodity production is contradictory in capitalist societies because it internalises within one person or family the structured conflict between property owners and labourers, who are usually related as employers and employees (Friedmann, 1986, p.53).

Succession is thus more than simply a social or biological fact, where the business is either passed on to the next generation or is not. It is also a goal whereby farm families seek to integrate, over the long-term, the management of a business and of the family assets. Succession links together the key decisions and negotiations during the family life cycle with the strategic decisions about the development of the business. It is a goal through which farm families manage the fissiparous pressures upon them. The reciprocal obligations it expresses help to bind family members together, within and across the generations, as they seek to accommodate the family life cycle to the vagaries of the business-cycle and overcome the contradictions between property and labour.