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Their Daily Bread

Land Grant Universities and Their Continuing Challenge by G. Lester Anderson

Review by: Richard J. Margolis

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friend and I never talked about such things back in 1969. With a motorcycle in the kitchen, it was a little crowded for straight talk.

—Duncan Newcomer

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DUNCAN NEWCOMER, a poet and story writer, has a practice for counseling and therapy in Simsbury, Connecticut.

## Their Daily Bread

*Land Grant Universities and Their Continuing Challenge* edited by G. Lester Anderson. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 354 pages, \$15.

We are in the presence of one of academia's favorite devices: the self-serving symposium. One should not ask a chicken to assess the quality of her eggs, nor should one expect a brood of land-grant professors and administrators to weigh the worth of institutions atop which they sit. Still, allowing for the biases, we have something to learn from these essays.

Tradition and this book tell us that the name of the land-grant game is equality. Lincoln signed the Morrill Act—the land-grant universities' birthright—in 1862, between the two battles of Bull Run, and suddenly, before you could say Mark Hopkins, American higher education had shucked 200 years of unabashed elitism and was off and loping in search of the holy grail, what we have come to call equal opportunity in education. The search continues today, but as this collection suggests, not always along lines that Morrill and his followers had foreseen. What the land-grant universities began others may have to finish.

Justin Smith Morrill (he was a Congressman from Vermont) envisioned an America in which the educationally meek would inherit a piece of the earth. His bill set aside for sale in every state parcels of federal land, the proceeds to be used "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in several pursuits and professions of life." By "industrial classes" Congress meant the sons and daughters—in those days, mostly sons—of farmers and workers; the curriculum Morrill had in mind was to focus on agriculture and the mechanic arts. That part of the record thus appears to support current revisionist doctrine, which holds that

universal education was just a capitalist device for training and brainwashing future industrial workers.

But as David Madsen points out in an interesting historical overview, the act also called for the teaching of "other scientific and classical studies," thereby allowing humanism to enter the front gates of land-grant campuses. And Madsen cites the still respected formula of Andrew D. White, co-founder (with Ezra Cornell) of Cornell University: "Make your student a master-farmer, or a master-mechanic; but make him also a master-man."

So the questions that worried thoughtful educators back then were remarkably similar to those that nag educators today. In a chapter on "Liberal Learning," Maxwell H. Goldberg of Converse College in South Carolina limns the persistent dilemma: The Old World advocates, he writes, clung to a double standard of education, claiming that aristocrats should be exposed to "excellence, the pursuit of perfection, and quality," while "average people should get an average education." The New World reformers, meanwhile, promoted educational equality without compromise or leveling. The "true greatness of American higher education," asserted Cornelius W. de Kieweit, who was then president of the University of Rochester, rested on "the two pillars of quantity and quality." You paid your tuition and you took your choice.

From such ambiguous, acornlike beginnings developed our sprawling oak of a land-grant university network—71 institutions in all, ranging in size from the College of the Virgin Islands with its 617 students to the University of California with its enrollment of 122,606. Origins aside, the singular thing about these land-grant schools nowadays is that they differ hardly at all from their sister institutions, even the private ones. Yale's student body seems as diverse in class and race as that of the University of Connecticut at Storrs (one of the country's oldest land-grant schools); and "U-Conn's" admissions policies seem almost as elitist as Yale's.

For the most part, the "industrial classes" of today look neither to the land-grants nor to the private schools for educational aid and comfort—they look to the community colleges, America's latest entry in the diploma sweepstakes. The recent mushrooming of these more democratically oriented schools underlines the status-ridden inadequacies of the land-grant system.

In one important respect, however, the land-grant universities do differ markedly from all the others, and that is in the special relation they have to American agriculture. From the start, the land-grant system was seen as an opportunity to enlighten farmers about the complexities of their craft, and perhaps also to enlighten farmers' children about the world beyond their village. And though many objected—Harvard's Charles Eliot warned that governmental support of agricultural schools was symptomatic of a "deep-seated disease"—the idea grew and gained acceptance.

It stood to reason that farmers, whose methods a century ago were rather catch-as-catch-can, could benefit from learning the agricultural technology then emerging, and that the land-grant universities could best serve as teachers. This was the basis of the now familiar complementary triangle made up of the farmer, the land-grant school, and—through its research and "extension" efforts—the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). As a result, "land-grant" and "agricultural" have become more or less synonymous in the public's mind.

So far so good. But a funny thing happened on the way to agricultural prosperity: The new, expensive technology, requiring bigger farms and greater capital, forced farm families off the land and into the cities; in their wake came the big corporations, the forerunners of those vertically integrated behemoths we have come to think of collectively as *agribusiness*. The upshot has been a protracted rural economic disaster in which the rich get richer and the poor get the hell out of there. Since the turn of the century, while the national population has tripled, five million farms have disappeared and thousands of once prosperous villages have been abandoned. The villages that remain are often reduced to a frontierlike indigence—communities bereft of decent housing, clean water, adequate schools, and humane health facilities. Today, such are the inroads of agribusiness that more than half of all our food and fiber is produced by just 5 percent of our farms.

All this—the small-farm attrition, the rural misery, and the consequent stampede to urban slums—has occurred under the banner of "higher productivity"; and, as this book makes clear, higher productivity is a goal that both the USDA and the land-grant universities continue blindly to pursue. Thus we are told by Ralph K. Huitt, who directs the National Association of State Uni-

versities and Land-Grant Colleges, that thanks to land-grant research only 6 percent of our labor force need now be engaged in agriculture. "That leaves 94 percent," he adds, "to provide the services and other goods...which U.S. citizens use and enjoy." But nowhere in his happy formula does Huitt account for the millions of chronically unemployed, a large proportion of whom have rural backgrounds.

To be sure, many of the book's contributors appear to realize that something has gone sour in rural America; but by and large they deal with it the way Odysseus dealt with the hideous Gorgons—by turning their backs. The authors of Chapter 4, an essay on the future of land-grant colleges, provide a case in point. They write, "The science of agriculture that solves problems also creates them. Farmers with limited resources cannot compete today in specialized agriculture, and too often rural communities offer little or no employment alternatives." Promising stuff. But then the writers (Henry R. Fortmann, Jerome K. Pasto, and Thomas B. King—all in the employ of Pennsylvania State University) back off with an assurance that rural poor people have been getting lots of help from the USDA and the land-grants ever since

1955. This turns out to be not very reassuring. There are still 14 million people out there who have been officially defined as poor, and any casual observer can see they are getting very short shrift from the powers-that-be, both governmental and academic.

Similarly, David Madsen summons the courage to pose a fruitful question: "Have the colleges in a curious way been the enemy of the farmer as well as his friend?" But he, too, gets a case of the Gorgon jitters, for he quickly notes that "the land-grant institutions have long been sensitive to the broad spectrum of the farmers' needs beyond the mere increase in product yields."

That, as every surviving farm family knows, is hogwash. What the land-grant institutions have long been sensitive to are the profit requirements of agribusiness. Likewise the USDA, which works hand-in-glove with the land-grants. That department may once have been "peculiarly the people's agency," as Lincoln called it in 1864, but today it is peculiarly the instrument of the corporations. The truth is, much land-grant and USDA-sponsored research is wasted in the development of ever larger, ever more "efficient" machinery—like automatic tomato pickers, or gas-powered peach-fuzz removers—that

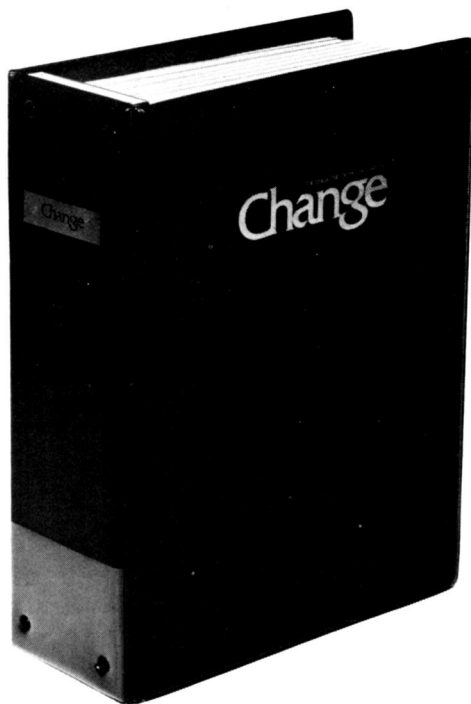
ultimately drive farm laborers out of work and independent farmers off the land. (The machines, the pesticides, and the chemical fertilizers—all offspring of land-grant research—also exacerbate the energy crisis. For every calorie of food the American farmer now produces, he expends eight calories of petro-chemical energy.)

Well, one hates to carp. But it does seem to this reader that the land-grant colleges have an obligation to see through a rural glass more darkly. Surely, if they hope to recapture a useful role in the lives of farmers and workers, the land-grants will have to submit to a more honest self-examination than this book achieves. It may be true that a steadfast look at the ugly, Medusa-like tragedy they and the USDA have wrought will turn them to stone; on the other hand, a little more candor might conceivably soften their hearts and begin to lead them back to their original purpose of exorcising the demon of American elitism.

The next book on land-grant universities, one hopes, will be written from the outside looking in.

—Richard J. Margolis

RICHARD J. MARGOLIS is *Change* Magazine's literary editor.



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