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# Quiescence Despite Privation: Explaining the Absence of a Farm Laborers' Movement in Southern Illinois

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We didn't have sharecroppers in here very much like we did in the South. Those families were paid a salary, which wasn't very much, and they always had a hard way to go, but most of the farmers, they had just about as hard a way to go as their tenants; their farms were small. . . . They [the tenants] all had their own garden, and own livestock and everything, and some of them even did do a little sharecropping. Most of them worked only so much a day for so much an hour. . . . But you know, one thing through here, whenever the work closed down in the fall of the year they didn't have any income. And they were really—[they had a] hard way to go. Now a lot of farmers that had more feeling for them would carry them through the winter, but I remember lots of them didn't have any income at all in the wintertime and it was really a big hardship.<sup>1</sup>

I wish here to query an absence, always a risky enterprise in social analysis. This absence, however, is striking for anyone working in southern Illinois, long the scene of militant and often violent labor struggles, particularly in the coal fields. It is the absence of any visible organized opposition by farm laborers to those who employed their labor, that is, the absence of any organized class struggle in agriculture.

The area I am concerned with lies just south of the coal fields, in Union County, widely known for its extensive fruit and vegetable production. From at least the late nineteenth century until the post-World War II period, the county's political economy was dominated by fruit and vegetable growers and by the manufacturers and merchants who served them. These growers relied on a large, primarily local, labor force, although during peak harvest seasons transient labor was also required. In addition, nearly one-third of all farm operators were tenants.

Portions of this essay appear in Adams (1994: ch. 6). An earlier version was presented at the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association, Atlanta, Georgia, October 13–16, 1994.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Charles Thomas (December 22, 1982, pp. 21–22).

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The conditions under which farm workers labored were often deplorable. Agricultural labor paid very poorly: Oral recollections recall wages ranging between \$1.00 and \$1.50 a day, working “can see to can’t see,” from the second decade of this century through the 1930s. In addition, the laborers’ living conditions tended to be poor. Many landowners supplied log or frame houses, often consisting of a single large room or a large room and small bedroom, with a kitchen lean-to attached to the back. Water often had to be carried from a distant spring, and toilet facilities were frequently absent.<sup>2</sup> Laborers converted chicken houses, corn cribs, and other structures for housing; some lived in tents made habitable by adding a floor. Many laborers—generally single men, but sometimes families—were housed in the owner’s home, as well. In contrast, their employers’ housing generally ranged from solid two-story homes to relatively elaborate Victorian-style houses.<sup>3</sup> A substantial number of landowners operated the farms on which they resided with wage labor and rented additional farms to landless tenants.<sup>4</sup> Before the New Deal, as one man described it, it was easy to tell who came from a “house of plenty” and who came from a “house of poor.”

Class distinctions also showed up in educational levels and in family size. Although census statistics do not disaggregate education by income or property-owning categories, oral accounts indicate that children of farm laborers tended to drop out of school early to work in the fields. In contrast, larger landowners tried to send their children to high school by moving close to town or by boarding their children with close relatives in town; and a considerable number went to college. Poor families tended to begin their families early and to have a large number of children, while property owners tended to marry later and have fewer children, giving rise to the aphorism, “The rich have the money and the poor have the kids.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For vivid descriptions of such housing, see Adams (1996).

<sup>3</sup> The region was not wealthy enough to support the extravagant mansions sometimes found in central Illinois (often from earnings from land speculation, rather than farming), but many truly fine homes were built, both by farmers and urban merchants, as well as manufacturers and professionals, who were also often absentee landlords.

<sup>4</sup> Accounts of these large landowners is anecdotal, taken from oral historical and other contemporary sources. It might be possible to determine the exact number of such landlords by studying property tax records, which would show ownership of several farms by one individual. Census schedules could then indicate which of these landowners resided on farms and which lived in town. This research remains to be done.

<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to strongly support this aphorism with empirical data that includes a detailed analysis of genealogical records or manuscript schedules of the census. However, intensive study of two county farms in 1990 (Adams, Stephens, and Rich 1990) strongly supports the general wisdom. One of these farms was an elite farm located close to the country’s business center. Between the founding of this farm in the 1850s and 1990, the family who owned it had five generations, while the tenant families whose genealogies we were able to document had six generations. As the aphorism predicted, family size tended to vary according to class, particularly in the last part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. According to the family genealogy, the founding couple (born in the 1820s) had nine children; of these, only six married, and bore an average of 1.2 children per family. The genealogy is incomplete after this generation,

Along with sharp differences in living standards between employers and workers, farm workers had many available models of class struggle. As early as 1875 workers in a soap factory in one of the county's towns struck for higher wages,<sup>6</sup> and throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the county paper carried frequent reports of militant coal and railroad strikes. Area farmers mobilized during the Granger Movement of the 1870s and again during the Populist movement of the 1890s (see Adams 1992) and formed enduring marketing and other organizations that welded them, along with town elites, into a self-conscious governing class. Elsewhere in the nation, particularly in California and the plantation South, laborers and croppers unionized (Majka and Majka 1982; Mooney and Majka 1995; Daniel 1981). But there was virtually no organizing by farm laborers, despite the great differentials of wealth between them and their employers, and the grueling and insecure nature of the work.<sup>7</sup>

#### SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORIES

The explanation for this absence of organized, class-conscious discontent, I argue, is complex, due to a combination of temporal, social-organizational, and normative factors. Most theories of social movements privilege the economic "moment." Relative deprivation and resource mobilization theories, as Zald observes (1992:329), "undertheorized the link of movements to social structure," focusing on "grievances" and on the ability to mobilize resources in strategies that focus those grievances in effective political action. Grounded in liberal economic theories using analyses of costs and benefits to the actors, these perspectives assimilate all forms of action to economic categories, seen as "resources." In a structural situation in which grievances might be anticipated and social resources could be available for mobilization, the absence of any recorded mobilizing efforts is left unexplained by such theories, however well they may apply to specific strategic actions of already mobilized people.

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but it appears that the son who inherited the farm was not atypical: He had only one son (born 1908) (his wife had a non-inheriting son by a previous marriage), and this son had only two children (born in the 1930s and early 1940s). Both these children left the farm as young adults; one returned as a widow with her only son. In contrast, during the same century we have no genealogical data for tenant families that corresponds to the first landowning generation, although it can be presumed that their birth rates, like most of their generation, were high. The only tenant family in the next generation for which we have data had 10 children. In the next generation, the 5 tenant families for which we have genealogical data averaged 6.2 children per family; the next generation, with 7 families documented, averaged 6.3 children per family. Only when these children left farming in the 1930s and 1940s did birth rates fall to an average of 2.7 per family for the 15 families for which we have data. Data are sketchy for the sixth generation, as people tended to scatter across the country; but birth rates appear to be congruent with national urban rates. Danbom notes (1995:123–4) the same phenomenon in the antebellum South, comparing cropper and planter families.

<sup>6</sup> Jonesboro *Gazette* (6 February 1875).

<sup>7</sup> One woman reported that the workers in her orchard came to her one year (in the 1930s or 1940s?) and threatened to form a union. She said that she called their bluff, refused to deal with them; and the protest collapsed.

In contrast, Marxists have focused on the direct relations of production as the determinants of political and other social actions. Classes, and putative class identities, are defined in terms of relations at the point of production, that is, within capitalism, as relations between the social categories of owners and workers.<sup>8</sup> Using this fundamental social analytic, the division between “non-cultivators” and “cultivators,” but applying the hypothesis testing methodologies of positive social science, Paige (1975) attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of agrarian political action. He focuses on the principal sources of income of these two great classes, that is, land, capital, and wages, and concludes that, if differences in relationship to the world system are factored in, these differences in sources of income ultimately determine differences in political behavior by both noncultivators (plantation and hacienda owners) and cultivators (serfs, sharecroppers, migratory laborers, wage workers, and small-holding operators). Despite the elegance of his study, Paige’s data base did not allow him to examine cases where structural conditions might have predicted political action when none occurred; further, the specific cases examined in depth indicate a wide range of intervening variables that substantially shaped the occurrence and form of specific political mobilizations by cultivators, drawing into question the economic determinisms that his theory required.

The role of other institutions, particularly the state, has long been central to debates within Marxism with theorists like Gramsci (1971), Poulantzas (1973), and Skocpol (1979) arguing that political institutions, particularly the state, created systems of determination distinct from strictly economic or class relations. “New social movement theory” and associated analyses influenced by French post-structuralism, feminism, and progressive ethnic movements, more rooted in the Marxist than the liberal neoclassical tradition, have attempted to open class analysis to other determinants, such as gender, race, and ethnicity (see, for example, Touraine 1966; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In these new readings of social relations, multiple, distinct systems of difference are imbricated upon one another (Hennesy 1993), without necessary determinism attributed to one or another set of unequal relationships.

I argue here that an understanding of the development of oppositional political forces, as well as the absence of such groupings in contexts where economically based theories would predict their occurrence, must be grounded in concrete analyses of the multiple institutions that organize and regulate social life—relations of production seen as multifaceted and multiply determined. Methodologically, this calls for a highly situated understanding of subject positions (Haraway 1988; Hartssock 1990, 1983), particularly the multiple institutionalized relations through which relatively deprived people carry

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of class in U.S. agriculture, see Banaji (1980), Goss, Rodefled, and Buttel (1980), Mooney (1988, 1986), and Rodefled (1978).

out their daily lives. These institutions include (but are not limited to) legal, gender, ethnic, age, family, and religious relations.

#### THE BASES FOR SOLIDARITIES

If the term class is to be used not simply to typify different observable strata of society but, rather, to be a concept that allows us to grasp some of the forces of historical change, it must point to a wider range of behaviors than social-structural locations. The term class, when used as a category salient to historical processes, must include the notion of class consciousness and, even more centrally, class solidarity (Thompson 1963; see also, using a more categorical definition of class, Weber 1946:184–5).

The criticisms of Marxist class analysis of the past three decades, as well as the practices of the people mobilized in the social movements of this period, have revealed that peoples' lives are organized by multiple, imbricated structures (or, better, to use Giddens' concepts (1979), "structurings"). These include the state (Poulantzas 1973; Skocpol 1979), relations among kin and putative kin, including but not limited to families (for example, Collins and Gimenez 1990; Roberts 1976; Rothstein 1986; Stack 1974), and the national, ethnic, racial, and religious solidarities mobilized by recent "identity politics" and older nationalist movements.

It has become apparent that virtually any set of social contiguities—what we might term institutions—has the potential to be mobilized for collective social action and that while some sets are more widely shared and powerfully marked than others, it is virtually impossible to predict political behavior. Social solidarities viewed this way generally extend beyond specific locales and are dynamic and relational rather than static and categorical, in contrast to functionalist modes of analysis used in traditional structural-functional community studies that reify geographical and structural locations. Therefore, by examining the multiple institutions through which social solidarities were created in the period under study, it is possible to explain why, despite great differences in wealth, no class movement arose in southern Illinois in the first third of this century.

#### CLASS STRUCTURE OF UNION COUNTY FARMING

Class analysis in the Marxist tradition has focused on the relations between the social categories that organize the direct relations of production: Specific classes (bourgeoisie, proletariat) specify structural locations. Using this definition, one can see that the structural conditions for creating a self-conscious class opposed to wealthy landowners were weakly developed. Two large categories of non-landed labor existed: propertyless laborers, and propertied tenants.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a large number of people worked intermittently as day

<sup>9</sup> Paige (1971:14–16) lumps together the landowning and renting smallholders, seeing them

laborers. Because families in both categories lived on landlord's land, both were locally referred to as tenants; and the distinction between the two categories is more continuous than discrete. In general, laborers lived on land on which the owner or operator also resided, in a quasi-plantation arrangement. In contrast, tenants rented whole farms and might employ resident laborers. It is this latter category—farm-operating tenants—that is listed in the Census of Agriculture. Between 1880 and 1910 the proportion of tenants increased significantly, but in the following decades it declined until the reversals of the Great Depression (see Table 1).

Labor and rental arrangements were highly variable. Some landlords provided their resident (married) laborers with garden plots and allowed them to keep a cow or other large animal with the owners' herd in a weakly developed manorial pattern (Wolf 1969). Others lived in the landlord's house. In addition, at peak harvest seasons women and children from neighboring farms and townsfolk joined the farm labor force, as did migrant laborers who followed the crops throughout the region.

Tenants were an equally various category, including people who owned large amounts of livestock and equipment and those who owned none, as well as many people who rented from relatives with the expectation of eventually inheriting the farm. In 1930, 120 of the 546 tenants, or 22 percent, were related to the landlord. Some renters, particularly in the Mississippi Bottoms, which was largely owned by absentee landlords, joined fraternal and sororal organizations like the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) and the Masons, that are generally associated with elite status (see, for example, Doyle 1978). Male tenants on occasion even held public office. Participation in these governing institutions indicates that owning landed property was not a necessary condition for membership in the county's governing elites, at least at the local level.

Finally, much of the labor force was not local. Transient labor was widely used at peak harvest periods. In the nineteenth century, people came from the surrounding counties to help out, particularly for the strawberry harvest in May. In the first half of the twentieth century many of the labor needs continued to be supplied by people within the immediate region, although peak harvest periods required more labor than could be supplied locally. By the 1920s a migrant stream had developed that served southern Illinois farmers. The largely white families in this stream wintered in the Missouri Delta, working as timber cutters. In the spring they planted cotton; when the crop was "laid by," they came to southern Illinois to harvest fruit and vegetable crops, returning to Missouri in the fall to pick cotton. These families, as long as they remained migratory, were so weakly tied to the region or to one

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both as being dependent on an upper class that controls capital and deriving income from land rather than wages.

TABLE 1.  
*Proportion of Farms by Tenure*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Full Owner</i>	<i>Part Owner</i>	<i>Manager</i>	<i>Tenant</i>
1880	74.7			25.3
1890	74.1			25.9
1900	62.8	–	.6	36.6
1910	62.4	–	.8	36.8
1920	64.0	4.2	1.6	30.3
1925	63.5	4.9	.6	31.1
1930	58.2	8.6	2.0	31.2
1934	50.5	13.6	1.3	34.6
1940	69.8	5.2	.6	24.4
1945	67.7	9.7	.7	21.8
1950	69.5	15.2	.1	15.2

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Agriculture, year as noted.

another that they presented little potential for organizing jointly with locally resident laborers. This wide diversity meant that those not owning land were unlikely to see themselves as a class with a common set of interests that were opposed to those of landowners.

#### STATUS RELATIONS

Not only were the structural bases for solidarities among farm laborers and renters weak, but a variety of status relations tended to diffuse class solidarities. Some of these relations created cross-cutting alliances, while others worked against the formation of class-based identities. I use the term status in its classic contrast with the term contract to point to relations organized through positions into which one is born rather than those entered into as putatively “free individuals.”<sup>10</sup> These status relations include, most directly, the non-contractual, extra-wage aspects of employer–employee relations, specifically the ways that norms develop to regulate intra-kin and neighbor interactions became part of the behavioral repertoire between employer and employee and the legal and customary relations between men, women, and children. It also includes racial, ethnic, and religious relationships and, in a

<sup>10</sup> This definition, derived from Sir Henry Maine, is not congruent with Weber’s, which associates status with honor and privilege obtained through other than class-determined means and contrasts with class as a means of assigning social prestige and power (Weber 1947:186–8). In my usage, status relations may or may not entail distinctions of power and privilege: Relations between, say, brothers, if they carry a set of reciprocal rights and duties, are status relations, even though they entail no disparity in relative privilege, whereas parent–child relations do entail differential power.



somewhat different vein, those class relations inscribed as geographic and temporal (evolutionary) relations.

#### EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

The relationship between employer and employee and between landlord and tenant tended to be a highly personal one that involved far more than selling labor for a wage. Putative kin relations entailing some of the reciprocal exchanges of goods, services, and courtesies associated with kinship were often established. For example, it was not uncommon for tenant children to refer to the landlord as Grandpa and for markers of mutual respect, such as those that enabled cooperative relations between siblings, cousins, and neighbors, to pass between landlord and tenant. Inasmuch as farming did not disrupt such kin and neighborly relations, as productive relations, to the same extent as did mines, factories, and very large scale agricultural operations (such as those in California and the Southwest in the United States), landlords and their tenants and employees had powerful models of appropriate interactions, other than those required by the firm, to draw upon.

To some extent, the specific requirements of farming (see, for example, Mann and Dickenson 1983; Jellison 1993, especially 167–8) work against impersonal, highly rationalized labor relations. Farming, unlike factory work, requires a wide range of skills, including many generally associated with management, and a degree of commitment to the outcome. Farm owners or managers cannot exercise oversight of their laborers except in specific circumstances, such as in harvesting, where large numbers of people are assembled in one small space. Owners, therefore, needed to understand that, if they wanted to obtain quality work, they would have to see their laborers not only as suppliers of the commodity of labor power but also as people. The difficulty in controlling agricultural labor through industrial class relations has long been recognized as central to the formation of sharecropping after the abolition of slavery (Flynn 1983; Foner 1983, 1990), and Wells (1997) demonstrates how class organization by farm workers in the 1970s and 1980s stimulated growers to establish a system of labor contractors who used non-class relations (kinship, coparentage, and so forth) to exercise labor discipline and insulate growers from their status as employer.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, white farm laborers had no tradition of servility and did not take kindly to being treated with arrogance. Renters and resident laborers could, and did, move to another farm if they were dissatisfied with their working conditions. As a local man told me, “As a whole they would come and go, depending on their ability and, also, . . . on the person they were working for.

<sup>11</sup> Daniels (1981:74) demonstrates that, given a different cultural context, labor contracting as a form of labor recruitment and organization can have the opposite effect, acting, as it did for Japanese workers at the turn of the century, as bargaining agents for their contractees rather than as private entrepreneurs.

If the farmer was mean to them, [they figured] another would be good to them.”<sup>12</sup> Local norms highly valued people who were “common” and criticized people who “thought they were better than everyone else” (see, for example, Adams 1996).<sup>13</sup>

Agrarian patriarchy permitted authoritarian relationships, that were potentially enforced through violence, between fathers and their dependent wives and children; and property ownership conferred legitimacy to “boss” work crews and individual laborers. However, no institutions existed that imposed servile behavior on laborers, such as in the South the law of “Judge Lynch” enforced the owners’ authority as a part of a profound system of racial segregation. In the more open milieu of southern Illinois, the norms of existing agrarian patriarchy, with its idiom of kinship, were mobilized to solidify and legitimate relationships between owner and tenant or laborer.

The structure of the labor market also tended to reinforce these norms. Urban industries tended to compete with farmers for labor. By the 1920s, agricultural laborers earned about half what a common laborer earned, indicating the great lag in agricultural productivity relative to industry. Many people who had ambitions to improve their material condition sought off-farm employment and migrated from the region, as indicated by the drop in the county’s population, particularly its rural population, after 1900. Labor mobility, as well as inter-farm mobility, therefore, tended to diffuse discontent with farm laborers’ relative position.

I have no direct evidence that farm employers experienced a scarcity of labor (although it is possible in the 1920s), but I understand from oral recollections that growers who treated their laborers poorly had difficulty getting the highest quality of workers. The relative mobility of tenants and farm laborers, then, undoubtedly exercised some restraint on the landlords and others who hired labor: It limited the degree of exploitation and contempt that employers could exercise if they wanted to get reliable workers and smoothed the obvious differences in material wealth with a lubricant of respect and reciprocity, often couched in the idiom of kinship.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER

The ethic that all people have equal worth and should be treated with respect, that Toqueville commented on as a fundamental American trait, appears to have been widely practiced, at least in superficial relationships. Alongside these markers of equality and respect, however, a complex set of status rela-

<sup>12</sup> Charles Thomas (interview, December 22, 1982, p. 22). See also Rendleman (memoirs, typescript of 1976 version, p. 34, Sirles interview).

<sup>13</sup> Mobility was important for southern Black tenant farmers and croppers, as well, because it provided some protection from the Black Codes and other laws and social practices that restricted their freedom (see Cohen 1991).

tionships defined peoples' social standing.<sup>14</sup> Ancestry and property ownership were important aspects of a person's status, but character traits like honesty, reliability, hard work, and diplomacy could elevate a poor person, but negative traits could lower the regard in which a well-born person was generally held. Status was not a unitary characteristic: A man generally scorned by women because of his sexual morality might be accorded respect by his male associates because of his political savvy and ability to cut deals; a poor person who had the ability to tell good stories and be a charming companion might be welcome in more wealthy homes but might not be extended credit to buy a home or farm by these same people because they evaluated him as financially unreliable. Conversely, a poor person who was honest and hardworking might never be invited to join the bankers' family at their hunt club but might be unquestioningly extended credit and treated with respect. These highly individualized means of conferring relative status, therefore, also mitigated against the creation of class solidarity.

#### SHARED POVERTY

Another factor that may have worked against the development of an organized sense of opposition between landowners and their tenants and laborers was the relative poverty of the region. Only a small proportion of the land was owned by non-farming landlords; instead, most absentee landlords worked their own farm separate from the ones they rented to tenants. A tiny fraction of these wealthy farmers lived like "city people" with the conveniences of electricity, live-in maids, and so forth. Members of even these families tended to engage in hard manual labor on their farms, although the women often hired help to do the laundry and ironing and their daughters generally were not required to do field work or heavy housework. In 1930 the average value of a Union County dwelling was \$971; in wealthy Tazewell County in central Illinois it was \$2,561. Union County fruit farmers were the most prosperous, their dwellings averaging \$1,856 in value.<sup>15</sup> Wage scales in southern Illinois were far below those of the central and northern part of the state. In 1930, according to figures in the Census of Agriculture, farm laborers in Union County averaged \$1.87 a day, although oral accounts give figures closer to \$1.50 a day. In contrast, farm laborers in Tazewell County averaged \$2.21 a day, slightly more than the national average of \$2.16. This differential corresponds to the different wage rates paid in the east north-central and east south-central states for common laborers on federal-aid highway projects (\$.38 and \$.24 per hour

<sup>14</sup> For close studies of status relationships in somewhat comparable communities, see West (1945), Bennett (1982), Matthews (1965).

<sup>15</sup> These figures were derived by eliminating "abnormal farms" from the tabulation and dividing the value of all dwellings listed in County Table I of the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932b) by the number of farms listed in County Table I.

respectively), which reinforced the perception that southern Illinois was more like the rest of the Upland South than it was like the northern states.<sup>16</sup>

Within most rural regions, opposition to existing power relations, drawing on the legacy of the Populist movement, tended to oppose independent land-owners to corporate capitalism and assimilated all those associated with farming to this model. Reinforcing this identity, urban (and Yankee) perceptions constructed the hill people of southern Illinois as an inferior Other, calling them hillbillies. Given the relative inequality between the agricultural sector and the manufacturing and finance sectors, as well as the recurrent sting of discrimination by urban people, this ideology was very powerful, particularly in a community where large numbers of people owned land (in 1930 approximately 56 percent of rural-farm families owned their homes. See the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1943, Table 22). Within the county, town and farm reflected this same set of prejudicial perceptions: Even the children from substantial farm families tended to be treated as hicks by children who lived in town.

The portrayal of farmers as hicks or hillbillies had contained within it not only a class and status differential but an evolutionary one as well. In elite ideology, farmers were “backward” and needed to be “brought into the modern world.”<sup>17</sup> The sense of shared grievances against wealthier elites in the local towns and in other parts of the state and country tended to create significant solidarities between rich and poor, despite the tendency of some elements of the local elites to respond to these prejudices by seeking to conform strongly to what they perceived as national norms of culture (for example, a woman played opera to the laborers at threshing dinners).

#### GENDER

The strong legal and status distinctions between men and women and between adults and children also created powerful inhibitions to the creation of class solidarities. Women and children constituted a considerable proportion of the farm labor force. Women can be presumed to have made up approximately a half of the members of the 44 percent of rural farm households that did not own their own homes in 1930 (slightly under a third were tenants, the remaining 13 percent presumably were landless laborers living in separate residences).<sup>18</sup> They were particularly important for the harvest of fruits and

<sup>16</sup> The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932b: County Table XII; and 1936: Table 9, p. 1152; 1932a: Table 521, p. 751).

<sup>17</sup> This was very obvious in the writings of home economists' and the Urban Agrarians who created the Country Life Movement (see Elbert 1988; Danbom 1979; see also new work on Appalachia, especially Billings and Tickamyer (1993) and Shapiro (1978). See also the extensive anthropological literature on the colonial construction of the Other, especially, in regard to its temporalizing moves, Fabian (1983).

<sup>18</sup> The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932b). The sex ratio in the rural United States was persistently skewed toward a higher proportion of men (see Jellison 1993:6, 9). In 1930, the

vegetables, although they also worked in the fields, hoeing corn and doing other labor-intensive tasks.

Women and children, due to their inferior status, were prevented from acting in the public spheres of law and politics (and were also largely invisible in census labor statistics). Although individual women were outspoken and influential in family and local affairs, I have no evidence that women were able to play significant roles in arenas in which men had a strong interest. In addition, powerful norms regarding appropriate female behavior, articulated as the control of women's modesty and sexuality, inhibited women from mixing socially with men or from travelling independently outside of the immediate neighborhood. Country stores and peddlers allowed women to trade their products for needed household goods without venturing unaccompanied into more distant towns.<sup>19</sup> This restricted geographic and social mobility inhibited the development of inter-regional and cross-gender solidarities that might have been mobilized for class-specific aims.<sup>20</sup> Female children were similarly restricted, although boys tended to range widely. With few financial responsibilities, boys tended to treat earned income as their own spending money, to be invested in riding horses, recreation, and so forth. Girls' earnings appear to be largely invested in their trousseau.

Women's and children's work was frequently intermittent and in many cases more or less discretionary. Many of the women and young people who worked in the packing sheds, fields, and orchards were members of land-owning or stable tenant families or lived in town. The women often had their own income-earning poultry, cream, or other enterprises, as well as their farm and household work. For them, wage labor was one additional source of needed income, but it did not displace their other remunerative and nonremunerative labor. Many young people joined the harvest to earn their own discretionary money. Therefore, unless the women and children were part of laboring families, they had little basis for developing a laborer's class consciousness. For the women and young people who were members of farm-owning or urban families, their transient class location as a wage laborer did not create a sufficiently enduring dimension of their daily life to become the basis for strong labor solidarities.

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Census of Population (1930: Table 14) enumerated 2,690 men over 21 and 2,356 women over 21 in the rural farm population.

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth study of the restrictions on women on Great Plains farms, see Fink (1992). Concerning the legal status of women in nineteenth-century Illinois, see Rich (1994). It should be noted that elite, largely urban, women tended to travel more than their poorer and rural counterparts. They travelled to visit daughters and other relatives and to go shopping in groups with other women who were also members of clubs.

<sup>20</sup> In this regard, I have evidence that relations between fathers-in-law and sons-in-law may have been important in the mobilizations of the 1870s but have no evidence that mother-daughter or sister-sister relations were important. Further research may reveal more complex women's networks that helped promote farmer solidarity in this period, although it is difficult to discern, due to the overriding patriarchal ideology.

## FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

The existence of many cross-cutting institutions and social mobility does not mean an absence of class consciousness. To the contrary, people in rural communities tended to be keenly aware of social rank. To a considerable extent, as described above, this ranking was flexible and individualistic; however, the governing elites tended to be quite a self-conscious and identifiable network of families—they were the country’s “society.”<sup>21</sup> In the nineteenth century, the county’s elite developed a variety of organizations and institutions which created solidarity among themselves. Out of the agrarian movements of the 1870s and 1890s the larger growers formed shipping associations. Along with these, progressive farming, business, and professional people formed joint stock companies to establish building and loan associations and other business ventures. The Masons had been established as early as 1822, and in the late nineteenth century various temperance and fraternal organizations sprang up. The most enduring was the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (the IOOF) and its women’s wing, the Rebekahs. Both the Masons and the Odd Fellows had a wide membership among substantial farmers and townspeople. Businessmen in the larger towns formed a variety of businessmen’s associations to boost the community. As in the rest of the country, Women’s Clubs organized in the towns in the 1910s, growing out of the various women’s auxiliaries and clubs that put on public entertainments and fund-raising events. Alongside these public organizations, some groups formed exclusive hunting clubs, some of which were incorporated and owned land in the Mississippi Bottoms. These same sets of families tended to socialize together on a more-or-less regular basis. The wives often had a regular weekly afternoon bridge game and entertained one another in the evening as couples or family groups. In the towns, church membership was also important in defining social groups. The Yankee immigrants brought Presbyterian and Congregational denominations with them; and many of the business and professional families belonged to these churches. The Catholics were treated as a minority and were generally not active in civic affairs until the 1930s. The older churches—Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed, Christian, Cumberland Presbyterian, and Methodist—had their roots in the rural areas.

Farm families, particularly poor farm families, had no organizations comparable to those of the urban professional and business people. The Grange, which provided a social organization for farmers in many parts of the country, never developed a sustained organization in the county. Some farm families belonged to the Odd Fellows, Rebekahs, Masons, Eastern Star, and other fraternal and sororal organizations; and a few, with strong kin ties to prosper-

<sup>21</sup> Joyce (1993) writes about a similar use of the term in southeastern Ohio, when the woman she interviewed assured her that if Joyce was interested in rural society, she should talk to someone else, because her family was not “society.”

ous town families, were members of a number of town-based clubs and activities. Many farm-owning men belonged to producer associations. By the early years of the twentieth century, these were primarily the Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union, which had locals around the county, and somewhat later, the Farm Bureau.<sup>22</sup> Most farm women belonged to no organizations and socialized through their church, the local school, and with neighbors and kin. Poor farmers and laborers generally belonged to no formal organizations except, perhaps, a church; their often-transient status worked against them developing responsible roles either within their church or the local school. E. P. Thompson (1963) has documented the importance of locations within which members of the working class could come together and develop a sense of shared conditions; such locations were largely absent in rural areas.

#### CROSS-CUTTING ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to the absence of organizations through which landless laborers could develop a sense of class solidarity, those organizations that were open to them tended to include people from all class and status categories. Rural children of all social classes attended the rural schools, and the numerous community activities associated with the school tended to smooth over status differentials. Only African Americans were excluded, through the formation of separate schools, and some Catholics removed themselves by sending their children to the parochial school in town. Only two rural communities had a significant African American population, but by the 1910s most of these families had left, abandoning their schools.<sup>23</sup> Most rural communities had only one church or, if there were more than one, did not recruit members based on class. The elite Presbyterian and Congregational churches were located in towns and had few farmers among their members. Only the Catholic church and one Lutheran church defined a discrete and stigmatized rural community (German),<sup>24</sup> but this division was based on ethnic and religious identities, not on class.

<sup>22</sup> I have no evidence that tenants belonged to such organizations, but inasmuch as some tenants approximated farmowners in the amount of draft, livestock, and equipment they owned, a few tenants may also have belonged to these organizations.

<sup>23</sup> One Black school remained in one of the towns, until in the 1950s shrinking enrollments forced its integration with the white school.

<sup>24</sup> Union County was somewhat anomalous in its early settlement: Upland Southerners of Germanic ancestry, among the earliest settlers, brought with them their Lutheran, Reformed, and German Baptist beliefs. They appear distinct from settlers of English ancestry in the first decades of settlement, although the county government and commerce were generally dominated by the German ancestry people until the Illinois Central Railroad, built in the 1850s, caused an influx of a considerable number of Yankees and increased commerce based in the new railroad towns. Germans and other German-speaking people (Austrians, Swiss, and so forth) who came in mid-century formed distinctive and more-or-less insular communities associated with their churches. Concerning prejudices, one woman told me her father (born in the 1860s) "hated Negroes and Catholics" and that he would probably have gotten over his hatred of Blacks before he would accept Catholics. Compared to many rural regions, however, these groups formed only a small

Rural recreational activities, such as dances in homes and at dance halls, were open to people of all classes (although some class divisions did emerge concerning women's attendance at social events) and did not provide an arena for creating class solidarities. This made the strongest contrasts those between town elites with their exclusive social clubs and rural people with their more informal recreational activities. Within rural communities, therefore, most of the formal and semi-formalized activities cut across class lines. At the same time, the existence of more or less exclusive business, civic, and recreational organizations, through which town elites organized themselves, and their associated prejudice against rural people, created a basis for cross-class solidarity among farm owners and laborers.

#### GEOGRAPHIC SITE

Extra-local conditions were also undoubtedly important in the failure of farm laborers and tenants to organize against their employers and landlords. Within Illinois, Union County was somewhat anomalous because of its extensive horticultural production. It required more labor and, because of this, supported more small farms than did the more prosperous counties in the prairie regions. For example, in 1930 Union County farmers who reported farm labor said they used an average of 227.8 days of labor per farm; farmers who reported hired labor in Tazewell County, one of the richest farming counties in the state, said they used only 156.8 days of labor per farm.<sup>25</sup> It was anomalous even within the region: Neighboring Pulaski County, which shared Union County's relative poverty but had far less fruit and little vegetable production, reported an average of only 207.4 days of hired labor per farm. The largest proportions of labor in Union County were used on general, fruit, and truck farms, whereas in most other counties, cash-grain and general farms used the largest proportions of wage labor.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, any organized discontent that might occur on a specific farm or group of farms had no place to spread.

#### TEMPORAL CONSIDERATIONS

The time period during which this form of production dominated is also important. As E. P. Thompson (1963) has shown, the development of class

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proportion, less than 4 percent in 1880, of the county's population. Other rural counties (such as Clinton) had as much as 27.8 percent foreign, largely German, born (the U.S. Bureau of the Census 1883:Table VIII). See Salamon (1992) for contemporary descriptions of Illinois German-American farming communities. Jellison (1993:205, n.24) notes that in the Kansas county she studied, "Non-Mennonites in the county commonly referred to themselves as 'white people' when distinguishing themselves from their Mennonite neighbors." Gjerle (1997) gives detailed accounts of north European settlements in the upper Midwest.

<sup>25</sup> These data are probably even more divergent than census figures indicate: Few Union County farmers kept records, while Tazewell County farmers were probably far better record-keepers: This suggests that the Tazewell County figures approximate actual labor hired, but Union County labor is probably significantly undercounted.

<sup>26</sup> Derived from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1932b: County Table XII and County Table VIII).



consciousness is a lengthy and uneven process. A capitalist rural economy was not consolidated in Union County until the 1890s; by 1921, only thirty years later, it was deeply and permanently undermined by the onset of a prolonged and constantly deepening depression that impoverished landowner and laborer alike. Members of even the most elite farm families recall acute privation; at one point one landowning family was unable to scrape together three cents for a postage stamp, and the wife got a job in the shoe factory (see note 6); and such poverty appears widespread.

Related to this, expectations regarding individual and family life cycle mitigated against the formation of strong class identities. Many laborers envisioned themselves becoming landowners or at least property-owning tenants, and the dominant American ideology of social mobility supported such Horatio Alger ambitions. In the early decades of the century, when agriculture reached a rough parity with industry in its financial returns, this was not an unreasonable belief for a young family to hold; and in fact many laborers, by dint of their intelligence, frugality, and hard work, were able to acquire tools and stock and become independent renters. Landowning, however, may have been beyond their grasp, despite the fact that the proportion of tenants fell from around 37 percent in 1900 and 1910 to 31 percent in later decades (see Table 1). My interviews did not reveal any laborers or tenants who were able to buy farms until the 1930s, when banks were willing to sell repossessed farms to established tenants.

#### COMPARATIVE SITUATIONS

I have argued that multiple structures of domination must be taken into account when seeking explanations for why a social movement did or did not occur. In doing so, I have focused on class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and region as important structures of difference in Union County, Illinois, in the early twentieth century. Not only did agricultural laborers not confront their employers as a coherent class, but the division of the agricultural labor force by gender and the regionally anomalous production system worked against the creation of class solidarity. Additionally, agricultural laborers often formed social solidarities with their employers, which were based on religious, ethnic, racial, and regional identities. These solidarities were often expressed in an idiom of kinship.

Regions of the United States such as California and parts of the South that experienced persistent, occasionally successful, organizing by agricultural laborers contrasted systematically with the situation in southern Illinois. In both these areas, elites formed solidarities that governed large regions politically and socially. In both areas class relations were inscribed as racial divisions—between black and white in the South and between Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, “Oakie,” and Mexican workers and Anglo employers in California. This imbrication of class and racial structures of domination made them particularly prone to class-based organizing.

The histories of the different regions created specific, and to some extent unique, class structures. Daniel's (1981) close history of California farmworkers between 1870 and 1941 argues for both structural and organizational bases for farmworker organization or non-organization (see also Majka and Majka 1982). Daniel stresses (1981:17) the unique history of California agriculture which, constructed on a historical base of Mexican ranches and bonanza farms, turned to fruit and vegetable production without a pre-existing base of small-scale farms. He argues that the "large-scale commercial farm promoted impenetrable class and caste lines that admitted of not the slightest ambiguity [and] drew plain and ineradicable economic battle lines between farm employer and hired laborer." Not only were there sharply drawn class lines but also, as in the South, ethnic distinctions which helped to rigidify the boundaries between landowner and laborer. Until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 slowed Chinese immigration, growers relied on Chinese labor; subsequently they used Japanese and, by the 1920s, Mexican and Filipino labor. The racist discourse surrounding farm labor in California also meant that when white people did enter agricultural labor, they were generally seen as defective or degenerate, not worthy of the respect due most white people (Daniel 1981:50, 64, 67). The particular configuration of California's agricultural labor force was, perhaps uniquely in the United States, heavily influenced by state policies, particularly those dealing with immigration and labor organizing (Majka and Majka 1982).

Daniel argues, in a way that is congruent with resource mobilization theory and undermines Paige's analysis, that the class relations that characterized California agriculture did not spontaneously lead to organized farmworker revolt or organization. Rather, formal organization was needed to mobilize and direct the otherwise diffuse and inchoate discontent and pain afflicting farm laborers. Formal organizations took two major forms: those built on cultural models imported by immigrant Japanese (late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries) and Mexicans (1920s)<sup>27</sup> and those of formal labor organizations, such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (both in the pre-World War II period, with the IWW having relatively successful agitators), and the Communist Party in the 1930s. The United Farm Workers (UFW) of the 1960s drew on both the labor union and community-organizing models in its successful efforts at unionization (Jenkins 1985).

The successful unionization of Mexican and Mexican-American farm workers in the 1960s appears to be due both to the strongly defined class divisions between large-scale growers and wage laborers and to ethnic solidarity. Wells' study (1996) of a strawberry-growing region in California indi-

<sup>27</sup> In the 1920s, the Mexican ethnic-based mutual aid society also organized a union, the Confederación de Uniones de Obreros Mexicanos (CUOM) and other similar organizations (Daniel 1981:106-8).

cates that even where most strawberries were grown by relatively small growers, the strength of the UFW in adjoining regions that were dominated by large-scale growers provided the basis for effective organizing of workers who, in class terms, were far less structurally favored to unionize. At the same time, Mexican workers did not organize against the Mexican-American growers who operated small farms in a marginal area of the region, largely because of ethnic solidarities mobilized through the idioms of *compadrazco*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican-American farmworkers also organized successfully in the upper Midwest in the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) (Barger and Reza 1994). They used many of the same strategies as the UFW in California but targeted large vegetable processors, specifically Campbell's. The farm workers also tried to create solidarities with their direct employers, the farmers who grew vegetables under contract for the processors; with a larger consuming public (through a boycott of Campbell's products); and with other sectors of the social movements of that period. Valdès' study (1991) indicates the importance of ethnic solidarity in the creation of such mobilizations. By the end of the 1960s, Tejanos "composed between 80 and 90 percent of the migrant labor force in the Upper Midwest, a higher proportion than any other ethnic group had reached in the century" (Valdès 1991:168). He points as well to the changing structure of production in the region, in which large-scale, increasingly impersonal enterprises, although rooted in very different histories, began to appear structurally similar to California's "factories in the fields."

The situation in the South was somewhat different. As Mooney and Majke (1995) argue, southern croppers straddled the line between proletariat and peasantry. Although organized in the 1930s into the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), the organization was persistently riven by conflicting goals. Many of the programmatic battles were organized by the Socialist and Communist Parties and reflected larger ideological battles between those two organizations, but tenant farmers also perceived different, not necessarily compatible, goals between those of organizing as workers into traditional unions and those of organizing to obtain farmland. That is, the structurally ambiguous position held by the croppers, as both peasants and proletariat, gave rise to conflicting economic goals. Paige (1975), in concert with Wolf (1969), thinks that such peasants tend to form revolutionary nationalist movements, rather than reformist labor unions or commodity organizations.<sup>28</sup> In addition, racial divisions undermined STFU unity (see Grubbs 1971; Mitchell 1989). At the same time, as with the attempts to organize Mexican laborers in California, state action was critical, both in creating the crisis that impelled tenants to action and in creating the legal and political framework that gave

<sup>28</sup> Barnes (1984) analyzes a different path potentially taken by croppers, who in 1889, in the Southern Farmers Alliance, created an alliance with smaller farmers, through the vehicle of the sub-treasury plan.

them hope that organized protest might be effective in remedying their grievances.

#### CONCLUSION

The only regions where farm laborers persistently attempted to organize were in the South, through the agency of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union; in the West, through the organizing drives among the Dust Bowl refugees; and, in the 1960s, in the West and Upper Midwest, by Mexican-Americans. Additionally, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnically distinct laborers in California organized through largely non-political, non-confrontational means to ameliorate their oppressive conditions. In these regions, laborers appear to have been constituted as a far more unitary and distinctive (and oppressed) social category than in southern Illinois. It is also significant that these movements did not occur until the 1930s, when, in the South as in Union County, the depression undermined the wealth and concomitant power of ruling elites, and the New Deal and associated social movements implemented a legal and social framework that provided some support for such organizing. In the 1960s, in addition to some legal support for farm labor unionization, the larger social movement provided both inspiration and material support in the form of finances, boycotts, and personnel for organizing drives. In the South the New Deal created an opening that allowed a severely oppressed laboring class to mobilize, if unsuccessfully, even as New Deal agricultural policies (the Agricultural Adjustment Act [AAA] crop adjustment program) instigated a crisis that undermined their livelihood.<sup>29</sup>

In Union County, the cropping regime and associated labor, gender, and age relations were highly diversified. Strong and long-standing personal linkages between landowners and their tenants and laborers frequently existed, and farm laborers lacked class-specific arenas in which to develop a sense of collective solidarity. Its production system was relatively anomalous in relation to the surrounding region and relatively poor in relation to the larger society, which mitigated against the formation of alliances between laborers in different areas and reinforced cross-class solidarities between producing and owning classes. Unlike the regions where farm labor activism did occur, therefore, Union County lacked the concatenation of the structures of domination within which the families that came from a "house of poor" could have organized in opposition to those who came from a "house of plenty."

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<sup>29</sup> See Skocpol (1979) on the importance of weakening of the state in creating revolutionary conditions.

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