

The coercion perspective also argues that because production methods and implements in such systems are in the hands of small, impoverished, and uneducated direct producers, technology is stagnant and productivity is low (Lenin [1899] 1956:192). As a result share farming cannot compete with the productivity of capitalist enterprise. Sharecropping is expected to disappear when the political constraints on share tenants weaken, and when competitive markets and transportation erode the boundaries of closed, self-sufficient feudal economies (Lenin [1899] 1956:202, 207-18; Marx [1894] 1977:795, 802-13). Where share tenancy does persist, it is seen as an anachronism perpetuated temporarily through isolation (Marx [1894] 1977:789).

In short, this point of view holds that the economic alternatives of share tenants as a group are so heavily circumscribed that their individual latitude for choice is negligible. In addition, landowners are motivated by irrational traditional values such as racism and a lack of profit motive. As a result, sharecropping can best be explained in terms of share tenants' categorical oppression by sociopolitical institutions and practices.

While this approach provides a valuable redirection of attention toward the role of domination and the level of social systemic constraints, as a single analytical framework this perspective too has limitations. First, its assumption that direct producers are passive and determined ciphers in the march of history may underrepresent the initiative that they in fact exercise, the extent to which they have mobility and choice. Second, assumptions that sharecropping landlords are irrational may disguise the fact that extra-economic domination may be economically rational and that share farming may be technologically advanced and productive. Third, although identifying coercive sociopolitical institutions, this approach generally fails to examine the mechanisms through which, and extent to which, political constraints affect market conditions. As a result, the invalidity of a microeconomic approach is not proved.

The Political Economy Framework and Class Struggle

Neither of these two perspectives clarifies the variable weighting and interpenetration of political and economic forces as they affect share farming. Nor do they help us understand the roles that sharecropping has played in the evolution of rural class relations. In point of fact, sharecropping systems may be empirically closer to the coercion or to the complementarity characterization. That is, their determinants may be more grounded in systemic constraints or in individual initiative, more heavily political or economic. As a result, these systems can be analyzed with differential success by one approach or the other. Between these two poles are a range of empirical forms in which the determinants and levels of analysis identified by both approaches are influential.

A political economy framework can help clarify the diversity of causation and outcome in sharecropping systems. This approach examines the relations between landowners and share tenants, as these shape and are shaped by changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. It focuses on sharecropping as a "form of production,"¹ that is, a characteristic patterning of relations within the production unit (including the distribution of control over the means of production and the social relations among participants) and within the wider social formation. This approach inquires into the role of sharecropping in rural class relations. It does not assume, but rather explores, the causes and consequences of sharecropping systems.

Sharecropping in the United States

Sharecropping is a major feature of American agricultural history. Although systematic data on share farming do not exist until 1880, narrative accounts before that time locate sharecropping in colonial New England, in the antebellum South, and on the middle and far western frontiers (Gates 1973; Innes 1976; Reid 1976a). In 1880 the federal census first reported the tenure status of farm

operators, and it continued to do so through 1974. The census defines a share tenant as a person who works land owned by another, to whom he pays a share of the crops, and/or of the livestock or livestock products, in rent.

Insert Table 1 about here

As Table 1 indicates, fully 17.5 percent of the farm operators in the United States were share tenants in 1880. The distribution of farmers across tenures varied by region, with sharecropping ranging from a high of 24.4 percent in the South, to 13.4 percent in the North, and 8.5 percent in the West. Although share tenancy was most common in the South, it was more prevalent than cash rental in all regions. Share tenancy increased nationwide until 1930, when Depression farm foreclosures brought it to an all-time high, and then it began to subside. By 1974 share tenants comprised only 5.6 percent of farm operators in the country, and its regional distribution had shifted. Share tenancy is now highest in the North (8.7 percent), and in the West (4.8 percent), but has decreased in the South (3.6 percent), especially with the mechanization of cotton.

Sharecropping has been disproportionately concentrated in certain crop industries: cotton, cash grain (primarily corn), tobacco, permanent tree fruit and nuts, and more recently labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crops. In the North, sharecropping has centered around cash grain farming and has recently involved cucumbers. It is concentrated in the north central states and sharecropping has been negligible on the northeastern seaboard. In the South it has been associated mainly with cotton, and more recently with cash grain. In the far West it has been associated with cash grain and permanent tree fruit and nuts, and more recently with strawberries (Reed and Horel 1980; Reid 1979; Wells 1984). Crop characteristics alone cannot account for the use of share contracts,