

## **DISSERTATION ABSTRACT**

### **Class, Crisis, and the Industry of Agriculture: Corn Belt Family Farms, 1870 – Present**

**Elizabeth A. Ramey**

How and why did U.S. agriculture evolve as it did across the twentieth century? What were the benefits, and what were the costs of change? How might these successes and failures shape future transformations of the food and agricultural system? This dissertation addresses these central questions by exploring the role of the family farm – as an enduring and significant agricultural institution – in shaping and being shaped by that evolution. The family farm has long been a powerful and beloved icon in American society, yet the economic situation facing the family farm is under-examined and poorly understood by the public, and even by agricultural economists. This misapprehension contributes to a much broader set of misunderstandings about the nature of the food and agricultural system, which in turn contributes to misguided agricultural strategies and policies.

This dissertation seeks to remedy this situation by exploring the family farm and the agrifood system in which it resides from a non-reductive, Marxian class analytic standpoint. The analysis first develops this theoretical framework, and elaborates a class-focused notion of family farm crisis, adaptation, transition, and survival. It then deploys this framework in developing a new class history of the Midwestern corn-producing family farm from the late nineteenth century to the present.

This approach sheds light on central features of the family farm, as well as its strengths and vulnerabilities. These include 1) the nature and effects of the burdens that family farms tend to place on the members of farm families; 2) the complex economic relationships that obtain between family farms and the agribusinesses that dominate the agrifood system in size and visibility, particularly as these relationships pertain to technical change in farm production; and 3) the economic relationships between family farms and the broader, non-agricultural economy, the state, and the natural environment. These insights provide a foundation for the subsequent examination of the politics of food and agriculture, as well as support for the transition to an alternative agrifood system that can sustain a burgeoning population without inflicting the extensive social and environmental costs born under the current system.