OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

An English Sheep Farmer's View of Rural America

By James Rebanks

- March 1, 2017

An abandoned building in Owsley County, Kentucky.CreditMario Tama/Getty Images

MATTERDALE, England — I am a traditional small farmer in the North of England. I farm sheep in a mountainous landscape, the Lake District fells. It is a farming system that dates back as many as 4,500 years. A remarkable survival. My flock grazes a mountain alongside 10 other flocks, through an ancient communal grazing system that has somehow survived the last two centuries of change. Wordsworth called it a "perfect republic of shepherds."

It's not your efficient modern agribusiness. My farm struggles to make enough money for my family to live on, even with 900 sheep. The price of my lambs is governed by the supply of imported lamb from the other side of the world. So I have one foot in something ancient and the other foot in the 21st-century global economy.

Less than 3 percent of people in modern industrial economies are farmers. But around the world, I am not alone: The United Nations estimates that more than two billion people are farmers, most of them small farmers; that's about one in three people on the planet.

My farm's lack of profitability perhaps shouldn't be of any great concern to anyone else. I'm a grown-up, and I chose to live this way. I chose it because my ancestors all did this, and because I love it, however doomed it might seem to others.

ADVERTISEMENT

My farm is where I live, and there is actually no other way to farm my land, which is why it hasn't changed much for a millennium or more. In truth, I could accept the changes around me philosophically, including the disappearance of farms like mine, if the results

made for a better world and society. But the world I am seeing evolve in front of my eyes isn't better, it is worse. Much worse.

In the week before the United States elected Donald J. Trump to the presidency, I traveled through Kentucky, through endless miles of farmland and small towns. It was my first visit to the United States, for a book tour. I was shocked by the signs of decline I saw in rural America.

I saw shabby wood-frame houses rotting by the roadside, and picket fences blown over by the wind. I passed boarded-up shops in the hearts of small towns, and tumbledown barns and abandoned farmland. The church notice boards were full of offers of help to people with drug or alcohol addictions. And yes, suddenly I was passing cars with Trump stickers on their bumpers, and passing houses with Trump flags on their lawns.

The economic distress and the Trump support are not unconnected, of course. Significant areas of rural America are broken, in terminal economic decline, as food production heads off to someplace else where it can be done supposedly more efficiently. In many areas, nothing has replaced the old industries. This is a cycle of degeneration that puts millions of people on the wrong side of economic history.

Economists say that when the world changes people will adapt, move and change to fit the new world. But of course, real human beings often don't do that. They cling to the places they love, and their identity remains tied to the outdated or inefficient things they used to do, like being steel workers or farmers. Often, their skills are not transferable anyway, and they have no interest in the new opportunities. So, these people get left behind.

I ask myself what I would do if I didn't farm sheep, or if I couldn't any longer farm sheep. I have no idea.

Perhaps it is none of my business how Americans conduct their affairs and how they think about economics. I should doubtless go back to the mountains of my home here in Cumbria, and hold my tongue. But for my entire life, my own country has apathetically accepted an American model of farming and food retailing, mostly through a belief that it was the way of progress and the natural course of economic development. As a result, America's future is the default for us all.

It is a future in which farming and food have changed and are changing radically — in my view, for the worse. Thus I look at the future with a skeptical eye. We have all become such suckers for a bargain that we take the low prices of our foodstuffs for granted and are somehow unable to connect these bargain-basement prices to our children's inability to find meaningful work at a decently paid job.

Our demand for cheap food is killing the American dream for millions of people. Among its side effects, it is creating terrible health problems like obesity and antibiotic-resistant infections, and it is destroying the habitats upon which wildlife depends. It also concentrates vast wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands.

After my trip to rural America, I returned to my sheep and my strangely old-fashioned life. I am surrounded by beauty, and a community, and an old way of doing things that has worked for a long time rather well. I have come home convinced that it is time to think carefully, both within America and without, about food and farming and what kind of systems we want.

The future we have been sold doesn't work. Applying the principles of the factory floor to the natural world just doesn't work. Farming is more than a business. Food is more than a commodity. Land is more than a mineral resource.

Despite the growing scale of the problem, no major mainstream politician has taken farming or food seriously for decades. With the presidential campaign over and a president in the White House whom rural Kentuckians helped elect, the new political establishment might want to think about this carefully.

Suddenly, rural America matters. It matters for the whole world.

James Rebanks (@herdyshepherd1) is the author of the memoir "The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches From an Ancient Landscape."

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on March 5, 2017, on Page SR4 of the New York edition with the headline: An English Shepherd in America. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe