

# The Significance of Small-scale Landholders in Ireland's Socio-economic Transformation

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## Introduction

THE STARTING POINT of this paper is the proposition that Ireland's process of modernisation does not conform to the convergent pattern of development expected under the liberal model of industrial society. This posits a growing similarity in both labour force structures and social mobility regimes with expanding industrialisation (Gallie, 1990: 31–33). In Ireland's case, however, rapid industrialisation has not led to increasing social fluidity, as the convergence thesis would suggest, and the modern Irish labour force has also remained unusual in the persistence of a substantial landholding sector. In addition, property holding groups continue to enjoy distinctive economic as well as mobility advantages (see Breen and Whelan, this volume). We attempt to show in this paper not only how and why landholding persisted, but also argue that the survival of landholders is one of the significant factors contributing to the distinctive character of the Irish social mobility regime.

Our first objective, therefore, is to document one important dimension on which the Irish case deviates from the convergent pattern of development expected to occur under the liberal model. The Irish divergence is manifested by the persistence, into modern times, of a vibrant, small-scale landholding sector and, especially, by the manner in which members of that sector have been relatively successful in adapting to the modernisation of the country's economic and social structure. We develop this point in

the first part of the paper by analysing some of the main 'survival strategies' adopted by small-scale landholders in face of agricultural modernisation and industrial development from 1960 to 1980, the crucial decades of Ireland's transition. We see these strategies as including adjustments to commercially-oriented, full-time farming at one end of the spectrum and, at the other end, a retreat from active farming with almost complete dependence on state welfare payments. The main focus of our attention, however, is on a substantial segment of the smallholder class whose members adapted to change by securing non-farm employment and other sources of income while retaining possession of their holdings. In light of this, we draw attention to the dangers of misinterpretation that arise in using conventional occupational categories in studying class transformation in Ireland; a concentration on 'main occupation' will conceal the extent to which extensive landholding persists among people with non-farm employment.

The second aim of the paper is to contrast the Irish smallholding class's adaptation to, or insertion into, the modernising economic and social structure with the fate of the country's lower working class. Working class families have generally failed to acquire their proportionate share of the new opportunities emerging with industrialisation. The new industries were clearly not concentrated in areas where traditional industrial employment declined but were widely scattered geographically. In addition, the rapid transformation of the Irish occupational structure after 1960 was associated with a much enhanced importance of educational and training certification for occupational entry. Families of smallholders capitalised on this change, to a greater extent than working class families, by taking advantage of the extended system of free post-primary education to secure employment for their children. Moreover, the continuing high natural increase in the Irish labour force and the rapid exodus from (full-time) agricultural employment, together with a slow growth in total employment, significantly increased competition for desirable jobs. In these contexts, the relative competitive ability of the Irish working class did not improve and, in important respects, indeed declined.

Our third aim is to show how the survival capacity of the small scale landholding class in the post-1960 period can be related to certain features in the historical development of the Irish family farm system; the 'specific, historically formed circumstances' (Goldthorpe, 1990: 333-336) of the initial stages of recent industrialisation. A quite distinct economic and social structure, elsewhere characterised as a 'peasant system' (Hannan, 1972), emerged among the smaller farmers of the west of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its cultural autonomy and effective mechanisms of social reproduction ensured the survival of this

system until the 1960s. Compared to the Irish working class, small scale landholders were better placed to capitalise upon the opportunities emerging in the post-1960 modernisation of Ireland's economy.

The fourth aim of the paper is to show how the persistence of the Irish small farm sector is linked to the country's political context and culture. In this regard, we review those public policies which have been particularly sympathetic to the smallholding class and argue that these, in turn, have to be understood with reference to prevalent ideological perspectives, to interest group mobilisation, and to the nature of political styles in Ireland.

In a final section we draw together the main strands of the argument. We contend that by describing and offering explanations for the persistence of the small farming sector in Ireland and, by describing that sector's disproportionate presence in the country's more recent socio-economic transformation, we have identified significant factors accounting for Ireland's non-conformity to the liberal model of societal change in the course of industrialisation.

A general theoretical position underlies our analysis. We consider that in relation to the restructuring of the Irish agricultural economy, an account in terms of 'modernisation' is the most useful approach. As we show later, the impact of capitalist macroeconomic forces on Irish agricultural production has been especially pronounced since the 1960s (cf. Commins *et al.*, 1978). However, purely structuralist theories of agrarian change over-emphasise the deterministic effects of economic forces and do not give sufficient weight to several influences that mediate the impact of capitalist development on agricultural communities. Such theories need to be modified to allow for the decision-making capacity—the 'survival strategies'—of individual farm owners (Leeuwis, 1989: 16; van der Ploeg, 1989; Long, 1986: 10). They also need to take into account the role of local cultures, and their associated communal arrangements and institutional forms. And further it is necessary to acknowledge the extent to which structural change in agriculture is substantially mediated by the strong interventionist role of the state.

### Survival Strategies of the Smallholder Class

Three main types of adaptation to economic change characterise the original landholding class from the 1960s onwards: full-time commercial farming, which has become increasingly concentrated on the larger farms; off-farm employment, combined with part-time farming or farm rental; and, finally, the adaptation of a category of small-scale landowners, whose

principal occupation has remained in farming but whose household income sources have become quite dispersed.

Somewhat over 40 per cent of all landholders in 1987 were estimated to be full-time farmers whose main occupation and income source was farming. A further 30 per cent of all landholders, whose main occupation was recorded as 'farming', received only a minority of their total household income from that source. Over half of this category depended mainly on state income transfers. Finally, approximately 30 per cent of all landowners were estimated to be part-time farmers, whose main occupation was not in farming. (*Agriculture and Food Policy Review*, 1990: 23–25; Callan *et al.*, 1989: 102).

These different outcomes from the significant restructuring that has occurred in Irish agriculture since the 1960s do not accord with what is predicted by theories invoking the 'logic of industrialism'. Land consolidation has been minimal, with small-scale landholders, by and large, holding on to their land. While conventional analyses show both a rapidly declining agricultural workforce and a substantial increase in industrial and service employment (Rottman and O'Connell, 1982; Rottman *et al.*, 1982), they ignore the continuance of landholding among the new classes of industrial and service employees. At the same time, analyses of poverty and inequality in Ireland, also based on 'main occupation' categories, exaggerate the extent of marginalisation and impoverishment among the smallholding class by ignoring the favourable position of the part-time farming group.

To elaborate on the significance of these trends in the Irish occupational structure, we first analyse the limited extent of land consolidation since the 1960s, despite the very rapid decline in farming as an occupation. Secondly, we show the significant growth in part-time farming and related occupations. Thirdly, we contrast the consolidation of commercial production on larger and more productive holdings with the adoption of less labour-intensive farming on smaller holdings. The trends towards part-time farming and dependence on many alternative income sources on the smaller farms mean that actual household income inequalities within the total landholding group are much smaller than previously estimated. Indeed, such inequalities may have narrowed significantly over the past twenty years. In all of these developments, both state and EC policy have had the paradoxical effect of maintaining the landholding structure and impeding land consolidation; outcomes directly opposite to those theoretically expected and to the long established objectives of agricultural modernisation.

**Decline in farming, stability in landholding**

Over the past quarter of a century there has been a sharp decline in the numbers returning their principal occupation as 'farmer' for census purposes. This has been of the order of 1.5 per cent per annum since the mid-1960s. This decline has been most pronounced among small farmers. The number of farmers with under 30 acres declined by 62 per cent between 1971 and 1986, as compared to a mere 5 per cent among those with holdings over 100 acres. The total decline was of the order of 30 per cent. These trends accorded with theoretical expectations, and with early policy objectives.

**Table 1.** Percentage change in farmers and landholders.

Farmers 1971-86		Landholders 1975-87	
Size groups (acres)	% change	Size groups (hectares)	% change
<15	-72.7	<10	-5.8
15-20	-56.6		
30-50	-35.4	10-20	-10.3
50-100	-9.6	20-30	+2.5
100-150	-4.2	30-50	-0.1
150-200	-5.9	50-100	+0.1
200+	-8.0	100+	-0.5
Total	-34.3	Total	-4.8

Source: *Census of Population*, 1971, vol. 4, 1986, vol. 2; CSO, *Farm Structures Surveys*, 1975 and 1987 (special tabulations).

By contrast, however, there has been remarkable stability in the number of *landholders*. These declined at an average rate of only 0.5 per cent per annum over the same period. Available data do not correspond with census returns for either time-frame or farm-size groups, but the substantially lower rates of decline among landholders are clearly evident in Table 1. Whereas farmers of under 50 acres declined by one-half during 1971-86, landholders in this group fell by less than 8 per cent in 1975-87. Obviously, a high proportion of those who were landholders in 1986-87 had taken up part-time farming.

Table 2 shows clear gradations of exclusive farming dependence by holding size. Nationally, one-third of all landholders have another occupation besides farming. This proportion, however, is over one-half for those with under 10 hectares, and rises to around two thirds of those on holdings of less than 5 hectares.

Studies of part-time farmers (e.g. Higgins, 1983) show that their

**Table 2.** Status of farmwork among landholders, 1985: % of landholders for whom farming is sole, major or subsidiary occupation.

Size Group (hectares)	Farmwork as occupation		
	Sole	Major	Subsidiary
<5	34.9	9.2	55.9
5-10	52.5	11.3	36.1
10-20	70.5	10.2	19.3
20-50	80.2	9.7	10.1
50-100	84.2	9.1	6.7
100+	78.6	11.8	9.5
Total	66.1	10.1	23.9

Source: CSO, *Farm Structures Survey*, 1985 (special tabulation).

number increased by 71 per cent between 1961 and 1987. They are heavily concentrated near larger urban centres, and tend to be younger than their peers, and more likely to be married and in the early to middle stages of the family life cycle. Such part-time farmers also hold a wide range of jobs, with only a minority in unskilled manual work. This suggests that they have attained at least moderate levels of education or training (Higgins, 1983: 25). Most intend to continue both in farming and in their non-farm jobs, and anticipate their heirs maintaining this pattern. Thus, most of the original smallholders with commercially non-viable holdings have held on to their land. Approximately half these surviving smallholders have off-farm jobs and adequate household incomes, to which of course farm production or rental income contribute. But the symbolic significance of being a landholder and its status implications probably count for more than its purely economic returns.

Full-time commercial farming has become increasingly concentrated on the larger holdings, while, on the other hand, those smallholders who are too old, unqualified or too distant from off-farm opportunities to avail of them, now constitute one of the most poverty prone groupings in Irish society (Callan *et al.*, 1989: 102).

This quite relentless process of economic and social differentiation that has occurred among landholders is now clearly reflected in the socio-demographic and income characteristics of their households. Table 3 summarises some of the more relevant data for the present discussion.

It is clear from Tables 2 and 3 that between 40 to 60 per cent of smaller landholders and/or their spouses have off-farm jobs. Compared to these, the small-scale landholders who are completely dependent on farming for market income are much older, much less likely to be married, or, if married, much more likely to have no children at home. They have therefore much smaller households, and are generally at the end stage of

**Table 3.** Different characteristics of landholder households, 1987. A = Farm operator and/or spouse with off-farm job. B = Farm operator and/or spouse *without* off-farm job.

		Acres				All
		<30	30-50	50-100	100+	
1. % of all farms	A	38	37	20	17	29
	B	62	63	80	83	71
2. Age of operator (average)	A	46	44	43	44	45
	B	60	57	50	48	54
3. % married (farm operators)	A	74	80	90	89	81
	B	48	56	59	68	57
4. % with pensions	A	30	28	31	27	29
	B	56	38	31	25	38
5. % with Smallholders' Assistance	A	14	14	7	7	12
	B	38	20	9	7	19
6. Non-farm income as % of earned income	A	75	76	53	38	62
	B	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Derived from Power and Roche (1990).

the family cycle. Partly because of their advanced age and incomplete family status, most have substantially disengaged from farm activities. In turn, their households are highly dependent on state welfare payments. Pensions and 'Smallholders Assistance' (the 'farmers' dole') are the main sources of income of a substantial proportion of these households.

### Differentiation in farm production

One correlate of this economic and social differentiation in farming has been an increasing distinctiveness in the volume and type of production found on the different kinds of holding. There is increasing concentration of intensive dairying and tillage on the 'full-time', larger farms as against extensive dry cattle and sheep production on the smaller holdings. This is clearly illustrated in Table 4.

In 1960 only 40 per cent of the tillage acreage, and 28 per cent of dairy cows, were on holdings of over 100 acres. By 1987, tillage concentration on holdings over 100 acres had increased to 59 per cent, and dairying to 34 per cent. At the other extreme, tillage had by 1987 almost disappeared from small holdings; and the decline in dairy cow numbers on the small farms, from 22 per cent to 8 per cent, was even more precipitous. So, the highest income yielding enterprises, tillage and dairying, have shown substantial shifts up the farm size scale, while, on the other hand, the more extensive and lower income yielding types of farming, such as dry cattle and sheep, have become much more characteristic of the small farm category.

Table 4. Distribution (%) by size of holding of types of agricultural production, 1960 and 1987.

Size of holding (acres)	Tillage		Dairy cows		Other cattle		Sheep		Arable (crops and pasture) land	
	1960	1987	1960	1987	1960	1987	1960	1987	1960	1987
<30	15.6	6.9	22.0	7.2	18.0	14.8	15.7	12.7	17.4	13.9
30-50	16.6	9.0	20.5	18.6	18.3	18.2	17.7	14.3	18.5	17.2
50-100	27.7	24.7	29.9	39.8	27.7	32.0	25.9	30.0	27.8	31.5
100+	40.0	59.3	27.7	33.8	36.0	35.0	40.7	43.0	36.3	37.4
Total	1,651.9	1,066.6	1,274.7	1,587.4	3,442.5	5,273.2	4,285.0	4,991.5	11,147.2	11,519.3
	(000 acres)		(000s)		(000s)		(000s)		(000s)	(000s acres)

Source: *Agricultural Statistics, 1960*, and special tabulations from CSO, *Farm Structures Survey, 1987*.

Although in postwar agricultural policy intensive dairy farming was strongly advocated as the solution to the 'small farm problem', the reality has been that small-scale farmers themselves opted for the less lucrative drystock (cattle) farming. The growth of off-farm employment, and the increasing age and deprived family status of the remaining full-time small-scale farmers have led to a substantial fall in labour supply on small farms. Thus, despite the lower incomes from extensive drystock farming, this pattern of land use accords more readily with reduced labour and also more restricted capital resources on small farms. Drystock farming is also more compatible with part-time farming than dairying. Higgins (1983), for instance, found that 72 per cent of part-time farmers were mainly in cattle and/or sheep production, as against 53 per cent of full-time farmers (see also Lucey and Kaldor, 1969). National Farm Survey (NFS) returns show clear gradations by farm size in the contribution of cattle and sheep to gross farm output. In 1988 this contribution ranged from 66 per cent in the 2–10 hectare category to 36 per cent for the category of over 100 hectares (Power and Roche, 1990: 2.43).

Over time, therefore, most landholders have adapted quite rationally to market opportunities and constraints. They took up off-farm employment where their own farm resources were insufficient, where their job qualifications were adequate and off-farm opportunities were available. Where land resources were sufficient they intensified and increased output and incomes. Close to one fifth of the smallholder class, however, are quite impoverished, being mainly dependent on state welfare payments. In fact, as we detail later, state and EC supports to a large extent bankroll *all* farm-owning categories. Such assistance is provided through a series of production subsidies and market supports. 'Headage' payments for cattle and sheep on the small to medium sized holdings are of particular importance. The cumulative impact of welfare payments, supports and the removal of all land taxes, has been to encourage the vast bulk of the original landholding class to retain their land, albeit in varying degrees of comfort.

The maintenance of such a 'pre-industrial' property holding class right through into the 1990s has not been recognised in most analyses of contemporary Irish society, including Breen *et al.* (1990). Such an outcome can, however, hardly be unexpected, given the historical importance of this class and its favoured political status. Its unusual capacity to survive can be illustrated even more clearly by examining trends in household income sources and levels since the early 1970s.

### **Inequalities increasing in farm incomes, declining in total household incomes**

Analyses of incomes derived from farming between the 1950s and 1980s show a growing economic differentiation, and increasing farm income

inequality between the large commercial farmers and those on smaller farms (Commins 1986: 56). However, these conclusions about *farm income* need to be qualified by reference to data available from Household Budget Surveys for *total household income*. These surveys show that for both gross household income and disposable household income, the gap between the largest and smallest 'farmer' category narrowed between 1973 and 1987. In 1973, gross household income on farms of under 30-acres, where the main occupation of the head of household was 'farmer', amounted to 34 per cent of that on farms of over 100 acres. By 1987, the corresponding figure was 44 per cent. Gross household income rose faster on the smaller farms, as did disposable income, despite the fact that income from agricultural production showed a reverse trend. The factor of major influence here was the increasing contribution made on the smaller farms by non-farm earned income and by state transfers. While farm income increases have favoured the larger farms, changes in non-farm earned income, in state transfers and also in direct taxation have had the opposite effect.<sup>1</sup> The proportionate changes in incomes calculated per farm household are shown in Table 5. While farm income growth increased directly with farm size, non-farm earned income, and gross domestic household income, show the opposite growth pattern. Thus, even in the case of those holdings where the 'main occupation' of the household head remains in farming, and where farm incomes have *declined* in relative terms since the early 1970s, the total disposable income of smaller farmers' households has

**Table 5.** Percentage increase in components of farm household incomes 1973–1987, by size of farm (1973 = 100).

Income component	Acres				Total
	<30	30–50	50–100	100+	
Farm income	310	293	413	439	483
Non-farm earned income	934	1076	798	890	912
Total direct income	541	472	456	485	559
Total state transfers	1032	1091	1288	1535	985
Total gross income	669	548	502	512	605
Total disposable income	642	518	481	479	576
Average weekly disposable income, 1987 (£s)	156.25	165.27	230.18	357.50	224.22
% of workforce in households unemployed, 1987	13.3	8.5	6.8	7.0	6.5

Source: Calculated from *Household Budget Surveys* 1973 and 1987 (CSO, 1977, 1990b).

<sup>1</sup> Further details are given in Central Statistics Office (1980); and Rottman, Hannan, *et al.* (1982).

*increased* at a relatively faster rate than on the larger farms. As a consequence, total household income inequalities have narrowed.

### State transfers

In Household Budget Surveys, 'gross household income' is composed of earned income, other 'direct' but unearned income and state transfers. The main components of state transfers are old age and retirement pensions and unemployment benefit and assistance payments. The household economy of the smaller farms is now predominantly based on non-farm employment and state transfers. Combined, they account for over two-thirds of gross household income on farms under 50 acres. The changes between 1973 and 1987 are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Percentage Composition of Gross Household Income, 1973 and 1987, by size of farm.

Year	Income component	Acres			
		<30	30-50	50-100	100+
1973	Farm income	32.8	57.0	69.3	81.6
	Non-farm income	25.1	16.7	14.2	8.4
	Other direct income	15.9	14.0	10.9	7.5
	State transfers	26.1	12.3	5.5	2.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1987	Farm income	15.2	30.5	53.6	70.0
	Non-farm income	34.9	32.8	22.6	14.5
	Other direct income	9.4	12.2	9.7	7.9
	State transfers	40.3	24.5	14.0	7.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Calculated from *Household Budget Surveys*, 1973 and 1987 (CSO, 1977, 1990b).

The proportionate contribution of farming to total gross household income has halved on farms under 50 acres, while barely changing on the farms over 100 acres. Even within the farm income component on smallholdings, an increasing proportion is accounted for by livestock headage payments or other income subsidies. It is estimated that by 1989 almost two-thirds of family farm income on sheep farms, and 40 per cent on dry cattle farms, was represented by such production subsidies (Power and Roche, 1990). Clearly, 'market income' has a very particular meaning in these circumstances!

State transfers as a proportion of total household income display almost the exactly opposite pattern to farm income, accounting for over 40 per

cent of total household income on small farms in 1987 and less than 10 per cent on large farms.

Farming households, therefore, vary widely in their income sources. Although most small farms depend on incomes from a number of sources, three sub-groups are discernible:

- 1 a minority whose farming operations ensure a viable household income;
- 2 those 'pluriactive' households where farm incomes are mainly supplemented by non-farm earnings from various sources, and by different people within the household;
- 3 those farm households relying predominantly on state transfers, though with some farm income.

This last sub-group paradoxically may have survived, despite their impoverishment, because they had no realistic alternative.

Household Budget data, it should be noted, refer to 'farmer households' and do *not* include around a third of all landholding households where the 'main occupation' of the head of household is not in farming. Unfortunately, it is not possible from currently available sources to include these latter households in any combined classification. If it were, it would in fact be revealed that the original smallholder class has increased its income at a far faster relative rate than is shown in the gross income disparities in Table 5.

## The Adaptations of Smallholders and of the Lower Working Class: Some Comparisons

Having battled so long for their land, the Irish smallholders have been very loath to give it up. Except for a sub-group, they are not nearly as marginalised as most previous analyses have suggested (see Rottman *et al.*, 1982; Commins, 1986; Breen *et al.*, 1990). Only analyses using conventional occupational categories to describe complex class positions could have come to that conclusion. Although only 14 per cent of the workforce are now employed in agriculture, almost a quarter of all households in Ireland still own land. It is instructive to compare the changing situation of smallholders to that of the Irish working class.

From the 1970s to the late 1980s the market income of those smallholders who remained on farms improved to a far greater extent than that of the lower working class. Unemployment among the latter is now at crisis level. At the same time, the educational and social mobility chances of the children of smallholders are far more favourable. Ireland's

class structure and class cultures are, therefore, both more complex and more 'traditional' than allowed for by modernisation theory or 'the logic of industrialism'. It is the Irish working class whose situation is now problematic, and who are experiencing economic and cultural alienation.

In the following we first examine the extent to which the rural and the urban working classes gained from Ireland's modern industrialisation process. Secondly, we examine the degree to which children from both class backgrounds gained from educational mobility.

### Income and employment changes: 1973–1987

The analyses of household income changes by family farm size and by social class, in Tables 5 and 7 respectively, show relative increases in different sources of household income between 1973 and 1987. The results demonstrate clearly that, even where small-scale landholders have remained in full-time farming, total disposable household income on these farms has not only increased at a much faster rate than on larger farms but also substantially faster than in all working class households.

The main reason for this trend is the extraordinarily rapid growth in unemployment among the lower working class. If one includes school leavers still seeking their first job, by 1987 44 per cent of all adults in the

**Table 7.** Percentage increase in components of household income by 'social class' categories, 1973 to 1987 (1973 = 100).

Income component	Social class of head of household					Total
	Higher and lower professional	Salaried employees and intermediate non-manual	Other non-manual	Skilled manual	Semi- and unskilled manual	
Earned income	621	598	561	509	377	563
Total direct income	623	603	573	513	393	566
Total state transfers	1,094	1,068	1,060	1,354	1,100	1,036
Total gross income	635	632	624	583	510	615
Total disposable income	555	562	575	539	496	556
Average weekly disposable income 1987 (£s)	302.96	224.91	197.67	198.08	158.97	200.96
% of workforce in households unemployed in 1987	6.1	12.5	21.1	25.0	37.0	18.0

Source: Calculated from *Household Budget Surveys*, 1973 and 1987 (CSO, 1977, 1990b).

labour force in lower working class households were unemployed. This rate has almost tripled since 1973.

Actual income levels on farms of under 30 acres are much the same as in lower working class households (Tables 5 and 7). Similarly, state transfers account for around 40 per cent of total disposable income in both cases. In lower working class households state transfers comprise mainly unemployment payments. On smallholdings, in contrast, such transfers are made up mostly of pensions and 'Smallholders Assistance', a specific income supplement not dependent on 'unemployment'.<sup>2</sup> If one adds in that proportion of farm income that is accounted for by state and EC supports, statutory income support for the smaller, poorer farmer is substantially greater, and of a less dependency-creating nature, than that for working class households. This holds true despite the fact that, at first glance, the latter households are in a far more deprived position than small farm households. In many respects, if one is to be unemployed it certainly pays to have some land! In addition, the social and psychological 'diswelfare' effects of unemployment and low incomes are far more serious in working class households (Whelan *et al.*, 1991).

### **Relative educational mobility and employment chances of smallholders' and working class children**

With the exception of a brief period in the 1970s, the expanding Irish economy never provided enough places for all young people leaving full-time education and seeking employment (Sexton *et al.*, 1991). Fertility increased rapidly up to 1980 as did the natural increase in the labour force. At the same time, substantial employment declines occurred in both agriculture and traditional industries (Breen *et al.*, 1990: 60). Thus, even though total employment increased in most periods, it was not sufficient to absorb both the increasing number of new entrants to the labour force and the older unemployed workers displaced from declining sectors. Moreover, although the agricultural workforce had almost halved between 1961 and 1981, the number of farmers' children (of less than 15 years old) declined by only 20 per cent. And of course, their tendency to stay on the farm lessened significantly, from about 30 per cent of the cohort of the early 1960s to around 15 per cent of that of the early 1980s. As a combined result of these trends, the actual volume of outflow from farm backgrounds into the nonfarm labour market declined only minimally from 1961 to

<sup>2</sup> At various points throughout this chapter we draw conclusions which are derived from calculations based on official statistics. An additional set of tables documenting these calculations is available from the authors on request.

1981. Given the general over-supply of labour and, as we shall see, the greater educational attainments of those from farming backgrounds, working class school leavers faced severe competition in the Irish labour market over most of the period.

The rather dramatic level of employment and occupational restructuring that occurred from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s is clearly described by Breen *et al.* (1990). There were substantial declines in small scale farming, agricultural labouring, and unskilled manual employment. Most of the new positions demanded, at least, second level educational and training qualifications. With employment and occupational mobility chances becoming increasingly dependent on educational attainment, the relative underachievement of children from working class backgrounds put them at a very serious disadvantage in the labour market (Breen, 1984a; 1991b; Hannan, 1986).

Educational participation rates increased rapidly from the mid-1960s, particularly from the introduction of 'free education' in 1967. In the mid-1960s almost one third of all primary school leavers finished education at that stage, the participation rate for 14 to 19 year olds being only 25 per cent (OECD, 1966: 169, 170). By 1971 the latter rate had almost doubled, while school leaving at primary level had almost ceased. By the end of the 1980s over 70 per cent of the relevant age-cohort were completing second level education, and only 6 per cent were dropping out of second level schools before taking any junior cycle examinations.

Social class and regional inequalities were very pronounced in the 1960s, with disparity ratios of almost five to one between upper middle class and lower working class children in their chances of completing second level education (Rottman *et al.*, 1982: 52). But these ratios had narrowed considerably even by the beginning of the 1970s. By the end of the 1980s, the ratio of upper middle class to lower working class children completing the Leaving Certificate had fallen to two to one (see Table 8).

What is striking about the figures for the 1960s is the similarity in the low participation rates at second level of boys from lower working class and small farm (<30 acres) origins. Around half of both groups did not go further than primary education (Hannan, 1970: 66, 70). Although the one study available for this period of participation rates by size of farm is small and highly regional, later studies for the 1970s and 1980s show equally wide variation in this respect. Within the agricultural sector, therefore, 'class' inequalities were just as marked in life chances as in the non-farm sector.

By the late 1980s, however, less than 15 per cent of children from farm backgrounds came from farms of less than 30 acres, compared to 40 per cent in 1961. Such smallholdings are now predominantly operated on a

**Table 8.** Educational participation rates by social class, 1960s and 1980s.

Father's class	1960s		1988-9 (National)	
	1961 (National) %left school at Primary Level	1964 (Cavan) % Primary only <sup>a</sup>	%with Leaving Certificate	%to Third Level
<b>Farmers</b>				
<50 acres	—	35	66	21
50-100 acres	—	23	75	34
100+ acres	—	19	83	42
All farmers	25	33	73	31
<b>Non-farm</b>				
Upper and intermediate non-manual	12	10	87	45
Other non-manual	20	21	68	21
Skilled manual	17	21	70	19
Semi-skilled and unskilled manual	46	49	48	11

<sup>a</sup> For the Cavan study valuation of farms was used a variable rather than farm size: an approximate conversion would be: <£30 = <50 acres; £30-£44 = 50-100 acres; £45+ = 100+ acres.

Sources: OECD (1966); Hannan (1970); School Leavers' Survey (1988-9).

part-time basis, and parents are not classified as farmers. Thus, we now have reliable figures only for farms of under 50 acres. Comparing the educational attainments of school leavers from such small farm origins with those from working class origins, as in Table 8, we find that the former have been substantially more successful than the latter. Two-thirds of children from small farm backgrounds complete the Leaving Certificate and over one in five go on to third level. The attainment levels of children from lower working class background are, proportionately, almost a third lower at Leaving Certificate level, and one half lower at third level. By the end of the 1980s the attainments of children from small farm backgrounds had come to resemble those from skilled manual and lower non-manual backgrounds.

Over the whole period, not only have smallholders as a class succeeded in retaining their property and relative income position, but they have also succeeded in capturing a significant proportion of local off-farm employment opportunities. They have been more effective than working class families in utilising the education system to gain access to such off-farm opportunities for their children. Thus, both demographic pressures

from the farm sector and the greater educational achievements of farmers' children helped ensure that the upward mobility of working class children was significantly constrained.

We now turn to place the foregoing discussion in the context of the origins and enduring nature of the small scale farm sector in Ireland prior to the adaptations of recent decades.

### The Importance of the Traditional 'Peasant' System

There are distinctive features in the historical development of the Irish family farm system that relate directly to the changes that occurred in the post-1960 period. The 'peasant' or small-scale farming system emerged late in Ireland, based on the far-reaching land ownership transfers between 1870 and 1920. These transfers led to the metamorphosis of the impoverished tenant farmers of the post-Famine period almost entirely into peasant proprietors, to the destruction of the rigid and exploitative landlord system, and to the emergence of a new stratification order dominated by 'middle peasants' (Crotty, 1966; Lee, 1973; Hannan, 1979). By the beginning of the 1920s the immense structural changes in the rural and national stratification order, which had occurred over the previous fifty years, had brought about substantial absolute rates of upward mobility for the mass of small-scale and middle-sized farmers, as well as significant improvements in their living standards. Such improvements, however, were not maintained owing to apparently declining productivity levels on their newly owned farms (Crotty, 1966: 92-107). What appears to have occurred up to the late 1950s is the stabilisation of a pattern of agricultural production significantly oriented to subsistence, particularly in the small farms of the west and south-west (Hannan, 1979).

The transition from tenancies to widespread property ownership had far-reaching economic effects, as well as outcomes of social, cultural and political significance. It took place in a context of severe economic rationalisation in the rural economy, so that by the mid-1920s dependence on farm employment had increased greatly relative to the 1870s. By 1926 56 per cent of total Irish male employment was in agriculture. The quite diversified rural economies of the 1870s were replaced by an economy dominated by family farming, with most of the active population being either farmers or farmers' 'relatives assisting' (Rottman *et al.*, 1982: 39-74). Furthermore, while the status, security and wellbeing of the peasant proprietors themselves improved substantially over the period in question, the life chances and the local reproduction opportunities for non-inheritors painfully contracted (Hannan and Hardiman, 1978; Hannan,

1979). The reason for this lay in the extremely discriminatory nature of the single heir inheritance system on family farms, combined with the virtual extinction of most local off-farm economic opportunities for non-inheritors. Arensberg and Kimball (1940) provide a classic description of this 'stem family' system at work.

The economic rationalisation of the rural economy, accompanied by large-scale outmigration of the 'surplus' population on farms, did, however, leave intact a relatively comfortable small farmer class. In fact, the social structure of that class appeared so stable and 'traditional' that Arensberg and Kimball (1940) not only invoked functionalist explanations for the high degree of mutually supportive relationships present, but also culturalist explanations of 'immemorial custom'—which custom had, however, a very brief history indeed.

Despite this lack of historical depth, particularly in comparison with that of peasant life in other West European countries, at least in Connacht and west Munster a particular form of peasant economy, culture and social structure prevailed up to the 1960s (Hannan, 1979). Its most notable feature was perhaps its highly effective, but discriminatory, survival and reproduction pattern. Marriage rates among inheritors remained high until the 1940s, and fertility rates among married farmers were extremely high (Walsh, 1968; Hannan, 1972; 1979). Moreover, while inheritance rules discriminated severely in favour of a single heir, there were effective arrangements for the dispersal and social placement of non-inheritors. Such arrangements included emigration—often managed through kinship networks abroad. But particularly notable was the tendency to seek secure, off-farm, employment opportunities for brighter non-inheriting children. Educational attainment and examination success were seen as the path to professional and public service employment. On this point, it is remarkable that the highest second level completion rates, and third level entry rates, for recent youth cohorts occur, precisely, in those counties which historically shared the main features of this peasant society (Clancy, 1988).

Resilient though this system was, it did experience increasing strains, especially as a result of the income difficulties faced by farmers on the smaller holdings. Among the latter, marriage rates declined rapidly from the 1940s onwards. Consequently, in the face of declining economic circumstances, the formation of complete nuclear families, fully dependent on family farm income, became increasingly problematic. Thus, by the 1960s a considerable proportion of smaller farmers were old and unmarried or, if married, had no direct heirs (Scully, 1971). Moreover, their objectively poorer situation was now less protected by a high level of cultural autonomy, or by strong and supportive local kinship and neighbour groups (Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Hannan, 1979). However,

what is noteworthy about this heirless and poverty stricken category of small farmers is that the general expectation of their holdings coming on the market, and supposedly resulting in the creation of larger and more economically viable farms, was not realised. Heirs appeared from unexpected places, but mostly from wider kinship networks, with the result that little decline occurred in the total number of landholders. As a consequence, farm consolidation proceeded very slowly. Increasingly, small-scale landholders came to depend less on farm production for their sole livelihood.

If, therefore, we consider the full set of differentiated adaptations of the smallholding class as a whole, rather than concentrating on the residual category of 'farmers', their economic marginalisation was not as pronounced as might seem. In fact, their generally successful process of adjustment clearly belies the negative prognoses that were made on the basis of the deprived status of small farmers in the 1960s (Scully, 1971).

By 1961, 42 per cent of total male employment in Ireland was still in agriculture, mostly in small-scale family production units, with a median size of 38 acres (Hannan, 1979: 27-66). The system still retained a strong, self-confident sense of its own culturally independent importance, and politically 'deserving' status, within Irish society. This helps explain why, when the Irish economy started to grow rapidly in the 1960s, the small scale landowners were in a much better position than the working class to use the new opportunities that became available.

## State Policy, Political Context and Culture

The persistence of the Irish small farm sector cannot be understood without reference to its generally favourable political treatment, in particular in agricultural and industrialisation policies and in income maintenance measures.

### **Land immobility and small farm policy**

We are concerned here with the way in which the rigidities of the Irish land structure and related agrarian policies have helped to sustain the small landholding class. High levels of immobility in ownership and user rights to agricultural land have been characteristic of Ireland since the late nineteenth century. Connell (1968: 116) argued that the land legislation of that time, in converting farmers from tenants to proprietors, made them more ambitious in their yearning to establish the family name on particular pieces of land. It does appear that ownership solidified the strong bonds

of attachment to the land. Certainly, the system of peasant proprietorship, introduced against a background of rapacious landlordism, stifled the evolution of any form of long-term leasing of land (Inter-Departmental Committee on Land Structure Reform, 1978: 26). As already noted, despite declines in agricultural employment, land consolidation to allow farm enlargement did not take place to any significant extent.

Instead, the land policies of the new Irish state were highly redistributive in character. The Irish Land Commission (the state agency responsible for land restructuring) became an extensive purchaser and distributor of land, creating new holdings mainly through the sub-division of those large estates that survived from the days of landlordism. While the Commission gradually obtained strong compulsory powers to acquire land which was not achieving adequate production, such powers proved difficult to use in the face of local popular opposition and frequent legal challenges. The Commission's redistribution policy brought only one-third of its farm enlargements up to its own standards of viable size. Irrespective of its stated priorities, the Commission had to have regard to 'the situation on the ground' and, in practice, the only feasible policy was to give a little land to everybody deemed to qualify (*Inter-Departmental Committee on Land Structure Reform*, 1978: 39). Nevertheless, even these marginal improvements enabled a large proportion of smallholders to remain in farming for at least an additional generation, thereby satisfying their deepest aspirations. Landless farm labourers and non-inheriting sons were not, however, extended this advantage. By the time of rural industrialisation in the late 1960s most of them had already left the countryside.

Another factor contributing to the retention of landholdings was that, for most of the period from the 1960s onwards, it was more economically attractive to retain possession of land than to sell it. In times of rapid inflation and rising land values, it made sense to hold on to land. Furthermore, assessment of means, against payment of the Old Age Pension, was likely to result in a lower imputed value to production from the family holding than the actual income that could be obtained from selling the land. Receipt of the Old Age Pension also conferred other benefits such as free public travel. In this context, special pension schemes to induce elderly farmers to retire, and release the use or ownership of their land to other farmers, did not prove attractive to the targeted population. In addition, younger low income, small-scale farmers could obtain Smallholders Assistance. Such income support could not be as easily secured if the land were sold. It should be noted also that there has been little imposition, such as property taxes, on landholders, and none at all over the past fifteen years.

Besides land policy, several related turning points can be discerned in the 1960s in state action in relation to small farms. An Inter-Departmental Committee on the Problems of Small Western Farms (1962) declared boldly that, for the most part, holdings under 15 acres were fundamentally non-viable. The Committee advocated certain measures to support small-farm development, such as production incentive bonus schemes, intensive advice, and a pension scheme enticing elderly owners to relinquish their land for use by active farmers. The 1965 Land Act did in fact provide for an early retirement pension but few farmers found it attractive.

The Committee, however, also recommended that the weight of future efforts by the state in small-farm areas should be directed towards providing non-farm employment through industrialisation, afforestation, tourism development and 'other ancillary activities'. The Second Programme for Economic Expansion accepted that programmes of agricultural development in small farm areas were not, of themselves, capable of meeting the problems of these areas. It recognised the need for 'an integrated approach' to rural development. In other words, the policy goal of stabilising the population on *farms* gradually ceded way to the objective of stabilising the *rural* population. By 1969 the Government's Third Programme for Economic and Social Development had consolidated the shift in ideas and strategies. It was stated (1969: 44-45) that:

In the long run the only real solution to the problems of farms which cannot be made to provide a reasonable livelihood lies not in agriculture alone but in the comprehensive development of rural areas through the expansion of industry.

### **Rural industrialisation policy**

Policy debates about industrialisation in the late 1960s and early 1970s revolved very much around the centralisation or dispersal issue. The Buchanan Report (1968), mindful of the need to maximise new employment in total, favoured a strategy of moderate concentration, focused on the promotion of regional centres. Recognising the obvious risks to its political support in favouring such a proposal, the government instead opted for a wide dispersal of industrial development 'in order to minimise internal migration and population dislocation'. Accordingly, the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) embarked upon a strategy of setting manufacturing job targets for groups of towns (*Regional Industrial Plans*, 1973-77). Mainly as a result of these policy changes, male industrial manufacturing employment grew by 107 per cent between 1961 and 1981 outside Dublin and Leinster—where such job increases were only of the order of 20 per cent. Indeed, in Dublin city itself such employment actually

fell, as the traditional industrial base declined rapidly. Overall, the IDA's policy of rural industrialisation had substantial success in generating local employment opportunities, which enabled many smallholders to supplement their meagre farm incomes and thus remain on the land.

### **The EC experience**

Policy measures consequent on Ireland's membership of the EC have also made a contribution to the persistence of small-scale landholding. While it is a fact that the price and market policies of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have skewed the financial benefits of EC membership in favour of the larger producer, Ireland has been quite successful in directing non-price policies to the advantage of its smallholders. Over recent years considerable lobbying has led to a substantial extension of measures in support of farming in 'disadvantaged areas'. Livestock farming which, as we have seen, is the mainstay of small farms, is now heavily subsidised by the EC.

### **Political context**

State policy 'favouritism' towards the small-farm sector derives from the institutional and cultural context of Irish politics and from the small-farm, and generally petty bourgeois base, of the dominant political party. Moreover, the civil and public service has traditionally attracted people from medium- to small-farming backgrounds. Thus, the legitimacy of the political bias towards small farming has rarely been challenged from within the state system.

However, the historical dominance of the rural petty bourgeoisie in Irish economic and political life, and their uniquely advantaged position in the state's taxation and transfer systems (Rottman, *et al.*, 1982; Breen, *et al.*, 1990), are only partly based on their favoured status in the nationalist ideology. They are also very practically grounded in the capacity of small farmers for political organisation. The public articulation and promulgation of their interests is based on skilful ideological use of the mass media and effective mobilisation to protect and advance their shared interests. Several characteristics of farmers as a class make such mobilisation possible. First, there is the political transparency of their class interests in product prices and in a whole range of other state and EC supports, which have increasingly become politically negotiated. Second, farmers live in long established, and generally class homogeneous, communities which have strong local descent group characteristics and limited geographical mobility. Third, farmers' organisations also represent much

wider landholding and property interests, and use a rhetoric whose resonance extends far beyond their own membership. In all these respects, the contrast with the working class, and its relatively limited capacity for mobilisation, is obvious.

Even with the emergence of neo-corporatist arrangements for the negotiation of state policies, farmers have retained privileged access to the bargaining table. And although the issues articulated in agricultural policy discussions may reflect primarily the concerns of the larger farmers, the fact remains that the interests of small farmers still receive greater attention than those of the working class.

### **Political culture and ideology**

In considering the survival of the small farm sector, the analysis of Irish political culture is highly relevant. As a predominantly agrarian society, and one in which land issues were associated with a long struggle for national political independence, the new Ireland inherited powerful strains of rural fundamentalist ideology. The writers of the Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century popularised a vision of rustic dignity and virtue while often spurning 'this filthy modern tide' (Brown 1981: 83). The founders of the modern co-operative movement were also inspired by a vision of a rural civilisation. Irish rural fundamentalism, like that found in other largely agrarian societies, was expressed through a set of values and beliefs which stressed: (i) the advantages of family-owned, family-operated farms and of a numerous class of landholders; (ii) the healthy nature of farming as an occupation, and open country farming communities as ideal settlement models; and (iii) agriculture as the basis of national prosperity. Support for the family farm ideal, as well as for having as many people as possible working on the land, was even inserted in the Irish Constitution of 1937.

This Irish version of rural fundamentalism was also congruent with Catholic social thought, which advocated the wide diffusion of private property ownership together with the desirability of owner-operated farms (Commins, 1986: 52). Significantly also, leading churchmen espoused the cause of small farming and rural development (Lucey, 1955; Bohan, 1979) while there is little equivalent episcopal concern on behalf of the lower working class.<sup>3</sup> In the postwar decades it became increasingly difficult to

<sup>3</sup> Despite the increasing deterioration in the conditions of the lower working class in Dublin over the past two decades, it is almost inconceivable that an equivalent Episcopal response would arise to that of the recent Western Bishops' Conference on the problem of the small farm Communities of the West of Ireland.

reconcile the rhetoric of rural fundamentalism with the economic realities of small-scale farming, but state action programmes still actively pursued various strategies to maintain viable rural communities.

Ireland affords an example of a polity in which the political concerns and style of the rural periphery came to invade and dominate the urban centre for more than a generation (Garvin, 1974: 324). Rural ideological perspectives, Garvin argues, have persisted in an urban context because patterns of mobility are such that a large proportion of those influential in urban society are likely to have a rural cultural background. The core of the Dáil in the 1980s, just as in the 1960s, was provided by farming and small-business groups, with strong rural and small-community affiliations (Garvin, 1982: 28; Chubb, 1970). Governments led by Fianna Fáil, the dominant political party, systematically spread their cabinet appointments around as many counties as possible, usually giving the western periphery a disproportionately generous share (Garvin, 1974).

In a rural society, where survival is linked closely to state transfers and subsidies, 'the political style will be extremely familial, personalistic and clientelistic' (Carty, 1981: 9). Moreover, patron-client structures are a typical outcome in societies where peasant values and social institutions exist. In the Irish political culture, there have been mutually reinforcing tendencies between peasant survival and patronage politics. Fianna Fáil has owed much of its electoral success to support from the small-farm counties. Although it gradually accommodated itself to an emerging urban bourgeoisie, it continued to favour its original political base. While public administration has grown more complex and centralised, political styles remain dominated by intercessionary politics, with members of the Dáil 'going around persecuting civil servants' in return for the favour of support at election time (Chubb, 1970). The personalism of clientelistic politics is inextricably bound up with the primary relationships of an agrarian-based rural society.

In this political context, and given the particular culture and forms of Irish political organisation, it is therefore, hardly surprising that the Irish smallholder class should have received such favoured attention.

## Conclusions

We have outlined the survival of a numerous land-holding class in Ireland right into the 1980s. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, although the number of those whose main occupation was farming declined at a rate of 1.5 to 2 per cent per annum, landholders declined at less than 0.5 per cent per annum. Even when landowning people shifted occupation from

farming, they mostly held on to their land. By the end of the 1980s at least a third of all those with 'farm' holdings with some agricultural activity, and a somewhat higher proportion of all landholders, were mainly dependent on off-farm employment. Until at least this time, little land sale or consolidation had occurred. Off-farm employment, therefore, has been one of the most successful 'survival strategies' adopted by the original smallholding class.

The communities of this class have disproportionately benefited from industrial expansion policy, and its members have adapted with relative success to the educational demands of the labour market. In an economic and demographic context in which labour supply has consistently outstripped demand, the Irish smallholding class has consistently won the competition with the working class for industrial jobs, as well as for upward educational and social mobility for its children.

The late survival of a substantial small-scale landholding sector in Ireland created not only a large reservoir of displaced labour but one that possessed specific cultural and institutional advantages. At least up to the mid-1980s, the 'cultural adaptiveness' of families and individuals from the older peasant, or small farmer, communities has in fact been much more in evidence than the cultural and social-psychological demoralisation of these communities perceived by some anthropologists (e.g. Brody, 1973). There appear to be at least three underlying reasons for this. One is the well-oiled reproduction and dispersion strategies of the stem family system, developed in the most straitened economic circumstances, which have provided small-farm communities with a 'significant beginning advantage' (Hannan, 1979). The 'stem family' system, it should be noted, has no counterpart among the urban working class. Secondly, such farm communities are still largely based on local descent groups, with much stronger ties of mutual support and shared identity than are generally found even within homogeneous working class communities—which, in any case, even in the 1960s when they were more stable and secure than now, held only a minority of all working class families. Thirdly, within the smallholder class, mobility aspirations are higher and more varied, and perceived social and geographic barriers to their attainment less constraining, than among the working class. Thus, over a number of generations, farm families have developed much more widely dispersed kinship and status connections (Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Hannan, 1979).

Such advantages have been reinforced by favourable state intervention. Crucial policy decisions were taken in the late 1960s which recognised the futility of attempting to maintain employment in small-scale farming. Regional and industrial location policy shifted away from the creation of new growth centres, and from supporting declining centres, towards the

goal of a widely dispersed industrialisation. The expected marginalisation and likely impoverishment of small farmers were matters of much greater political concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s than that of declining employment opportunities for the urban working class. The importance of the allegiance of small farmers to Fianna Fáil was hardly incidental. Indeed, Irish political culture has, in general, been disproportionately influenced by this class.

Finally, though, these positive conclusions about the survival capacity of the smallholder class need to be balanced by two more negative findings, which may offer pointers to the future. First, those smallholders who are unable to supplement farming income by off-farm employment now constitute one of the main recruitment bases for poverty in Ireland. Secondly, preliminary evidence on land inheritance and sale trends at the end of the 1980s suggests that either the older 'heirless' owner, or his or her heir, is now less likely than before to hold on to the patrimony. But, whatever about the future, there is no denying the numerical, cultural and political significance of the 'peasant residue' in modern Ireland. Previous accounts have provided a predominantly negative evaluation of this phenomenon (Brown, 1981; Garvin, 1974, Lee, 1989). Our argument counters this view, and draws attention to the manner in which the persistence of this landholding class constitutes a crucial respect in which the Irish case deviates from the pattern of social development that would be envisaged under the liberal model.

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