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The Agrarian Myth; How Has it Affected Agricultural Policy?

By

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The Agrarian Myth: How has it affected Agricultural Policy?

In his presidential address to the Southern Historical Association in 1960, William Hesseltine commented on the role myths have played in American history[1]. A myth is the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, and customs from one generation to the next. He stated historians have often ignored the role myths have played in American development.

One of the four myths he discussed was the yeoman tradition. The term yeoman referred to plain honest men in England and the term was used commonly in colonial America. The " agrarian myth" refers to a nation of yeoman farmers who worked to produce abundance rather than to make money. The intent of this paper is to address the role the agrarian myth has played in forming agricultural policy.

The independent farmer as the backbone of democracy is an oft-repeated supposition. It has been the basis for countless government policies ranging from land tenure to food assistance programs. Historians have pursued this topic in all its themes ranging from presidential election propaganda to income support programs for farmers. How the agrarian myth has influenced politics and policy in the United States is explained in the next sections.

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[1] William Hesseltine, "Four American Traditions," *Journal of Southern History* 27 (February 1961): 3-32.

Presidential Politics

The first president, Washington, was a large landowner and a progressive agricultural experimenter. He began the agricultural tradition, and presidents were of rural origin from 1790 to 1877. Jefferson was perhaps the staunchest supporter of agrarianism to serve as President. Madison, Monroe, Jackson, Tyler, and Polk were all Southern planters. Harrison and Taylor represented frontier agriculture in the Northwest and Southwest areas of the United States. The Adamses hailed from a typical New England farm. Van Buren and Buchanan both claimed rural backgrounds.

Brown revisited the relationship of United States Presidents and the agrarian myth in 1957.[2] The appeal of the sturdy yeoman as a symbol of honesty, integrity, democracy and statesmanship is deeply rooted in America. Political propagandists have used this from Andrew Jackson to Dwight Eisenhower. The voter has always been assured of the agricultural roots of the candidate. They are also presented as having been torn from the plow to save the state and the candidate is seen as a self-sacrificing patriot. The presentation of candidates in this light intensified from the 1920s to the late 1950s.

The myth also played a role in the first political party battles. The Jeffersonians in their attacks on the Federalists appealed to the moral primacy of the yeoman farmer. The battle between the Jeffersonians and

[2] W. Burlie Brown, "The Cincinnatus Image in Presidential Politics," *Agricultural History* 31 (January 1957): 23-29.

Federalists has been portrayed as a conflict between the patrons of agrarian self-sufficiency and the proponents of modern commerce. The actual conflict existed between two ideas of how capitalism would develop in the United States.

Jefferson's enthusiasm for agriculture was not an attachment to the past, but rather a vision of how planters and farmers could raise food rather than tobacco, which would keep the profits in American hands rather than those of British tobacco merchants. Jefferson saw the inability of Europe to grow enough food for its growing population as an opportunity for Americans to market foodstuffs to them. Ordinary farmers could now maintain the basic structure of the family farm, but increase profits. Technological improvement made this possible, not slave labor, specialization, or large holdings that characterized commercial agriculture. It was through agricultural development that Jefferson thought ordinary men could "escape the tyranny of their social superiors".

He joined the concepts of political democracy and economic freedom. Jeffersonian economic policy was not anti-commercial as has become the common characterization. Rather, a commitment to growth through the exertions of individuals. Those individuals would have economic opportunity protected and facilitated by the government.

Jeffersonian Agrarianism

Grampp reexamines Jeffersonian economics in 1946.[3] Jefferson has been labeled in literature as a Physiocrat, an advocate of agrarian self-sufficiency, disciple of Adam Smith, and a protectionist. The author points out the obvious. That is, it is impossible for Jefferson to have been all of these, at least simultaneously. However, what is generally not questioned is his elevation of agriculture. He stated, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God".[4]

Jefferson's romantic notions of agriculture influenced his political positions on various fronts. He advocated for a nation of agrarian self-sufficiency supported by household manufactures. Those who were opposed to the industrialization of America used Jefferson's agrarianism to further their cause.

The author notes that by 1793 it seems Jefferson was aware of the unlikelihood of his ideal agrarian self-sufficiency becoming a reality and there was a change in his economic policy [5]. He no longer advocated free trade and agrarianism, but instead supported a system of protection. But, it is his early writings and proposals regarding the yeoman farmer that are remembered.

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[3] William Grampp, "A Re-Examination of Jeffersonian Economics." *Southern Economic Journal* 12 (1946): 263-282.

[4] *Writings*, II, p. 229. (All references of Jefferson's works are to the Bergh edition.)

[5] William Grampp, "A Re-Examination of Jeffersonian Economics." *Southern Economic Journal* 12 (1946): 277.

Origins of the Agrarian Myth

In a 1948 book by Griswold, the tie between farming and democracy is examined in detail.[6] There is a general idea that somehow the fate of the United States is somehow bound to the fate of the agricultural community. There is a romantic appeal to the family farm as the symbol of the good life in this country. It stands for democracy in its purest and most classic form.[7]

This belief persists despite evidence to the contrary. Rural conditions include hunger, unemployment, ill health, poor education, and inadequate housing. The family farm has been in decline almost since its conception and the farm population continues to decline every year.

So, where did this "agrarian ideal" come from and why does it persist? As stated earlier, Jefferson is largely responsible for the agrarian myth. He is the embodiment of the agrarian democracy idea and his writings are the American origin of the tradition. However, Griswold posits the concept of moral superiority of the farmer did not originate with Jefferson.

Agriculture has been exalted above all other occupations for centuries. Aristotle, Xenophon, and Hesiod write of its prestige among the Greeks. Similarly, the Roman writers Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Pliny, Cato, Varro, and Columella wrote of the prestige of farming. Socrates

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[6] Alfred Griswold, *Farming and Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948).
[7] Ibid. , 5.

contributed to the motto of the French Physiocrats of the eighteenth century. Medieval and Renaissance writers revered agriculture as well.

The idea was also not uniquely American. It existed in other countries as well. Moral ascendancy of agriculture reached its peak in England and France during the second half of the eighteenth century.[8] Farming and rural life were a craze among British and French at the beginning of the industrial revolution in England.

Quesnay proposed an economic system known as Physiocracy. At the heart of it was the idea that agriculture is the only true source of wealth. The physiocrats applied John Locke's philosophy of natural rights to economic life. This marked the peak of agriculture's economic and moral prestige.

Policies

Against this background, Jefferson and his colleagues formulated their thoughts on agrarian life and agriculture. Jefferson's ideal of democracy as a collection of family farms inspired lawmakers and influenced the thoughts of all regarding rural life.

One of the first national policies to result from the agrarian myth was public land law. The purpose of these laws was to disseminate land widely among independent landholders for the purpose of creating a family farm. The support of the myth was also responsible for the

[8] Ibid. , 21.

opening of the trans-Allegheny region and the purchase of the Louisiana Territory.[9]

The creation of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1862 is also in the Jeffersonian tradition. The goal of which was to acquire and diffuse useful information on subjects connected with agriculture. The role of the USDA has since expanded from technical and scientific areas into economic and social areas.

The Jeffersonian ideal can also be found in the New Deal. Preserving the family farm had evolved from an implicit goal of policy to an explicit goal. The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act and the Farm Security Administration are also the culmination of the agrarian tradition.

Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier examined farm policy in detail from Franklin Roosevelt to Eisenhower. [10] Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was the start of the central government being responsible for the economic welfare of people. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 that provided benefits to farmers was part of this legislation. The disparity between farm and non-farm income was seen as the biggest problem of farmers. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 was written to equate agriculture with other industries. The family farm was recognized as a "central point" in our cultural background. The AAA was to raise farm

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[9] Ibid. , 45.

[10] E. Schapsmeier and F. Schapsmeier, "Farm Policy from FDR to Eisenhower: Southern Democrats and the Politics of Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 53 (1979): 352-371.

prices and protect farmers from the competition of large-scale farm operations.

The political heirs of Thomas Jefferson were the Southern Democrats. They played a major role in the implementation of New Deal farm policy. They extended more influence on farm legislation than their minority numbers warranted. They were able to influence legislation using a strategic voting alliance with Midwesterners who represented corn interests and Great Plains representatives of wheat growers.

They were motivated by a concern for the farmers as well as a fear of the rural radicalism that might spread if nothing was done to improve the economic situation of farmers. The Populists, Grangers, and other agrarian groups were perhaps the first organized voice of citizens advocating the family farm. These groups looked for solutions to farmers' problems. They advocated a permanent public policy to alleviate the problems of rural America.

The yeoman tradition furnished the background for the Populist movement in politics. The Populist movement ultimately failed, but is an example of the power of the yeoman tradition. The influence can also be seen in the incorporation of agricultural research and vocational education in schools.

Fact or Fiction?

In his book, Griswold traces the origin and evolution of the relationship between farming and democracy in the United States. He

concludes that Jefferson's idea is no longer a valid basis of public policy. The tradition of the farm population as the best measure of a nation's welfare is also no longer valid, if it ever was.

The seminal article by Hofstadter published in 1956 addresses this very point. [11] That is the validity of the tradition of the family farm. He asks the question: did it ever exist? There were large numbers of farmers during the colonial period. Well into the Nineteenth Century these farmers were similar to the idealized yeoman in the myth. However, self-sufficiency was adopted for a short time with the hopes that eventually they would become commercial farmers.

People have always been drawn to the noncommercial, non-pecuniary, self-sufficient aspect of American farmers. However, Hofstadter claims the farmer was inspired to make money, but self-sufficiency was forced upon him by a lack of transportation and markets. Commercial goals spread to agricultural classes much as it had the rest of American society.

As this transition continued, it only deepened the attachment to the idea of farming as a self-sufficient way of life. A further contributing factor to the perpetual myth was the farmer himself. Even after the yeoman farmer was practically extinct, replaced by commercial farmers, the farmer continued to think of himself as a yeoman.

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[11] Richard Hofstadter, "The Myth of the Happy Yeoman," *American Heritage* 7 (1956): 43-53.

Abbott published an article examining how the agricultural press viewed the yeoman between 1819 and 1859. [12] His findings support Hofstadter's thesis that the "happy yeoman" never existed. Abbott proposes that if the agrarian myth had ever existed, it had lost its appeal by the mid nineteenth century, even among farmers.

In his 1961 article, Anderson examines how much of the agrarian creed persisted in the 1920s and 1930s.[13] He defines agrarianism using three doctrines. The first of which is the conviction that agriculture is fundamentally superior to other occupations. The second doctrine is farming as a way of life, not a business. The tenet that America should remain a nation of small yeoman farmers is the final doctrine.

To assess the general level of acceptance of these tenets, he refers to farm journals, Congressional records, and speeches made by agricultural spokesmen during this time period. All of these documents were filled with agrarian sentimentality. Farming is referred to as the source of all wealth. From this, Anderson concludes the first doctrine was still broadly accepted. However, economic reasoning was beginning to replace the moral arguments. By the end of the 1930s, one rarely found moral arguments for the superiority of farming as an occupation. Instead, economic reasoning stressed the importance of interdependencies among industries.

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[12] Richard Abbott, "The Agricultural Press Views the Yeoman: 1819-1859," *Agricultural History* 42 (1968): 35-48.

[13] Clifford Anderson, "The Metamorphosis of American Agrarian Idealism in the 1920s and 1930s," *Agricultural History* 35 (October 1921): 182-188.

Farm spokesmen still spoke of the second tenet of agrarianism, but business or labor leaders rarely expressed the sentiment. The farmer was being seen more and more as just another businessman. Business and labor leaders adopted this argument, as did large commercial farmers.

Support for and against the final doctrine could be found among farm supporters. Many farmers rejected the idea of a rural America due to the inevitability of urbanization. Also, many admitted that too many people living off the land was not in their best interest. However, many clung to the belief that urbanization would lead to national ruin.[14]

Anderson concludes that while agrarianism was still broadly supported in the 1920s and 1930s, moral arguments were being replaced with economic arguments. The growth of large-scale commercial farming supported the view of the farmer as a businessman. Arguments for the interdependency of industries coupled with the urbanization of America also served to undermine agrarianism.

Why does it persist?

Gerster and Cords contribute to the understanding of why the agrarian myth persists, not only in the south, but perhaps even more so in the north. [15] The reasons for this are numerous, but southern

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[14] Ibid. , 187.

[15] P. Gerster and N. Cords, "The Northern Origins of Southern Mythology," *The Journal of Southern History* 43 (November 1977): 567-582.

literature has played an important role in perpetuating the region's mythology.

To many, the South symbolizes a purely agricultural past. Hofstadter explained that the United States was born in the country and moved to the city. As the nation moves further from its agricultural origins, there is an imagined glory of tillers of the soil as ideal men and ideal citizens, and the South stands for these solid values of agrarianism.

The South and thus farmers of the South have taken advantage of the good will the agrarian myth has accorded them. The North's fascination with the agrarian myth and the South's personification of the idea has allowed the South to manipulate the situation for its own advantage. Agricultural income support programs are one example of how this has played out politically.

Current Situation

While many Americans may still believe in the yeoman farmer, he does not exist to any great degree. In 1935, there were 6.8 million farms. In 1997, there were 1.9 million and 350,000 of those accounted for almost 90 percent of farm production. Despite the falling number of constituents directly involved with production agriculture, the farm sector has managed to maintain a strong presence in Congress.

The government first became significantly involved in farm policy during the 1930s, when one in four Americans lived on a farm. However, the image of the struggling farmer is still a powerful political tool. The

reverence in which farmers are held continues despite large corporate agribusinesses that dominate the industry. In fact, their dominance only makes the plight of the small farmer more sympathetic. This partially explains the clout the farm lobby still enjoys.

Another reason the farm lobby remains strong is because they have maintained a nonpartisan image. Farmers realize they must present a united front. Therefore, Midwestern soybean farmers support Georgia peanut growers because it serves everyone's interest. Also, the programs that are attached to farm bills influence members of Congress who represent urban members. Nutrition programs such as Women, Infants and Children (WIC) have been key in securing support for farm legislation.

The most unlikely ally of the farm lobby in recent years is the environmental community. Strong wetlands and conservation provisions in the 1995 and 2002 farm bills win support from the environmental lobby. The ability of both the farm and environmental groups to appear as constituent groups rather than special interest groups is also important. Farmers are also better informed about legislative policy than other citizens because it directly affects their profitability.

Although farmers still enjoy the goodwill of most Americans, the legitimacy of farm bills that help the small farmer is increasingly being called into question. In a recent Newsweek, Robert Samuelson severely criticizes the 2002 farm bill, calling farm subsidies political bribes and

useless. Also, bad publicity regarding pollution of rivers and streams by corporate hog farms and broiler houses tarnishes the steward of the land image of farmers.

Conclusions

The agrarian myth at its core is the relationship between agriculture and democracy. It began with Jefferson who idealized farmers as virtuous, independent, and valuable citizens. The reason farmers were thought to be better citizens than traders or manufacturers was due to their vested interest in the nation and society. Farmers are bound to the land, which cannot be moved. Therefore, their interest and the nation's interest were the same, which cannot necessarily be said for traders or manufacturers.

Other historians have debated the historical mythology of farming as a set of ideas that significantly affected the development of the United States. Hofstadter, for instance, argues the agrarian ideology was outdated before the twentieth century. However, Grant McConnell, Donald Pisani, and Peter Daniel believe agrarianism has continued to motivate Americans in the twentieth century, particularly in the desire for a true egalitarian democracy.[16]

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[16] Donald Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West, 1850-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

Bradley proposes the argument that the agrarian ideology has simply mutated. Even now, the set of ideas symbolizes the conditions and life experiences of many groups in American Society. The agrarian ideology can be used to promote and legitimate the interests of these groups.

This demonstrates two important points regarding how the agrarian myth has influenced farm policy. First, agrarianism is alive and well in the twentieth century. Second, agrarianism adapted as the economy shifted from a rural based economy. Two concepts emerged during this adaptation. The notions of entrepreneurship and individualism were emphasized. Also, notions of good citizenship, equality and opportunity for those starting out became more important. The agrarian myth has become a persuasive rhetorical device to promote the interests of agrarian reformers.[17]

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[17] Karen Bradley, "Agrarian Ideology and Agricultural Policy: California Grangers and the Post World War II Farm Policy Debate," *Agricultural History* 69 (Spring 1995): 256.

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