AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
http://ageconsearch.umn.edu
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

THE ROLE OF RURAL BELIEFS AND VALUES IN AGRICULTURAL POLICY[1]

John M. Brewster, Agricultural Economist[2]
Agricultural Research Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture

The beliefs and values that I shall talk about are rural to the bone, but they do not stop at the farm fence. In great measure they inhabit the mind and conscience of all America. For the sake of brevity and precision, I often substitute the term "value judgments" for "beliefs and values."

My theme stems from three observations: (1) The heart of any serious policy problem is a conflict of deep-seated value judgments. (2) In our generation, the central farm policy problem is excess farm capacity that takes the form of chronic surpluses and relatively low farm income per capita. (3) In the classical view, this is a short-run affair because in the long run, outfarm migration will shift excess farm workers into nonfarm employments until that combination of land, labor, and capital is reached in which equal rates of return are realized from all similar resource uses in all parts of the economy.

These facts give rise to several questions. What are the key value judgments that have been the chief guides to national policy formation since early times? What is the model of social organization that traditionally has been viewed as promising fulfillment of these values, and what important events shaped it? What is the connection between these values and the tremendous surge for technical advance that unfolded our Machine Age, including modern scientific agriculture with its burdensome excess capacity and relatively low income? In what respect does modern technical advance in agriculture throw these pre-machine creeds into conflict, thereby generating serious policy problems?

---

[1]With minor exceptions, the materials of this paper are taken from three of the author's writings: (1) "Value Judgments as Principles of Social Organization," Proceedings Papers of the Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Section, Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Social Science Association, March 27-28, 1958; (2) "Technological Advance and the Future of the Family Farm," *Journal of Farm Economics,* Vol. XL, No. 5 (December 1959), pp. 5096-1609; and (3) "The Impact of Technical Advance and Migration on Agricultural Society and Policy," prepared for the joint meeting of the American Farm Economic Association and Rural Sociological Society, August 26, 1959. All documentations are omitted here as they are included in the other three papers just cited.

[2]The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Farm Economics Division, Agricultural Research Service, or the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

KEY POLICY-GUIDING VALUE JUDGMENTS

In developing the key policy-guiding judgments of value, a useful point of departure is the observation that one of the most dominant drives of men is the aspiration for ever higher status and the fear of falling to a lower one. As here used, status is the standing—the approbation and esteem—that an individual covets for himself in the eyes of all observers, including his own. The vital center of the status aspiration is the love of merit and aversion to demerit. This sense of merit and demerit is the self-acceptance or self-rejection that arises from an individual's judgment regarding whether he demonstrates or fails to demonstrate an equivalence between his capacities and the level of approbation and esteem he covets. William James observed that:

> No more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain unnoticed by all members thereof. If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did—a kind of impotent despair would ere long well up within us from which cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief . . .

This is but half the truth. An equally fiendish punishment is the feeling of being so barren of meritorious capacities as to be undeserving of anyone's esteem. Any equating of the status drive with the mere thirst for popularity thus falls to the ground. We are often popular with others but unacceptable to ourselves. Conversely, a man may feel deeply that the larger community withholds from him or his class their desserts. Then instead of eating himself out with self-blame, he becomes a formidable animal—a rebel demanding a new social order that will accord him the status, the dignity, his endowments deserve.

Thus including a sense of merit and demerit, the status aspiration can be gratified neither by social esteem alone nor by self-esteem alone. The complete objective is twofold: To be the kind of person who deserves self-approbation, and also to belong to a social order that recognizes one's capacities. In line with this double objective, the status drive includes commands of mind and conscience concerning ways and objects of life that are to be prized because they best demonstrate meritorious capacities. These commands are the value judgments that are a people's chief guides to policy formation, and in this way shape their destiny.

Early in American life this status aspiration unfolded into three groups of value judgments that are especially relevant to our problem. These groups are called the work ethic, the democratic creed, and the enterprise creed.

Three judgments of the work ethic are pertinent here.

1. The first is called the work-imperative. Negatively expressed, this imperative is the judgment that one fails to deserve the esteem of

self, family, country, and even all men if he places love of backward or "easy" ways above love of excellence in any useful employment of his choice. Positively expressed, it is the judgment that the proper way of fulfilling the status striving is to be the kind of person who: (a) merits his own high esteem because of proficiency in his chosen field and, therefore, (b) deserves a social order that prizes him for the same reason. With the so-called materialistic income incentive thus encompassed in the sense of merit, the drive that leads the farmer to adopt new cost-reducing and output-increasing technologies is obviously not merely the love of lucre but the aversion of mind and conscience to disesteem.

2. By including superior industry as the proper test of desserts, the work-imperative also includes a unique concept of justice. This concept is expressed in the judgment that society owes to each man: (a) the equivalent of his contributions and also (b) equal access to the means necessary for developing his creative potential to the fullest extent possible. The first of these is called commutative justice; the second is the justice of equal opportunity, sometimes called distributive justice.

3. Finally, in American lore the work ethic includes the judgment that, in their productive capacities, individuals and the nation alike possess ample means for closing the gap between their present circumstances and their aspirations. According to this belief, human capacities are quite capable of improving without limit the lot of the common man. To believe less puts a ceiling on the American Dream and belittles the promises of American life.

The second set of key policy guides in American life are the two central value judgments of the democratic creed: (1) All men are of equal worth and dignity and (2) none, however wise or good, is wise enough to have dictatorial power over any other.

The third set of key policy guides are the judgments of the enterprise creed. Two of these are especially relevant to our problem: (1) Proprietors, or their legal representatives, deserve exclusive right (or power) to prescribe the working rules of their production units. (2) Therefore, a prime function of government is to prevent anyone, including government itself, from restricting the otherwise unfettered power of proprietors to run their businesses as they please.

Deserving emphasis here is the fact that the *enterprise and democratic creeds include opposite meanings of freedom*. Embodied in the enterprise creed is a negative sense of freedom. To be free is to be left alone, unmolested by collective restraints on managerial power of proprietors to run production units as they see fit. In sharp con-

trast, the democratic creed includes a positive sense of freedom. It has never meant an absence of collective restraints on individual action; it has always meant the right and power of each to an equal voice in deciding what rules all must observe for the sake of the common good. There is scarcely a greater source of mischief than the confusion of the positive meaning of freedom in the democratic creed with the negative meaning of freedom in the enterprise creed. This confusion drags the whole American heritage under the skirts of the enterprise creed. This creed has thus been used to try to block almost every piece of social legislation ever passed on the grounds that it threatened our democratic way of life.

While all three creeds are deeply rooted in American life, they are not necessarily connected. A people may feel deeply committed to the work ethic and yet totally reject the enterprise creed. Again, all men possess no specific meritorious capacity in equal degree; hence, the democratic imperative that we accord all men a status of equal dignity and worth clashes sharply with the work-ethic imperative that we accord them differential status in line with the results of their productive effort.

LOCKEAN MODEL OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION TRADITIONALLY VIEWED AS FULFILLING PREMACHINE CREEDS

The fact is, however, that in American life these disconnected creeds became interlocked in one of the most unified belief systems in history. Why? How?

This came about mainly through a three-century association of the fulfillment of all three creeds with what is often called the Lockean model of social organization. This model takes its name from John Locke, who, in his *Treatise of Civil Government* first held that the good world lies in a sharp division of society into a big natural order, subject to no collective rules, and a tiny political sphere of popularly controlled government that keeps its hand off the "state of nature," later named the free market.

Of the many events that entered the shaping of this model, five are especially relevant to our problem. Three of these have their setting in the Old World; two in the New. They are substantially as follows:

1. The first of these is the part the Protestant founders played in the rise of the work-imperative.

Before the Reformation all classes, nobility and serfs alike, shared a deep aversion to work beyond the amount required to support one's customary mode of life. This was not because people were lazy; they could think of no reason, except greed and miserliness, why reason

and conscience should demand anyone to forego leisure and consumption for the sake of working more than necessary to meet his customary need. The one exception was the monasteries where men viewed themselves as exemplary doers of God's work. They viewed this work as a highly specialized occupation designed to utilize one's entire energies in an unremitting expression of gratitude for God's infinite love and gift of eternal life. For accomplishment of this purpose, the entire 24-hour day was at length organized into a series of professional routines that were known as the Holy Callings. Thus, the essential attitudes of the work-imperative were first incubated in the monasteries.

Zeal for infusing all human activities with a God-seeking spirit led Protestant founders to shift the work-imperative from Holy Callings to secular employments, saying that all occupations are equivalent opportunities for systematic expression of gratitude for God's goodness. This shift of the older Christian concept of God's work from religious to secular occupations precipitated an irreconcilable clash with the feudal separation of the managerial and labor roles of lords and serfs. Resting on the widespread belief in prowess as the proper test of merit, this division of functions accorded to those who did no work the dignity, the approbation, and esteem which the ages had posited in the lords of the land. Such a world allowed no room for the new conscience of the work-imperative.

2. But the 17th century philosophers, especially John Locke, neatly resolved this conflict by imaginatively slipping both roles inside the same skin. Simple as this trick may seem, it gave birth to the democratic creed and the enterprise creed, and combined both these and the work ethic into a single whole by setting up the judgments of all three as laws of nature—not of men.

Consider first the democratic creed. To affirm that nature combines in the same skin the hitherto separate managerial and labor roles of lord and serf is to say that, in the very act of birth, she makes each man a king. To men with this imagery of themselves, no laws of nature are more obvious than that: (a) All are of equal dignity and worth and that (b) none, however wise or good, is good or wise enough to have arbitrary power over any other; hence, all should have an equal voice in formulating the rules which all must observe for the sake of the common good.

Again, the philosopher set up the work-imperative of the Protestant founders as a law of nature. For, to affirm that nature combines within each skin the managerial and labor roles is to say that she outlaws prowess as a test of merit because this test leads to their separation into lord and serf, which is contrary to nature. Again, through the

same combination of roles, nature limits the size of firms to the point where families can do most of the required labor and management. In this way, she so limits income inequalities that she obviously: (a) returns to each the equivalent of his contributions and also (b) gives to each equal access to the means needed to develop this productive potential to the fullest extent possible. Thus, the natural order embodies the concept of commutative and distributive justice, inherent in the work-imperative.

In like fashion, the Lockean model sets up the judgments of the enterprise creed as laws of nature. In combining in the same individual (or family) the hitherto separate managerial and labor roles of lord and serf, nature renders households and firms identical. This means that the real estate and implements of firms are but extensions of the personalities of proprietors—the embodiment of their saving, investment planning, and productive effort. Therefore, interference with proprietary power to run production units robs proprietors of their nature-given freedom.

The philosopher was quick to see that in the absence of collective restraints on the natural rights of each to be equally lawmaker, judge, and policeman, men would turn on each other like wolves. But he declared that ample remedy lay in a process of mutual consent whereby rational men agree to eliminate insecurity of life and property by setting up a central group called the government and handing over to it their natural rights of lawmaker, judge, and enforcement officer with the tacit understanding that the prime function of this government is to protect the natural rights of proprietors to run their businesses as they please.

3. A third condition rooted this Lockean model and its creeds of life far more deeply in the American culture than in the European. This condition was the emergence of a system of family farms as the expansion of the Old World into the New pushed past the outposts of the Atlantic seaboard. As explained elsewhere, the belief-forming role of this institution in our national life is immense. By combining into the same individual the hitherto separate managerial and labor roles of lord and serf of the Old World, it gave through direct experience a much richer imagery of the precepts of the Lockean model than the European could ever gain indirectly from the philosopher's verbalizations of this model.

4. As handed down by the philosopher, this model has a conspicuous loose end. The philosopher offered the statesman no evidence, except intuition, that if government only withdrew its guiding hand, the state of nature would lead self-seeking individuals in ways that

would most enrich the commonwealth. Instructed through the ages in the opposite belief, the statesman felt that this intuition severely overtaxed his credulity. To ease this burden of undocumented faith was the historic mission of the classical economist. Among his numerous contributions to the Lockean model, two are especially relevant here.

The first is that no business can be big enough to affect the prices at which it buys or sells. As government was the only power then big enough to affect price, the wise statesman would stop government from meddling with the economic domain because nature guarantees that no one can increase his income except by giving to society a correspondingly greater equivalent through improved industry.

Again, if only government will keep its hand off, nature will see to it that every scrap of resource will be shifted among various employments until it makes its maximum contribution to the gross national product. For, under the guidance of competitive rivalry, owners always tend to transfer their resources from lower to higher income uses until the earnings of all similar resources are equal. Thus, the natural order is like Tennyson's "far off divine event toward which all creation moves." At all intermediate points, lower incomes in any employment than can be explained by transfer costs or personal tastes is prima-facie evidence of underemployment of resources.

5. A fifth condition rendered the Lockean social model a far more potent vehicle of the previously specified creeds of life in America than anywhere else. This condition was the 200-year interaction of a virgin continent of opportunities with the attitudes of the work-imperative. In America the Malthusian law of life did not apply, and minds were emptied of memories of past defeats. However severe the privations and cruelties of the new continent, it would nonetheless turn into marvelous shapes and forms under the touch of patient industry. As men saw the oak in the acorn, so they envisioned farms in swamps and thickets, ports and cities in river bends, paths of commerce along the wild-game trails, and even jewels in the grubby earth if only they dug and hoed enough. In this fashion, romantic imagination at length unfolded the American Dream as the assurances of nature and providence alike that the workmanlike capacities of even the humblest men offer ample means of closing the gap between their present circumstancs and their aspirations. Enkindled by this magnificent dream, America conquered her vast wilderness within a century after the formation of the Republic—a feat that even the founding fathers had thought would take a thousand years. This achievement reinforced the promises of the American Dream.

In this way, the dream as well as the work ethic, the democratic creed and the enterprise creed, became interlocked in America, as

nowhere else, with classical economic doctrine, even though laymen had never heard of it. In no other country have the tenets of this doctrine evoked such affection. Here as nowhere else, anyone who advocated departure from sound economic doctrine could be silenced with the retort that he was putting a ceiling on the American Dream.

CAUSAL CONNECTION BETWEEN PREMACHINE CREEDS AND MODERN TECHNICAL ADVANCE

This three-century interlacing of the Lockean model with the otherwise disconnected judgments of the work ethic, the democratic creed, and the enterprise creed released an avalanche of vital energies that literally reshaped the world. This is particularly true with respect to the work-imperative. The older Protestant shift of this work-imperative from religious to secular employments expanded religious and moral aspirations to include the conquest of nature. Vast energies hitherto released in building great cathedrals now found new expressions in sailing the seven seas, turning deserts into gardens, conquering pests and disease, breeding scrub stock into fine herds, and transforming hovels into firesides of good cheer. These were new songs of salvation. Thus, the older quietism was transmuted into a new urgency to seek the ancient vision of man's dominion over his surrounding universe.

In American agriculture, this truth best unfolds from the vantage point of an earlier day when land was so abundant as to be "dirt cheap," while the scarce human factor was extremely dear. In this setting, nothing was more obvious than that fulfillment of the desire for higher standing through superior industry lay in discovering new implements and machines that would increase the amount of land and materials which one could handle per unit of time. In response to this belief, American farmers became notorious tinkerers long before the birth of agronomists and agricultural engineers. The experiences of the most outstanding of these tinkerers such as McCormick, Oliver, and Deering, who first conceived and brought forth many of agriculture's implements and machines, are inspiring.

But farm people themselves were the first to recognize that their own tinkering could never produce the technical knowledge needed to realize their aspiration for a better life through superior industry. They were sure that this new kind of knowledge would have to be provided as a specialized service by a larger social order, which did not then exist. The kind of knowledge then supplied by the existing order was serviceable, by and large, only to those exempt from manual employments such as lawyers, artists, and ministers; it was useless to the ordinary farmer seeking a cure for a sick calf or trying to make two blades of grass grow where only one had grown previously.

With the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, the government began to take increasing responsibility for supplying farmers with the practical knowledge needed to develop their productive potential to the fullest extent possible. The history of the Republic contains no finer chapter than that on how the nation's effort to meet this need with little more than a sprawling farm on which some experienced farmer instructed young men in the best-known farm practices of his time, and within the short span of a century unfolded into the modern system of land-grant colleges, experiment stations, and extension services that is today the wonder of the world.

From these vast incubators now flows an ever-increasing stream of technical innovations on so many fronts and at such rapid rates as to threaten the very existence of the typical farmer. But, even though he may thus live almost under the very crack of doom, no article of faith is more deep seated than his unquestioning identification of technical advance with progress. Though it slay him, yet will he trust it.

TECHNICAL ADVANCE IN AGRICULTURE GENERATES CONFLICTS BETWEEN WORK ETHIC AND ENTERPRISE CREED

So rapid is the rate of technical advance that total farm output capacity averaged 8 percent more than consumption needs from 1949 through 1956. No letup to this development of excess capacity is in easy sight. Even if technical inventions in agriculture came to a dead halt, estimates are that the food and fiber demand of our 1975 population could be met through full use of presently available farm technologies.

In this way, the work ethic now meets the peculiar irony of fate. The very technical advance, long called for by the aspirations of this ethic, now generates an excess farm output capacity that depresses earnings of farm workers substantially below those of workers with like ability in nonfarm employments. In 1956, for example, the income gap between farm and nonfarm families of similar labor capacities was estimated to be roughly $2,000 on the average. Gaps of this magnitude can hardly be explained satisfactorily by the reluctance of farm people to change employment because of the cost of moving to nonfarm jobs, preferences for country life, and other factors that are consistent with perfectly functioning markets.

This suggests the existence of impediments to the migration of farm people into nonfarm employment at rates needed to fully remove excess farm capacity. Hendrix has recently demonstrated that these impediments do not reside in the peculiar characteristics of farm people but in the nonfarm economy that normally keeps nonfarm employers from making full use of the supply of workers who want jobs at wages

they pay. Failure to remove the excess production capacity puts farmers in a cost-price squeeze that so siphons off the benefits of their improved industry to the rest of society that they are the lowest paid of any major occupational group.

A frequently suggested remedy is a program of collective restraints on individual producers that would enable all farmers to achieve an optimum output from the standpoint of themselves and the public alike. In principle, farmers tend to want such a program to protect them against a market that denies them an equitable share of the benefits of their technological advance. But they also resist it in the belief that it is wrong to deny proprietors the right to run their businesses as they please.

In this way, the farmer's technology puts his conscience in a jam. The question at issue is not the democratic freedom of each to have an equal voice in laying down the rules which all must observe for the sake of the common good; the issue is the kind of malady from which the farmer most seeks liberation. Does he most prize a democratic order that restrains him from farming as he pleases in order to prevent his being deprived of an equitable share of the benefits of his increasingly superior industry? Or does he most want a democratic order that subjects him to this injustice but leaves undisturbed his proprietary power to farm as he pleases? Either choice is consistent with our democratic creed. Thus, the value conflict generated by our highly productive farm technology and limited markets is strictly a clash between the deep-seated love of commutative and distributive justice, inherent in our work ethic, and the equally deep-seated love of unfettered proprietary power inherent in our enterprise creed.

Until we really face up to this clash of values, we may never find a program that can resolve the farm surplus problem in line with our work ethic concept of justice and our democratic concept of freedom.

CONCLUSION

An implication of the foregoing analysis is that no simple solution is in sight for the nation's underemployed manpower in agriculture because America, by and large, has no clear conception of what she wants: neither the kind of people nor the forms of social organization she most prizes and aspires to achieve. Without this knowledge no people can realize more than a fraction of their creative potential, economic or otherwise. This does not mean that our older sense of values must be junked. It does mean that our older creeds are in for some teeth-jarring shake-ups that may lead to wider visions of their essential meanings and the forms or organization and action appropriate to their fulfillment.

In this re-examination of our older creeds, farm people might find it helpful, if in addition to indispensable charts and figures on the cost-price consequences of the alternative policy choices, they also had at least three nonquantitative factors before the mind's eye. These are: (1) clean-cut identifications of the key value judgments that have long functioned as the chief guides to our policy reflections; (2) a clear picture of the salient premachine conditions that generated these premachine creeds of life and harmonized them so wonderfully well in the Lockean model of social organization; and finally (3) a clear picture of specific respects in which the machine age now throws our premachine creed into conflict at numerous points, thereby generating serious policy issues. While such items of information are nonquantitative in nature, they are no less relevant to policy deliberations than the how many's and the how much's.