



Sustaining Life on the Land

Reflections on Rural Life

THE CULTURES OF AGRICULTURE AND THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL TEACHING

BY
BROTHER DAVID ANDREWS, CSC, JD
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE CONFERENCE
@1998

Introduction

In Wendell Berry's essay, "Conserving Communities" from *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry makes an analysis of the forces at work in a globalized economy. He sees this as a split between the "locals" and the "globals." It is a movement toward a two-party system which divides over the fundamental issue of community. One is the party of the global economy; the other he calls the party of local community:

"The natural membership of the community party consists of small farmers, ranchers, and market gardeners, worried consumers, owners and employees of small business, self-employed people, religious people, and conservationists. The aims of this party are only two: the preservation of ecological diversity and integrity, and the renewal, on sound cultural and ecological principles, of local economies and local communities."

The adjective "sustainable" when it precedes the word - agriculture - is subject to many ambiguities. The law creating the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Iowa defines "sustainable agriculture" as "the -appropriate use of crop and livestock systems and agricultural inputs supporting those- activities which maintain economic, and social viability while preserving the high productivity and quality of Iowa's land." The references' to "social viability" and "appropriate use" are both intended to keep the public alert to include the structural component in discussions of sustainability.

To address structural issues in food production requires topics such as: the value of anti-corporate farming laws, fairness of contract production terms, restrictions on processors in monopoly activity, legality of premiums for large marketers, appropriate location for land use regulations. It also requires examining whether such issues ought to be addressed by local governments or exclusively at the state level.

The sustainability of agricultural production as related to protection of the land's, the economic and social viability of a community is a matter of culture

A culture can be described as "the meaning and value of a way of life." There are four cultures of agriculture.

Yeoman Agriculture

Yeoman agriculture is focused on the family and local community in this culture, cooperation prevails over competition the family members each cooperate with each other. Parents and children each have, their respective roles and domains of labor and recreation, with a lot of interrelatedness. If one neighbor needs help, the others are there to assist. Whether one speaks of harvesting or home building, enlivens the community.

The framework which holds the family and community, together is a tradition that is passed from one generation to the next. For this culture, religion is an integrating force in life, it is the bond that holds everything else together. Intergenerational transfers of the farming operation is important in, this type of agriculture., Things are produced for cash and personal consumption. The land is, to be held in trust for future generations. So it is treated with reverence. Yeoman agriculture has goals which transcend economic goals. Institutional carriers of these values-include native Americans, the Amish, and many smaller scale independent family farmers, market gardeners and the like.

Entrepreneurial Agriculture

Entrepreneurial agriculture is related to the influence of the small-town business methods onto the rural life-style. Entrepreneurial agriculture arises in situation in which family boundaries are extended in networks of association such as business societies, fraternal orders women's associations. The cultural hope is expressed in "climbing the agricultural ladder". This meant that if one did not inherit a farm one might aspire to own one by moving up the ladder from sharecropper to tenant farmer and from tenant farmer to owner-operator. The culture of the farm shifts from family as a primary

focus to incorporate refinements in values, and attitudes. The temporal, horizon shifts from life long, multigenerational perspectives to the annual budget. The focus becomes more on individual success which is measured in profits. There is a high value on being one's own boss. There is less of a commitment to farm ownership continuity by keeping the farm in the family.

Rather than family and local community, the culture fosters strong self-reliance and individualism. Religion, is separated from one's livelihood. The social constraints of local community and values achieved in hard work give dignity and civilized shape to this culture of agriculture. Overt greed is unseemly in the social dynamics of small towns. Institutionally the National Farmers Union and the National Farmers Organization carry the traditions of entrepreneurial agriculture.

Investment Agriculture

This form of agriculture seeks to systematically incorporate all individual and discretely distinct economic and productive activity into a larger whole for a globalized market. Profit is the goal. The temporal horizon has shrunk from generations, to annual accounts, to now a focus on quarterly or monthly stock reports. It is a culture driven by globalization of capital. No longer are we focused on local, regional or national levels. Corporate agriculture relies heavily on the use of advertising technologies.

This type of agriculture brings with it a concentration of land ownership, economic control, and consolidation of power. It seeks to control production through intellectual property laws, a control over biotechnological research, by developing designer "genes" It has been a powerful force for the deregulation of the country side and has brought downward pressure to bear on governments at every level. Murphy Family Farms, Cargil, ConAgra, IBP, the Land Grant Colleges, the FSA, Extension Service and national banks tend to favor this type of agriculture.

Sustainable Agriculture

It attempts to restore a lost connectedness between the earth and the human community. Proponents foster the encouragement of intentional communities and smaller human-scale operations in agriculture. The farmers explore microenterprise development and value-added activities like local processing, local marketing, local distribution networks. Sustainable agriculturalists encourage the adoption of alternative agriculture and appropriate technology over and against the investment agriculture's focus on large machinery-giant technological inventions, center pivot irrigation systems, concentrated

livestock production in poultry and hogs, are significant examples.

Among the efforts for this alternative view are consumers who look for nutritious food, less dependence on chemicals like, pesticides and herbicides. They place a priority on people and the earth rather than on profit. In this culture, we see greater efforts at cooperation among members seeking a new system. There are as well correlative efforts at the formation of credit systems, mediating structures of counseling, information sharing, and crisis intervention. In Iowa, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, a number of rural sociologists and economists at Iowa State University, The Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture, programs from University of Iowa and the University of Northern Iowa, The Iowa Environmental Council, Professor Neil Hamilton and the Drake Center for Agricultural Law and others practice and educate for the meanings and values of sustainable agriculture. Other states have equivalent organizations. A number of religious congregations throughout the United States teach these approaches as well.

Cultural Trends in Agriculture

What kind of futures can we envisage with the cultures of agriculture?

The first cultural trend we see is the growth of investment agriculture, the subject of a recent statement by the American agricultural economist Harold Breimyer:

"The founding of our country, was basically an escape from the feudal system in: Europe in which the Lords owned all of the land and the serfs worked it for them. Now, we're moving into an industrial situation where the farmers become wage employees, and the masters are a few large corporations."

A second cultural trend for the future might be described as the declining mixed middle ground. This will be made up of traditional yeoman and entrepreneurial family farms trying to compete or to hold their own in an increasing investment culture. A common characteristic of these farmers might be uncertainty about their future in agriculture. The question many of these farmers will face is - do I take the leap? do I become bigger? Or, do I get out now? The older farmers may be hoping to ride out the remaining years of their farming by holding out until retirement.

A third direction will found by sustainable agriculture. It has a historical grounding in the yeoman culture and structure of farming in the United States with its agrarian, Jeffersonian ethos. The culture promoted civic republicanism was community. Not Locke, Hobbes or Adam Smith, but the Greek Polis and Humanism were the philosophical roots for this agrarianism.

What will lead the voice of agriculture? Will the forces leading to industrialization pose a threat to our ability to protect a dispersed land ownership system, broad participation in farming, active, local democratic most at home on the farm in the local processes, a stewardship of the land and of local communities - a sense of responsibility to future generations? What legal policies will promote sustainability?

Catholic Social Teaching and Sustainable Agriculture

John Paul II has given us a good standard by which to examine our own performance. In his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he named three considerations for close examination:

First, development must recognize the nature of each being and its mutual connection with everything else in an ordered world. Animals, for example, should not be used simply for economic gain. They have their own place, in the cosmos and as the Catholic Catechism says: "deserve respect and dignity."

Second, natural resources are limited, we have a responsibility to own and to future generations to care for them in a responsible stewardship.

Third, local peoples deserve respect and a healthy, wholesome quality of life.

When applied to the cultures of agriculture, these perspectives give us valuable guidance in appraising the direction of future economic and social dynamics.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is a membership organization grounded in a spiritual tradition which brings together the Church, care for creation and care for community. The NCRLC fosters programs of direct service and systemic change. As an educator in the faith, the NCRLC seeks to relate religion to the rural world; develops support services for rural pastoral ministers; serves as a prophetic voice and as a catalyst and convener for social justice.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference:

4625 Beaver Ave.,
Des Moines, IA
Phone: (515) 270-2634
Fax: (515) 270-9447
E-mail: ncrlic@aol.com
(Used with permission.)