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An Evaluation by a Political Scientist

ANDREW HACKER¹

I SHALL CONFINE myself to a few impressions about the preceding papers and shall try to be both brief and candid.

THE THEOLOGIANS

I must confess that to me the points made by the theologians are uniformly disappointing. Almost without exception they explore the niceties of religious doctrine. Surely there is no need to propound and rehearse the various theological principles at such length. More annoying, scarcely any effort at all is made to relate these generalized propositions to the specific problems of agricultural goals and values.

I had hoped something would be brought out about the problems encountered by priests, ministers and churches in rural settings. There seem to be several reasons why this was not done. The first is that most of the theologians represented here are from administrative offices and theological schools — not from the countryside parishes.

Moreover, the theologians are from the respectable, articulate and well-organized sects. But it is my impression that a large proportion of rural Americans are affiliated with fundamentalist churches. Fundamentalism is still a strong force, especially in the countryside, and it would be instructive to have its social viewpoint stated. My impression is that the fundamentalists are conservative in temperament and often quite intolerant in outlook. At all events, I should like to hear their viewpoint.

¹ Professor of Political Science, Cornell University.

Also lacking is the viewpoint of a Negro minister from a rural church. Almost six million Negroes still live in rural areas and this group, which is stongly oriented to religious life, deserves our attention. Their churches are also fundamentalist, although in a rather different sense from those of their white neighbors.

Finally, theologians generally do not like to get themselves involved in social, economic and political controversy. This is why the points made are at the rarified level of principles rather than in the arena of problems. If principles are general enough — and most involved here are — then there will be little argument over them. Indeed, the avoidance of controversy is characteristic of the parish minister whether he is in a rural or an urban setting. The typical cleric is not a free agent. If he is a Protestant minister, he is dependent upon the good will of the dominant members of his congregation. And these, for the most part, are the better-off people in his community. They are not ones to appreciate a minister who rocks the boat. For it is, after all, their boat and they are quite comfortable in it as things are. Roman Catholic priests can take a more independent line if they have a sympathetic bishop. Some bishops are willing to give their support to outspoken parish priests, and in several such cases the Roman Catholic Church has had a distinguished record. But most bishops are conservative, and priests lower down in the hierarchy understand that silence is expected of them on social issues.

Those who have been active in the religious life of America have never been notable for defining social goals and values. It was probably too much to expect that the theologians would depart from this tradition.

RURAL VERSUS AGRICULTURAL

I was impressed with the comment that we ought to distinguish between "rural" and "agricultural" America. Needless to say, this distinction was not and could not be maintained, for the overlapping is inevitable. But to confine ourselves to the goals and values of only "agricultural" Americans is to limit our thinking to the problems of approximately 8 percent of the population. Put another way, the "rural" population of the United States in 1960 was about 54 million, but the "farm" population was only 14.8 million. Thus approximately 40 million Americans live in rural areas but do not earn their livings by farming. I should have thought that our major concern would be with the 54 million citizens who comprise rural America and not simply with the

14.8 million who are in agriculture. The quality of rural life leaves much to be desired and calls out for discussion on our part. Certainly the goals and values of the Americans with whom we are concerned are as much related to their rustic place of residence as they are to the ways in which they secure their incomes. At all events, none of the papers demonstrated that "rural-farm" people are far different from "rural-nonfarm" people.

THE FAMILY FARM

There was much concern over the future and the fate of the family farm. Most of the papers conclude that the family farm is a good thing and ought to be preserved. Yet what emerges most strikingly is that the family farm is, in actuality, a small-to-medium-sized business, and its proprietor is a member of the middle-to-upper-middle class. For it was pointed out that to rate as a family farm a farm must be capitalized at \$100,000 or more. This is hardly a modest enterprise. There appear to be about 2 million of these family farms, and I was persuaded that they are doing quite well. The 2 million farmers who run them belong to articulate groups such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Grange and the Farmers' Union. While there may be differences of opinion between the various associations and their respective members, the conflicts are within the middle class, and success for one line of policy need not spell disaster for those who adhere to another.

The attitude seems to be that farms capitalized at under \$100,000 do not rate as family farms and hence fail to embody the virtues characteristic of their wealthier neighbors. These other farms apparently are not long for this world, and the view seems to be that those who own or work them ought to begin packing for a move to the slums of Chicago or Oakland. There were no suggestions as to how a farm with assets of less than \$100,000 might raise itself to the optimum level. It is clear those families, also numbering about 2 million, who are on the doomed nonfamily farms, experience a rather grim existence and perhaps deserve some consideration.

Indeed, whether we are talking about "rural" or "agricultural" America — or both — much of the problem is southern. Taking the 1959 figures, there were 3.7 million farms in the United States and over 1.6 million of them were in the South. Considering the relative populations of the southern and nonsouthern states, the South has far more than its share of farms. This is a point which certainly is worth some time exploring.

PORTRAIT OF RURAL LIFE

The goals and values of rural America involve a discussion of the attitudes held by rural Americans. If one finds this characterization consonant with one's own value system, then there are few major problems in the realm of rural values. If, on the other hand, rural values seem to be wanting in several significant respects, then basic attitudes may be in need of an overhauling.

I will attempt to characterize — at the risk of caricaturing — these attitudes.

The rural American is a "superior" individual. He possesses the virtues of self-reliance and independence of mind, and has a strong sense of family ties and religious values. He is strongly patriotic and proud of his nation's pre-eminent status in the world. The rural citizen looks on himself as a successful person, and he tends to be not a little impatient with those who have failed to equal his record of attainments. Thus he is opposed to government hand-outs or welfare benefits, for it is questionable whether upstanding individuals should be taxed to support those who are patently undeserving. The rural American has also been successful in that he is a member of the white race, belongs to a Christian church and had parents or earlier forebears who came from Northern Europe. Those who failed to gain these attributes through an unfortunate choice of parents are looked upon as somewhat inferior. The rural American, then, may be somewhat lacking in compassion for those not as successful as himself; but there is probably little point in shedding tears for those naturally incapable of rising to the higher virtues.

The rural American is persuaded that his perception of reality leaves little to be desired. He knows what he knows, whether by intuition or other means, and the knowledge he has is correct knowledge. Intellectuals and others who question conventional values are regarded with suspicion, as are most new ideas. There are no new problems that require new modes of thinking; on the contrary, we ought to return to traditional patterns of behavior if we are to solve our problems.

On the political level the rural citizen is distrustful of democracy. In contrast to what occurs in urban politics, those who live in rural areas are deferential to their betters and permit them to run the affairs of government. Thus a banker-lawyer-merchant class is allowed to dominate party and political offices, for that group knows best what is in the public interest. There is not the populism that one encounters in the cities, where the masses insist on making their views known and having them translated into political policy. The rural citizen respects those who by position and attainment are his rightful rulers. This makes for stability in politics and orderly relations in the community.