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The role of culture in the process of modernization – the case of American agricultural policy

INTRODUCTION

American agricultural policy of the 20th century told the final chapter of a story of transition to industrial agriculture. Modernization of American agriculture stimulated by changes in the overall American economy, society and technology had been initiated centuries earlier. In economic terms, it was prompted by the overwhelming trends towards increased food production efficiency and maximization of profit. These practices have made agriculture another *mathematicised* and *technicised* sphere of human activity only to account for the fact that today it widely resorts to instruments of economic and financial analysis and takes advantages of new sophisticated technological advancements. However, for the predominant part of the process, modernization of American agriculture has totally overlooked the significance of *culture* as an element which could provide economically attractive and viable options for its development¹. This had profound consequences for the quality of food, life of rural communities and the environment and problems affecting all these spheres emerged with different intensity and timing throughout the last century. Furthermore, growing dissatisfaction with numerous shortcomings² of the policy of compensation and support for agricultural prices and farmers income necessitated search for a new more effective policy model. Construction of a new agricultural paradigm took advantage of the scientific and theoretical developments of the last two decades of the 20th century which recognized culture as an integral part of development.

¹ The tendency was quite symptomatic of the prevailing attitude, which lasted until 1990s, to exclude culture-based reasoning from economic analysis. The situation had its roots in the *economic imperialism* and *mathematical sophistication* of the science of economics which cut its sociological origin and weakened its intrinsic links with sociology, politics, history and anthropology [Guiso *et al.*, 2006, p. 27].

² Among the most prevalent and pervasive were increasing predicament of small, particularly family farms, rapid degradation of the natural environment following the excessive use of artificial fertilizers and chemicals, galloping cost of the policy for the federal budget, slippage of the acreage reduction programs and instability of the agricultural market.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURE

The new agricultural paradigm was forged by the rise of several concepts that consequently stimulated a new perception of the role of agriculture. At its roots there was the rise of a general ecological awareness that had developed in the second half of the 20th century. Attentiveness to environmental issues and problems that arise out of the interaction of people with their natural surrounding was in the background of the new agricultural paradigm. However, it was not until the rise of a theory of *sustainable development* (SD) which for the first time grouped together apparently contrary concepts of environmental protection, economic prosperity and social well-being, and drew attention to the interdependence between all these elements

Not originally associated with agriculture, the concept of sustainable development proved to provide a viable alternative to industrial agriculture and hence became the key element of a new American agricultural policy in the process of its modernization. The multidimensional approach advocated by the notion proved particularly suitable to the analysis of agricultural problems. Culture, physical well-being and the material success of those involved in agriculture were linked directly to the state of the environment and the ability to manage natural resources and coexist with other species. Recognition of such interdependent and diverse aspects affecting agriculture introduced a new quality to the policy formulation. It was particularly meaningful to agriculture, since by its very nature, it has always stressed the relationship between humans and the environment, which the American industrial agriculture of the post-New Deal era tended to overlook. In the cultural sense, it revived the old, yet long-gone tradition of *cultivation* of land, i.e. caring for the land based on observation and an understanding of the natural processes taking place around man as well as an awareness of the fact that he is an integral, though not exclusive part of them³. The tradition was characteristic of early American frontier farmers of the pre-industrial era and was so skillfully captured by abundant works of American literature [Howarth, 1995, p. 8].

Implementation of sustainability into American agricultural policy resulted in adoption of a new policy model, i.e. the integrated farm and rural policy. It sought to reconcile two apparently opposing, yet factually overriding, policy

³ In the linguistic sense, one can observe a philosophically symptomatic link between various meanings of the word *cultivation*. It denotes *the preparation and use of land for growing plants or crops* [Hornby, 2000]. This widely accepted meaning reflects the unemotional, devoid of culture, attitude towards farming characteristic of industrial agriculture. Yet, another definition reveals a more sophisticated understanding of the word – it also denotes *deliberate development of a particular relationship, quality or skill*. Juxtaposition the two definitions moves us closer to understanding of what both industrial agriculture and modern, i.e. sustainable agriculture really mean.

goals. On the one hand, it recognized an extraordinary diversity of American agriculture and rural areas in particular. On the other, it treated agriculture and rural areas as two inseparable elements of one organism. This holistic perception of diverse geographical, social and cultural settings of American agriculture and rural areas has brought about a significant change in the role of the farmer. Today no longer is he a sole producer of food and fiber but he is also a provider of the socially acceptable non-commodity goods and services. For the sake of the process a farmer can take advantage of his natural skills, knowledge and experience and put them in harmony with the natural endowments of soil, land and climate, as well as cultivate the cultural heritage of the community in a much better way than performing the role of a crop grower. This model of *farmership* is closest to the one presented by Wendell Berry [1977, p. 45] over three decades ago: ... *the best farming requires a farmer – a husbandman, a nurturer – not a technician or businessman... A good farmer ... is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated, tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future.* The farmer has become a steward of the natural environment and a keeper of the cultural traditions that so proudly are declared to be in the center of the American creed.

PRESERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Pollution of the environment generated by practices of industrial agriculture gave rise to a renewal of interest in protecting environmental resources and was generally referred to as *agricultural or countryside stewardship*. The trend was particularly strong in developed countries whose affluent societies after decades of a consumption-like approach to the environment and in the face of growing environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources by agriculture and other sectors of the economy realized an urgent need for environmental protection⁴. In the case of the US new agricultural model, stewardship took the form of conservation of land, restoration and protection of landscape, strengthening rural infrastructure and the provision of rural-based recreation.

⁴ Growth of the demand for environmental goods resulted from the general increase in wealth of countries. The situation reflected a major shift in consumer interest: as they became better-off they got less interested in securing an adequate food supply in favor of the provision of environmental goods and more intangible, culture-related products and services [Huylenbroeck *et al.*, 1999, p. 2].

Agricultural stewardship is not a new idea. Taking care of the environment and natural resources had always been a part of the tradition and culture inherently related to the farmer's cultivation of land. In the pre-industrial era, the stewardship practices had not been so problematic since agriculture was a closed system in which the production of food for people, and feed for animals was contained within a circular flow of nutrients between people, animals and the land [Huylenbroeck *et al.*, 1999]. We could trace at least two mutually complementary determinants of this attitude: the moral which made a farmer undertake environmental protection activities out of responsibility for his farming activities, and the economic belief that the better the land and the greater the care, the longer and greater will be the profits. Stewardship offered a viable option for both the farm producers and the rural population alike: they were all interested in improving or maintaining the agricultural resource base which served as a workshop and/or place of residence. The maintenance and/or improvement of the rural infrastructure (roads and hedges, drainage and water systems, forest management) also ensured the existence and access to a variety of rural landscapes and was highly valued by individuals and society.

Stewardship had remained the very essence of a farmer's job until the fundamental change in attitude to stewardship practices brought by intensive use of external inputs like mechanization, fertilizers, and pesticides following the rise of the industrial model of agriculture [Huylenbroeck *et al.*, 1999]. This was the moment when the system lost its self-regulatory and regenerative characteristics as intensive agricultural production depleted the natural resources and damaged the environment. This meant that sooner or later environmental stewardship became a matter of necessity rather than choice. Stewardship practices were no longer undertaken to merely conserve the agricultural resource base for the sake of farmers and the rural community; rather, stewardship policies were crafted to deliberately enhance the multifunctional character of agriculture, particularly its public functions, and limit its negative externalities [Ferro *et al.*, 1995; Huylenbroeck *et al.*, 1999]. Thus the modern attitude to stewardship in American agriculture emphasizes its role as an intrinsic element of the rural structure with major implications for the well-being of society on the whole.

PRESERVATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The industrial model of American agriculture which prevailed for most of the 20th century had major consequences for the rural communities and rural areas. Apart from the already mentioned, depopulation of rural areas, increasing poverty rate and the overall economic and social decline of rural areas and communities further extended the pool of adverse effects. Moreover, in the ar-

areas where rural communities survived, the traditional link between people, their work and place of residence was severely undermined [Clugston, 1997]. In this sense, the economic decline of rural areas was followed by the cultural one. It was manifested by erosion of rural values and traditions so openly and eagerly praised by the American public, deterioration of relationships between members of rural communities, i.e. the sense of community, neighborly bonds, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurship⁵. This interpersonal aspect of decline also had a more tangible visual manifestation: decline of historic heritage, landmarks and buildings related to the culture and tradition of a given local rural community. In the face of rural economic downturn, rural outmigration and high poverty rates, these physical assets of local culture were foregone as frequently there was hardly anyone in the forlorn rural towns and villages to take care of them.

General policy efforts to counteract the negative impacts of the industrial model of agriculture came to be referred to as *revitalization of rural areas* or *village renewal*. The term *rural revitalization* denotes primarily policies aiming at the economic growth or stabilization of small towns and villages in the vicinity of farms: *revitalization ... sometimes connotes recognition of the richness of rural culture and the need to preserve it* [Clugston, 1997, p. 80]. Both became indispensable elements of the renewal. Hence, policies fostering preservation of rural heritage and culture – both the physical (e.g. historic and traditional buildings and sites) and the behavioral (traditions, customs, and specific rural lifestyle) – cannot do without economic revitalization (e.g. improving employment and income opportunities) followed by improvement in social and physical infrastructure. People can hardly be persuaded by any policy to preserve the non-material values of their life like culture, tradition and lifestyle if they cannot see an economic benefit behind it. Thus, the policy can succeed only if it lets local, in this case, rural communities develop economically. On the other hand, the danger of this approach is that unlike typical economic policies, maximization of efficiency – and the resulting dependence on external inputs – is not and cannot be the focal point of rural revitalization and economic development. Rural areas would then again share the grim fate of economic underdevelopment as an abandoned workshop of industrial agriculture which drained the economic and social potential of the rural areas to its own advantage. Hence effective rural revitalization policy is a multipronged approach resting on the legs of both economic development and cultural renewal in accord with the local environmental conditions.

A direct proof of the importance of the cultural aspects and the inclusion of culture into modernization of American agriculture is preservation of rural

⁵ According to Gorchak [1995, p. 25], the rise of American industrial agriculture brought about the crisis of traditional values related to cultivation of land, the ethos of hard work and sustenance of living off the soil and preservation of the natural and cultural heritage.

America's cultural heritage. It derives from a more general trend to protect the distinctive character of the multitude of local, also rural, places viewed as products of the intricate cultural context involving the place's history, traditions, land-use patterns, material heritage, and economic development. The trend has been referred to as *cultural landscape preservation* [Hayden, 2000]. It recognizes a close connection between nature and culture. The relationship is of primary importance not only for cultural studies on general American identity and its heritage. Cultural landscape and its preservation also seems viable for the village renewal/rural revival policy. It offers a chance to restore the original character of American rural communities (e.g. the traditional rural lifestyle, perseverance, self-reliance, fostering community bonds – all so deeply venerated by the American Founding Fathers and incorporated into the American creed), the heritage of the specific human attitudes towards the surrounding environment and events (e.g. compliance with nature) along with material heritage. In sum, the economic criterion has stopped to be the sole measure of the rural policy success in favor of the social and environmental ones. For that, preservation of rural cultural heritage and landscape was included into the process of modernization of American agricultural policy.

The rural cultural heritage approach to rural revitalization was incorporated for the first time into the 2002 American farm bill, the *Farm Security and Rural Investment Act* (FSRIA), by the US Congress. Its best example is the *Historic Barn Preservation Program*, one of the act's provisions. The main rationale behind the program was equivalent to the one in the cultural landscape preservation: to preserve and restore the unique and rapidly vanishing character of traditional rural landscapes created by historic agricultural buildings, of which barns are best examples. As observed by Auer [1989, p. 1] as ... *the main structures of farms, barns evoke a sense of tradition and security, of closeness to the land and community with the people who built them*. Historic barns have exceptional cultural significance for rural areas. On the one hand, they are genuine symbols of rural community spirit as their raising was an effort that usually united the whole local neighborhood. They are often regarded as the landmarks of their local rural community and help distinguish them from others. Yet above all, the structures represent ethnic local rural traditions, customs, and the rural way of life in the face of changing farming practices and building technology [Auer, 2000, p. 2]. In this sense, historic barns have performed an important role in strengthening the cultural identity of local rural community.

Preservation of historic barns is a part of the general trend to protect cultural and historic resources. The trend is an important part of the rural revitalization policy even if in many cases these resources are not directly related to farming. Moreover, the significance of this approach goes beyond that related to cultural and historic resource preservation solely. This policy trend can be also perceived in the context of its effect on rural areas, as most of them are located

there – it rejuvenates the American countryside through taking advantage of their inherent, original attributes like the presence of landscape, cultural (mainly folk) and historic resources. The fact is that numerous American government programs administered by various federal departments and agencies promote historic and cultural projects (for instance, the resource preservation alone), whose impact affect primarily the American countryside. Seemingly devoid of any market or economic implications, these programs often have a strong economic incentive behind them. In a more general report on the role of traditional arts in economic development, the following cause-and-effect line of argument is presented in that respect [Walker *et al.*, 2003]. Firstly, active cultural participation is capable of building strong communities and fosters community spirit. Secondly, the process of strengthening cultural communities creates economic value. Finally, the value created by cultural production can be channelled for regional growth through the export of unique traditional products – *making locally and distributing globally* [Walker *et al.*, 2003, p. 10]. In this way culture-oriented activity can provide notable economic benefits for rural communities. The role of external demand for cultural products, let it be a piece of handmade craftwork, scenic or historic view, or a rehabilitated historic rural building like a barn, is of vital importance for local development and revitalization plans. It has the potential to generate new employment and expand business opportunities which have always been identified as viable economic development strategies. In combination with tax incentives and funding opportunities provided, for example, by the variety of historic preservation programs, cultural production becomes the key element of the local revitalization strategy. The role of cultural production (traditional arts) proves a real window of opportunity for development for the most economically disadvantaged parts of the country, i.e. rural areas and towns, in particular [*ibid.*]. This happens due to expansion of markets for traditional arts and travel which attract special value to cultural uniqueness, counteracting the globalization trend which often translates into cultural unification, in the process. Under these conditions, values attributed to family traditions and the community's cultural heritage can render a direct market value and let the so far geographically underprivileged regions capture their share of national economic growth.

CONCLUSIONS

Culture, as an integral part of economic development, was included into the process of modernization of the American agricultural policy as an element of sustainable rural development. Culture has made an important consideration in justification of agricultural stewardship on the grounds of American tradition and preservation of historic heritage or cultural landscape have provided a viable sustainability strategy for rural areas for revitalization of their communi-

ties. Altogether cultural aspects have become a crucial part of the modernization of American agriculture aiming at bringing life back to rural areas and keep the economic policy in line with social development and environmental care. Culture offers a new approach to the process of modernization, which refuses to be merely a *technicisation* – improvement of the measurable aspects of the standard of human life generated by use of new technological appliances, but is rooted in a better understanding of complex interdependencies between the man and the surrounding world. Culture-based preservation of cultural/historic heritage stimulates local entrepreneurship, provides for economic profit and proves an important element of economic revitalization of rural areas and agriculture. This approach restores balance between the environment, economy and society but also offers a promise of less disturbed and more equitable development for members of society and actors of the market game. The inclusion of cultural considerations into the formulation of American agricultural policy proves the fact that modernization and development must rely on and enhance the traditional values cherished by society, not to contradict them.

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Summary

The paper deals with the role of culture in the modernization of American agricultural policy. The role was neglected and underestimated for most of the 20th century. At the same time agriculture became an industry of food production with strong emphasis placed on increase in production efficiency and profit maximization. This had profound consequences for the quality of food, life of rural communities and the environment problems. Furthermore, growing dissatisfaction with numerous shortcomings of the policy of compensation and support for agricultural prices and farmers income necessitated search for a new more effective policy model. Construction of a new agricultural paradigm took advantage of the scientific and theoretical developments of the last two decades of the 20th century. In this way culture became an important aspect of sustainable agricultural modernization. Most typical examples of such policies were agricultural stewardship, revitalization of rural areas, cultural landscape and historic barn preservation. All these programs play important part in bringing economic revival to rural areas and all cultural production can potentially win competitive advantage of these areas over other in the market game.

Rola kultury w procesie modernizacji – przypadek amerykańskiej polityki rolnej

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia kwestię roli, jaką pełni kultura w procesie modernizacji amerykańskiej polityki rolnej. Przez większą część XX wieku rola ta była całkowicie pomijana. W międzyczasie rolnictwo amerykańskie przekształciło się w rolnictwo przemysłowe, nastawione głównie na wzrost wydajności i maksymalizację zysku, co bardzo niekorzystnie odbiło się na jakości pożywienia, społeczności wiejskich i środowiska naturalnego. Wzrastające społeczne niezadowolenie oraz coraz wyraźniejsze przesłanki świadczące o nieskuteczności polityki industrialnej w rolnictwie wymusiło zmianę modelu polityki na opartą na rozwoju zrównoważonym. W tak przyjętym paradygmacie rozwoju rolnictwa kultura stała się ważnym jej elementem. Typowymi przykładami programów, które wykorzystują tzw. produkcję kulturową są programy: zarządzania ziemią, rewitalizacja terenów wiejskich, ochrona krajobrazów kulturowych i ochrona lokalnych stodół. Wszystkie te programy mają na celu uaktywnienie potencjału gospodarczego na terenach wiejskich, a poprzez produkcję produktów kulturowych mają zdobyć przewagę konkurencyjną nad pozostałymi aktorami gry rynkowej.