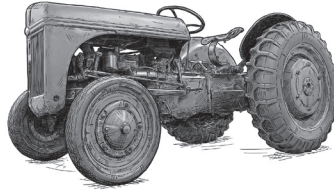


CHAPTER ELEVEN



GETTING A LITTLE AGRI-CULTURE

Have you ever contemplated doing something entirely different as a career? I remember a fellow law student and I discussing what restaurant we would open when we dropped out of school.²⁸⁸ There was a time I wanted to own and operate a gym.²⁸⁹ I still think I would have been a pretty good ag teacher and eventually a decent principal, which was the plan until about halfway through college. “I should

288. We ultimately came to the conclusion that the only one we could afford was a Subway. My friend Barry researched what was required to establish such a franchise and concluded you needed “\$5,000 and a box of envelopes.” To this day, I look enviously on the meatball sub and think about how I could have eaten thousands of them by now if Barry had just ponied up \$5,000 and I had possessed an unopened box of envelopes.

289. If you were to meet me, you would have no trouble believing I could spend more time in one.

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have done the MBA, or maybe the joint MBA and law degree,” I’ve lectured myself. The ministry, military service, or a deeper dive into economics have all seemed, at one time or another, like attractive alternatives. Yet as I’ve aged, one field of study rises to the top of the “I should have” list more consistently than the others: anthropology.

From the homepage of the American Anthropological Association:

From the Greek anthropos (human) and logia (study), the word anthropology itself tells us it is the field that seeks to understand humankind, from the beginnings millions of years ago up to the present day. Anthropology considers how people’s behaviors change over time, and how people and seemingly dissimilar cultures are different and the same.²⁹⁰

The promise of better understanding humankind, and thus why humans make the decisions they do, is intoxicatingly tempting for me, but it should also be tempting for folks hoping to better understand the mindset of foodies and other food system outsiders. Being able to explain why people buy anything that has been “unicorned” or have a desire to avocado things that are perfectly good without it (or with butter) could possibly restore my faith in the human race. Or make it deteriorate further. More relevant to the crux of this book, a valid question would be why so many Americans share an idyllic view of farms while at the same time they are seemingly predisposed to like them less the more food they produce?

I share the anthropologists’ desire to know what people think is important, and to better understand why they think that what they think is important, particularly their thoughts and opinions about

290. “What do Anthropologists do?,” Advance Your Career, American Anthropological Association, last modified November 17, 2021, <https://www.americananthro.org/AdvanceYourCareer/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2148>.

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farming and food production. Chances are that you've asked yourself some of these same questions.

There are many funny stories about how culture works. They are even more humorous when they involve public policy efforts that fail to account for culture's importance. For example, in Singapore, a tax designed to make vehicles more expensive, and thus to encourage the use of public transportation, ultimately backfired. The authors of a study concluded that Singaporeans, even ecologically aware ones, shared a view that "those who drive are smarter, more educated, and higher class."²⁹¹ As a result, the tax that made driving more expensive ultimately reinforced that view, because driving became an even greater symbol of wealth. Needless to say, the tax ultimately discouraged the use of public transportation.

It is not, however, just governments that must attend to the forces of culture. For those of us who want to better understand the minds of food system outsiders, and to potentially influence them, we must have some awareness of the culture in which those minds are shaped. In the words of Dr. Ruth Fulton Benedict, a former president of the American Anthropological Association and the first woman to be regarded as a prominent leader of a learned profession, "The crucial differences which distinguish human societies and human beings are not biological. They are cultural."

As an aside, us aggies have our own cultural proclivities, too. We often don't see them until somebody outside the family points them out. I had one such experience just a couple of years ago. While living in Northern Virginia and working in Washington, my family and I brought a friend of ours to the family farm I grew up on in Southeast North Carolina. This friend, Julie, had never been on a farm. She was, like my wife, an accomplished math teacher, not an agrarian. She could run circles around the best tour guides of New

291. Kim Armstrong, "The WEIRD Science of Culture, Values, and Behavior," Association for Psychological Science, March 30, 2018, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-weird-science-of-culture-values-and-behavior>.

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York City, but she had never ridden in a pick-up truck. Anywhere. Much less a combine, which she had the opportunity to do during her trip to Starling Farms. Julie had lots of questions about how things worked, why things were done the way they were, and what we called different things down on the farm. She might have ordinarily been a splendid teacher, but on this day she and our other agritourism guests were splendid students. My brother Willi was their teacher.

It was Julie that challenged me in a way I had not expected. Namely, by asking a simple question: “Why do you pronounce ‘combine’ the way you do?”

Stop, like I did, and think for a moment about the word “combine.” For everyone involved in agriculture, we view that word, at least when it is used in the farm context, as COM-bine. For everyone else, including Julie, it is pronounced cum-BINE.

This is even more vexing when you consider that the common name for this machine came from the fact that it merges—or combines—several different functions required to harvest within one apparatus. “Reaping, threshing, winnowing—combining all three operations into one led to the invention of the combine harvester, simply known as the combine.”²⁹² In fact, I could find no convincing explanation for why those of us in agriculture have created an entirely new pronunciation for this word. But we have. To pronounce it differently amongst a group of aggies would engender glances and looks typically reserved for vegetarians at a Pig Jig.

As Julie helped me understand, those of us in agriculture sometimes do not even realize that we are really functioning within a subculture, with a system of meaning and shared beliefs that may or may not align with our larger society. Most aggies have

292. Mary Herring, in a May 2020 piece entitled “A Brief History of the Combine,” offers a succinct and enthralling history of the combine. I would be the first to admit that I found reading her piece more interesting than writing this one. Mary Herring, “Harvest Equipment: A Brief History of the Combine,” *Iron Solutions*, May 24, 2020, <https://ironsolutions.com/agriculture-equipment-value-guides/a-brief-history-of-the-combine/>.

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a fondness for the “blue and gold,” or have pledged their “hands to larger service.” There are few things more entertaining than hearing farmers who are otherwise complete strangers talk, well . . . farming. An immediate bond is present. A shared kinsmanship. A family reunion, but with people you do not recognize. There are shared frustrations (“Why does the sensor mechanism cost more than the thing the sensor was supposed to sense?”) and shared joys (“It started raining just as we got her into the shelter”).

Is it possible, then, that there are cultural forces outside of the agriculture community that are shaping how people think about agricultural insiders and the work they do? Might some of the insider-outsider disconnects chronicled in this book be explained by upstream cultural forces that have reframed what many of our non-ag brethren believe they can expect from the farming and food ecosystem? More interestingly, could some of those cultural norms be shaping us, even if we don’t recognize them? Your author has already admitted he is no cultural anthropologist, but refuting that the modern-day farming and food system critic brings cultural baggage to their assessment of the food and fiber enterprise seems like a dumb hill to die on. In other words, yes, there are changing cultural norms that help explain outsiders’ views and why they may be different today than they were just a few decades ago.

So what are those changing cultural norms, and how do they help explain the Humpty Dumptyism aimed at the agricultural community? I will cover three. The first is the continual rise in individualism. The second is society’s shift to a consumption mindset as opposed to a production one. And the third is our continual quest to find purpose, which may afflict the farm community as much as it does the general population, but in different ways.