

Klassen on Rural Homesteading for the “Time of Troubles”

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Robert Klassen has some observations that should be of interest to any lefty who's into Peak Oil, any Misesian who believes we're headed for a crackup boom, or anybody in general who believes state capitalism is headed for some kind of messy crisis of inputs: “The Transition II.”

How can communities be organized to survive the threat? I would like to begin to try to answer that question by talking about the farm where I grew up.

This farm was located two-miles west of LaPorte, Indiana. The town was named by French trappers as “The Door” out of the forests to the prairies of rich soil to the south. Our farm sat on the edge of the glacial boundary, on the leftover sand and clay and stones of the melted glacier. Around sixty-five acres, the soil was fertile enough to grow anything appropriate to that climate with sufficient patience and labor.

Our family consisted of three generations, eight adults and nine children, living in three separate households. Our immediate neighbors lived on parcels of one to ten acres and comprised a dozen adults and two-dozen children. By working together in completely free and informal manner, expressing an innate spirit of cooperation, all of these people survived the privations of the Depression and WWII without suffering. How?

What I remember most clearly is a spontaneous division of labor, and trade. Our family produced raw milk, chickens, eggs, fruit, cider, honey, and grains. One neighbor specialized in strawberries and sweet corn, another in vegetables, another in goat products. Food was traded within the group, and the surplus was sold in individual roadside stands.

There was no fuzzy warm feeling of family or community here, that was simply the way things were done. There was a fierce sense of property ownership, and woe betide cheats or trespassers, including children – maybe especially children who stole watermelons. Borrowed tools were returned promptly, and if a neighbor asked

for help with a major job, one would be wise to arrive early and stay late, or at least until milking time...

State sponsored corporations are trying to sell these people single-harvest hybrid seeds, and discourage the use of native seeds that will reproduce identical genetic copies year after year for free. I have to agree that costly hybrids are inappropriate to poor subsistence farmers even though potential yields may be many times greater, because high-tech agriculture presupposes high-tech farmers, which they are not. The matriarch interviewed in this essay simply said no to hybrid seeds. No sale. What's wrong with that? It doesn't take a UN resolution to say, I won't buy it.

Klassen says one thing I disagree with:

This kind of rural model cannot be imported to the cities, and city dwellers would not willingly be exported to the rural model. The millions of hungry urban people require intensive mechanized agriculture with its high-yield hybrid seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides plus thoroughly educated farming practitioners and skilled banking creditors. For urban dwellers rhapsodizing on an organic garden theme in nature, I suggest they try it before they try to sell the idea: turn over an acre with a spade, break it up with a hoe, rake it out, plant it, cultivate and harvest by hand, and then talk about it. They didn't call it back-breaking work for nothing. Even Thoreau hired a teamster with oxen and plow to break Emerson's land at Walden.

First of all, he sets up a false dichotomy between "intensively mechanized" chemical agriculture and spadework. What about the possibility of appropriate-scale mechanization: i.e., the use of a simple rototiller? They won't throw you out of the organic club for using it. Second, even without any mechanization at all, there's a lot (really a lot) less spadework involved in intensive raised bed techniques than in spading up a field for row crops. One double-digging job for a bed can last for years, with only U-bar cultivation subsequently, if you're careful not to compact the soil. Third, the vacant space in even a built-up city is sufficient to meet a surprising proportion of people's total needs, what with rooftop gardens, vacant lots, small yards, and the like. John Jeavons, through years of experimentation, has managed to get the amount of space needed to produce an average person's diet (meat included) down to 4,000 sq. ft. Fourth, from the point of view of labor-time, such techniques are probably a net plus for most people, if you compare the amount of time it takes to grow the stuff to the amount of time you'd have to work to earn it. Borsodi calculated, in *Flight From the City*, that the total cost of labor and supplies to grow and can one's own tomatoes was about a third less than the grocery store price.

I recently received, by email, this criticism of Borsodi's latter claim, with the request that I post it on my blog:

Of the many comments I would like to make, I'm only going to focus on one comment you made in your Rejoinder to George Reisman, who, by the way, is a PHD and should be addressed accordingly.

Your rejoinder states,

".....Further, as counter-intuitive as Reisman may find it, the economies of mechanized farming and food processing are not that great even over the ordinary techniques of the average backyard gardener. Borsodi did a careful study of all the costs

(including labor time and supplies) involved in growing and canning vegetables at home, and found that it was cheaper overall to grow one's own. As I said above, the increased overhead and distribution costs of large scale production offset many of the economies that Reisman is so enamored of."

What you fail to recognize, as did Borsodi, is the violation of the fundamental rules of economics, (see Hazlitt, "Economics in One Lesson" for further clarification). Namely, Borsodi's 'careful study' obviously does not calculate 'the costs to society' if everyone had to take the time to can their own vegetables. Would we have electricity?, Automobiles?, High rise buildings?, etc.? if Edison, Ford, Carnegie, etc. spent most of there time canning vegetables, baking bread, building their homes, etc? Of course not!

May I suggest that you read Prof Reisman's book Capitalism and study the recommended readings he provides, then come back and see if you still think Mutualism is viable. Until you complete this exercise and master that body of economic knowledge, your ideas cannot be considered reasonable by any intellectual that does have that body of knowledge (economics) mastered. You owe this to your participants and followers that, I believe, are being led down a path of economic ignorance...

Sincerely, Mark Baumann Project Manager, The Boeing Company

Mr. Baumann's interpretation of Hazlitt sounds remarkably like a public good argument for innovation, if (as it seems) he posits some sort of "cost to society" that's not reflected in the costs of materials and one's own labor time. Remember, Borsodi's calculation of costs included the average value of labor time involved in growing and canning. So if he was correct, there would be a net gain in time for a person of average income in doing it himself; he wouldn't "have to take the time," but rather would *choose* to spend the time doing it himself *instead*, in order to maximize his own available time.

Remember, also, that Borsodi's calculation was made using an *average* wage. Someone who earns significantly more than the average for an hour's work might find it pays better to buy groceries. And whether an hour spent inventing automobiles is more remunerative than an hour raising one's own vegetables is an individual decision, based on the individual's perception of cost. If the individual perceives the potential payoffs from invention to exceed the benefits growing vegetables, he's free to do so. If not, I see no reason for him to feel under obligation to worry about "social cost." Besides, if growing one's own vegetables reduces the total labor time needed for procuring food, a person will have more time left over for other pursuits. If anything, in a society with less dependence on wage labor and more bargaining power for labor, and with decentralized small-scale production, I'd expect more productive innovation by people tinkering in small shops.

If the costs and benefits of various uses of an hour's labor are fully internalized by the laborer, then it seems to me that a simple economic calculation of comparative advantage will lead to the most "socially useful" use of time. Unless, again, you're proposing some public good standard of the "best" individual use of time apart from individual calculations of efficiency? If the individual is expected work longer hours to buy something than it would take to make it himself, because his wage-labor is more socially useful, it seems you're elevating some standard above demonstrated preference.

I've already read *Economics in One Lesson*, but I'll add Reisman's book to my reading list lest I wander off the Celestial Highway onto the Path of Economic Ignorance. As for my "followers," Mr. Baumann flatters me: these cats don't much care to be herded.

By the way: I believe it's fairly standard in this genre to refer to authors by last name without any honorific. At least I don't recall seeing any prefatory "Mr." cluttering up "Carson" in Reisman's article. And in the States, at least, any insistence on the social use of "Dr." by PhDs produces an effect more comical than anything else.

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