

Everyone a Populist

One theory on the mind-set of anti-agriculture activists.

Commentary by **Wes Ishmael**

If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian.”

That’s how a solemn Paul McCartney, the ex-Beatle, begins narration of a new video from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). What follows is the same sensationalism and fiction that livestock producers have come to expect from the radical activist group.

Unfortunately, if you have no reason to know otherwise, what follows is news, tragic news.

That’s why agriculture is so easy to attack.

The fruits of it are everywhere, part of everybody’s daily existence. Yet there are relatively few people left in society who know anything about how it works or the producers who make it possible to purchase a bounty of safe, affordable food within a couple of miles from home every day of the week.

It’s even easier to attack animal agriculture. In addition to the aforementioned, the uninformed feel even more expert because so many of them own or have owned a dog or a cat.

According to the latest U.S. Pet Owners and Sourcebook from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), 37.2% of all U.S. households own at least one dog (43.02 million households); 32.4% own at least one cat (37.46 million households). For the bean counters out there that amounts to 72 million pet dogs and 82 million pet cats. Results for both are 1% more in 2007 than the previous study conducted in 2001.

These aren’t just pets, they’re companions. In fact, according to AVMA, 49.7% of pet owners in 2006 considered their pets to be family members.

No wonder the American Pet Products Association estimates total pet industry

expenditures this year to be \$45.4 billion. Spending was \$28.5 billion in 2001.

Social upheaval leaves people searching

These attitudes and the amount of money people spend on their pets have plenty to do with folks trying to ease their anxieties.

It’s not much of a stretch to compare the current, ongoing transition — from the industrial age to that of information and service — with what occurred as the United States emerged from the agrarian age toward the end of the 19th century and stretched toward the industrial one.

Now, as then, lots of preconceived notions are being displaced by history. How people planned to make a living, how they began their working lives providing for their families is shifting in unimagined ways.

According to history, it was the sense of loss and disenfranchisement accompanying these realities at the beginning of the industrial revolution that helped spawn the populist movement in this country.

Philosophy, political or otherwise, may seem a strange starting point on the journey to begin understanding the mind-set behind rabid anti-agriculture activists, but it explains a lot.

Though lots of folks stretch the term *populism* to fit whatever definition they have in mind, it has specific history and origin in the United States. It goes back to the upheaval caused during the aforementioned transformation from an agrarian nation to industrial.

According to Stanley Schultz, emeritus professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, in an online lecture series, “Rural America underwent massive transformations in the late 19th century. In response, farmers

began a nationwide movement demanding a new kind of politics. More and more people began to view the federal government as a possible source of protection against the ravages of industrial society. Farmers, however, were not the only Americans who championed government power as a means to assuage the problems that they perceived in society.”

That’s where the Grange began. Actually called the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, the organization began in sparsely populated parts of the nation as a place for agricultural producers to gather and socialize. It wasn’t long before they were sharing their frustrations with things like access to and the cost of grain storage, access to credit and the cost of borrowing, issues similar to today. In time, owners of small businesses, who had similar concerns, began to join, too. Ultimately, the organization began working politically to change the system.

These champions of what they believed to be the common people formed various groups that became known as the people’s parties or populists. They believed the root for many of their frustrations grew from the business elite, the folks industrializing the nation. Thus, the populist definition is always surrounded by an aura of us-against-them and David vs. Goliath.

In the 1800s, Schultz explains, the main criticisms these folks levied were:

- ▶ The American legal system placed too much emphasis on property rights.
- ▶ Monopolies were an economic and social evil.
- ▶ Social Darwinism & laissez-faire were bankrupt ideologies.
- ▶ Industrial society had turned individuals into economic commodities.
- ▶ Wealth was unevenly distributed.

According to history, populists weren’t socialists, per se, but they had a socialistic outlook. For instance, they believed the government and its regulations had a responsibility to take care of the working classes.

William Jennings Bryan became a firebrand for what became known as populism. As a hopeful presidential candidate at the 1896 Democratic National Convention, arguing against the gold standard in his famous Cross of Gold speech, Bryan is the one who said, “Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

Knowing what’s right

Dig deeper and the populist viewpoint

described here aligns closely with a philosophical school of thought that places more weight on subjectivity and emotion — ideology — than reason and fact. In other words, despite what logic and fact suggest, something is correct or incorrect because enough folks believe it so.

You can argue that many of today's radical anti-agriculture activist groups mirror this mind-set, with an eye focused on a self-conceived utopia they believe to be the will of the common people. Science and facts be damned.

Consider these descriptions from some of the organizations:

- ▶ *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.* “PETA focuses its attention on the four areas in which the largest numbers of animals suffer the most intensely for the longest periods of time: on factory farms, in laboratories, in the clothing trade, and in the entertainment industry. We also work on a variety of other issues, including the cruel killing of beavers, birds and other ‘pests,’ and the abuse of backyard dogs.”
- ▶ *The Sierra Club.* “... like 1.3 million of your friends and neighbors, you want: a safe and healthy community in which to live; smart energy solutions to combat global warming; an enduring legacy for America's wild places ... Since 1892, the Sierra Club has been working to protect communities, wild places, and the planet itself. We are the oldest, largest, and most influential grassroots environmental organization in the United States. And our founder, John Muir, appears on the back of the California quarter.”
- ▶ *Humane Society of the United States.* “The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is the nation's largest and most effective animal protection organization — backed by 11 million Americans, or one in every 28. Established in 1954, the HSUS seeks a humane and sustainable world for all animals — a world that will also benefit people. We are America's mainstream force against cruelty, exploitation and neglect, as well as the most trusted voice extolling the human-animal bond.”

It's difficult for the uninitiated to question, let alone argue with such fuzzy-feeling logic. Beneath the surface, though, thinking people quickly come to understand each of these groups is pushing an anti-sustainable-agriculture agenda, an anti-livestock agenda, or some other movement against something.

There's no telling how many members of such organizations understand what's behind such organizations. Of those who

understand, there's no telling how many agree and believe. Those who are true believers, though, believe they are correct and that mainstream agriculture is wrong.

This is also true of organizations within the industry battling to change how agricultural business works, just like they did when populism was born in this country.

These days, the battleground includes such issues as operation size, industry concentration and consolidation, the desire for more government regulation to control markets, and the belief that locally grown organic production is somehow more sustainable than mainstream practices.

When it started in the 1800s, Schultz says it had to do with what he describes as the *agrarian myth*: “This is the concept, popularized by Thomas Jefferson, that the self-reliant yeoman farmer was the bedrock of American society. The gulf between this ideal and the reality of farming — falling income, and loss of profits to the railroads — exasperated farmers. For this reason, many tried to form organizations that would make the agrarian myth a reality at the end of the 19th century.”

Arguably, that's what some within the industry are trying to accomplish yet today.

