

D.D. ©

## Valuing America and its Values

### REDISCOVERING AMERICA'S VALUES

by Frances Moore Lappe' Ballentine, (1989) \$22.50

Reviewed by E. Robert Scrofani\*

Ever since writing her first book "Diet for a Small Planet" in 1971, Frances Moore Lappe' has devoted her efforts to reshaping the way Americans perceive their values about hunger and poverty. "Diet for a Small Planet" demonstrated how individual decisions, even the most basic, such as what we eat at the evening dinner, can prolong hunger.

Her next book, "Food First" (written with Joseph Collins) cleared the air of many of the hunger myths, particularly the old Malthusian belief that people are hungry because there are insufficient resources. She received the J. Rupert Mason Award for "writing in the spirit of Henry George" for this book.

A recent *Food First Alert* explains how the rain forest in Brazil is being destroyed as a result of the government's inability (or refusal) to discourage holding large tracts of underdeveloped land by a few wealthy families. The government encourages poor peasants to go to marginal lands in the rain forest instead.

Lappe' thus makes clear in her writings that hunger could be avoided if governments and individuals changed their habits. *Food First* detailed how governments support hunger and poverty by permitting land monopoly and by refusing to share power with citizen communities.

Lappe's forte is to bring fresh insights to continuing problems and to establish the connection between the lack of democracy (ie. control over your own life and the right to life sustaining resources) and hunger. "Hunger is the ultimate sign of powerlessness. It is a screaming siren telling us that something is terribly amiss in the social order," she wrote persuasively in the *Christian Century*.

A few years ago, Lappe' decided that the work of *Food First* was not enough. Despite ample world food supplies "the hunger has problem worsened."

She asked herself a fundamental question which led to the latest book. "What could be powerful enough to tolerate, to accept, and even to acquiesce to millions of silent deaths (of hunger) each year? What could possibly explain our ability to condone the status quo?"

Only one thing is powerful enough, she answers "the power of ideas." From her personal journey to discover why hunger exists in America, "a society built upon freedom, fairness, and democracy," she wrote "Rediscovering America's Values."

As she says in the opening of her book, "...to ask the biggest questions it often helps to start with the most personal. And what could be more personal than food? ... food is a basic human need... if people aren't eating, little else matters."

"...Hunger became my measuring rod...my first test of a political or economic system would be whether or not all of its people are eating."

## A Dialogue on Values

"Discovering Values," is an animated dialogue in which Lappe' speaks with two voices; the voice of the classical liberal who views government as a necessary evil, and proposes that "the government which governs least governs best," and her own voice. Lappe' presents ( *in italics* ) the view of the modern liberal (or progressive) who sees the government's role as one that must serve all the people, in our society. Her view reflects the Jeffersonian perspective embodied in the agrarian and community based movements in our history.

Readers will particularly find the introduction a challenging review of the dominant liberal (i.e. the free market conservative) tradition which since the 17th century has powered the thought processes and the productive energies of the Western world.

This tradition which says, "our individual self-seeking turns the wheels of the economy to the ultimate benefit of everyone..." no longer serves us well, Lappe' contends. It presents a world view in which "the individual has prior claim to all goods as they are produced or exchanged with little or nothing 'left' over for society as a whole."

While ' acknowledging that the Liberal tradition (combined with Western religion) gave us a belief in the innate worth of the individual and the modern concepts of human rights and civil liberties she believes it is "now a set of unquestioning beliefs...which bind our creativity."

### "Values" Serves as Economic Primer

Rediscovering America's Values could easily form the basis for a philosophy or government and economics course. It is a great primer for those who want to consider their values in the 20th Century. In fact Lappe' appeals with her readers to join her in a mutual search for America's values.

She chose a propitious time for her book which emerges during the prolonged bicentennial celebrations for the Constitution, the founding of Congress and the Bill of Rights.

The dialogues are short, readable, sometimes provocative and sometimes frustrating. A few selections will give you a flavor for the book. In her section on Self Interest versus the Community Interest, she shapes the dialogue in this way.

#### > Liberal view < Lappe'

> " But you must agree that the biological sciences now have considerable evidence that selfishness is in our genes. And in that sense, the market system - mandating decisions based upon self-interest best fits our nature....

< The biological sciences have been used since at least Charles Darwin's time falsely to justify your view of ourselves."

> Darwin showed us that we evolved in a dog-eat-dog world where "survival of the fittest" was the unpleasant truth pushing evolution alone. Some may think we can

overcome this legacy, but you can't deny its imprint.

< Darwin actually insisted that natural selection endowed us with "social instincts" favoring cooperation and mutual aid

In a later engaging chapter Lappe' dialogues with her Liberal alter ego on : "Does Capitalism Embody Moral Values?"

> the market system is more realistic, therefore less coercive....it reduces the need for compassion and good will as motivating forces behind social improvements.

< cooperative feelings grow with use, they heighten self esteem..

> Democratic capitalism doesn't deny the existence of the more positive qualities in people, it just doesn't depend on them in economic life...

< Every society's rules - economic or otherwise are inescapably moral. In ours the money value of one's contribution in the market determines one's well being...

> Co-operation and agreement on moral values is not the aim of capitalism...

< You praise the market because it relieves us of moral reasoning. ...it is in the exercise of moral choice that we become human...

> While the market system does not embody any moral values it does provide the best structure for people to make moral choices...

< Capitalism...(narrows) our values to the single standard of the market worth...

> The excesses of narrow self-centeredness you describe in our culture reflect the failure of our religious and cultural life.

< But is it possible for people to operate out of sheer economic self-interest during most of the waking hours and still retain a private sphere in which other aspects of our character can flourish?

> The most undeniable evidence that capitalism certainly doesn't kill human kindness is that we find the staunchest defense of human rights in capitalist countries...

< I've never advocated doing away with the market but rather simply putting it in its place, using it as a device to serve our values.

Some sections like this one present the progressive viewpoint less forcefully, thus the dialogue may be somewhat skewed to the more conservative end. Perhaps Lappe' is attempting to be so fair that she gives more strength to arguments for the other side.

While she makes the case for the community, she is less effective in asserting that those of us who strive to be individuals also rely on the community. The reality is the collective, not the individual. We are born into a family and into the

community. Even those among us who attain riches do so in the context of the community, and rely on the community - its military, its police, its moral restraints - to protect us so that we can live rich as well, within the safety generated by the community.

**If we are not all attentive to the community we all lose.** "Whence shall come the new barbarians," asked Henry George in *Progress and Poverty*, "Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now the gathering hordes."

She also makes clear that capitalism works in the West, because it was modified by the moral principles of the Judeo-Christian religions. But religion has receded in importance and the emphasis since the 60's has been more on a personal experience of God, particularly in the evangelical sects. Instead of doing good for others in charity as defined by St. Paul and demonstrated in our times by a Dorothy Day or Mother Theresa we have the amorphous "thousand points of light." Capitalism thus has lost much of the restraints on its greed and self centeredness.

### Land Question Lacking

Despite Lappe's full understanding of the impact of land monopoly on hunger and poverty, she makes only passing mention of land in her book. In *Christian Century* magazine she writes that "the most obvious concentration of economic power is in the form of land" but her arguments about land have no power in this book. ,

Her omission is even more startling since she quotes Adam Smith frequently. Adam Smith divided the world into the owners of land, labor and capital. But her discussions about property do not even distinguish land and capital - as he did. He warned in *Wealth of Nations* that "landlords seek to reap where they have not sown." Surprisingly land is not even cited in the Table of Contents.

These are major flaws in the book and the dialogue often returns to the same strains but it still provides a mine of materials for those who want to delve into economics, civil liberties, democracy and human nature.

If her work challenges us to delve into our personal and our nation's values then the her work will be well done. Reading "Rediscovering America Values" might even encourage some of us to dust off their Hobbes, Smith, George, Galbraith, Freidman and others.

As one reviewer stated, "if more Americans had Lappe's willingness to subject her moral and political convictions to such searching scrutiny we would be a less divided, more moderate and more thoughtful nation."

\* Scrofani has been teaching for 29 years in the California Schools. A Fulbright Fellow he is editor of the Economic and Political Literacy Newsletter, and a director of the Henry George School of Social Science. He is a member of the history faculty at Berkeley High School.