DISCUSSION

The Value Problem in Agricultural Policy
Kenneth H. Parsons

Discussion by C.M. Bogholt

The consideration that led the planners of this conference to include a discussion of the present topic is stated in the Conference Outline. If the farmers in our growing economy are to have a commensurate share of the rising national income, important adjustments in agriculture are required, namely fewer and larger farms, a transfer of labor resources, increased efficiency in use of farm resources, and a conformity of the supply of products to consumer demand. To accomplish these adjustments we must, among other things, know more about "the nature of alternative goals which have relevance to the number of farms and the size of the farm population or labor force."

I suspect that were I more familiar with the field of Agricultural Economics than I am, this statement would be quite clear to me. As matters stand, I am puzzled by it. Does it suggest that farmers and, perhaps, public officials concerned with matters of agricultural policy have interests the pursuit of which might impede the declared necessary adjustment? And that a study of these interests in their bearing upon the scale of farm operations and the size of the labor force is, therefore, recommended in order to expedite the required adjustment?

I expected that Professor Parsons' paper, directed as it is to the subject of value problems in agricultural policy, would help to clarify matters for me. It did not. Actually his is not a discussion of the Conference Outline question at all. The upshot of his remarks, if I
understand him, is to raise a question about the question put by the Conference Committee.

Values (goals) are social affairs primarily. I take Professor Parsons to be saying that values (goals) are prior, antecedent to the career of any given individual in the sense that language is so. The American farmer inherits the values (goals) of the complex of institutions that constitute his culture, the most important of which are Freedom, Equality, Security, Justice, Order, and Efficiency. It is clear, therefore, that the primary focus of policy questions in respect to agriculture must be upon social organization and social procedure. Viewed from this standpoint, Professor Parsons declares, it will be seen that questions of agricultural policy will be adequately formulated only within a more comprehensive framework of ideas than that of agricultural operations and rewards. His suggestion is that the central question of policy at the present time is how to assure equality of opportunity through procedures for resolving power conflicts. Economic freedom thus attained nourishes the other values (goals) which are the basis of the good life on the farm or anywhere else.

The term values (goals) that is used in these discussions has, I confess, given me some bother. I believe something would be gained in dispelling the vagueness of this term if we were to follow the lead of John Dewey who distinguishes between two usages of the term 'value'. In one usage 'to value' means to act in a certain way toward an object, the sort of action that can be indicated by saying that something is "cared for" "cherished" or "prized". Thus a mother cares for her son, an academic man prizes his freedom, a teen-ager cherishes Elvis Presley. In this sense of the term "to value" marks nothing deliberate, nothing into which decision enters.
This statement stands whether we declare the end to be freedom, security or maximum satisfaction of wants.

It is my opinion that this is one of the main contentions of Professor Parsons' paper concerning value problems and agricultural policy. I agree with him and agree with him, too, in considering it a matter of primary importance in defining areas and methods of research.

C. M. Bogholt