

# Survey of Eurocentric Views on Agriculture in Students at a Land-Grant Institution



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## Abstract

In this preliminary study, we posited that subtle but normative socio-cultural Eurocentric views held by students could tend to subvert efforts at land-grant institutions to help students become more competent to reap the opportunities of increasing globalization. We designed and administered a simple attitudinal questionnaire to a sample of freshmen and seniors (in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, a land-grant institution) to measure the intensity of their agreement with 16 Eurocentric propositions about agriculture advanced by David Landes (Landes, 1998), a leading proponent of Eurocentric explanations of modern economic history. We found that both freshmen and seniors held Eurocentric views of agriculture. Although seniors' views tended to be less intense than freshmen's, they were still far from being immune to Eurocentric socio-cultural influences. Academic exposure and/or social maturity were likely causes of the lower intensity of seniors' views. We think that students' Eurocentric views on agriculture are probably associated with socio-cultural conditioning embedded historically by precept and example in the (essentially neo-European) North American psyche as proposed by Hughes (2003). More comprehensive and in-depth surveys are needed to better characterize the origins and intensity of Eurocentric socio-cultural views and how such views may impact graduates' global competency.

## Introduction

The landmark mandate of a "people-serving" land-grant system of higher education in the USA (created by the 1862 Morrill Act) was to truly democratize university access and thereby facilitate meeting the national need for skilled human resources in agriculture and industry over the long

term (Ross, 1942; Eddy, 1957; Cross, 1999; Herren and Craig, 2002). But it was essentially nationalistic and populist in its conception. Land-grant universities were chartered to provide access to agriculture and engineering education that would meet long term US socio-economic economic development needs (Nevins, 1962; Edmond, 1978; Williams, 1991; Geiger, 2000). Indeed, the curricula have been remarkably effective in achieving this intent. However, a question might be posed of whether the land-grant system's putative nationalistic and populist tendencies might foster some degree of insular bias in views and attitudes in its "outputs" – its graduates.

Why should this question be posed? For much of the period following the creation of the land-grant institutions, the US agricultural and industrial economy has been self-sufficient and self-sustaining, largely protected and relatively immune to changes imposed from the rest of the world. A very strong case can be made that this situation has changed remarkably in the last two decades. Dramatic and revolutionary changes in communication and technology have led to increasing internationalization of commerce, capital, and labor. The USA is becoming increasingly linked with the global economy and more and more interdependent with other nations and other peoples. An increasingly international market has been created, not only for conventional products and commodities, but also for professionals, knowledge, research, and educational services (GASEPA, 1998; Ohmae, 1990; Friedman, 1999; Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Kellogg, 2004; Hudzik, 2004).

Faced with these dramatic changes, administrators and faculty at many land-grant institutions are trying to refine and adapt their 21st century mission to better face the challenges of increasing globalization (van den Bor et al., 1995; National Research Council, 1996; GASEPA, 1998). Clear definition of the challenges and concerted policy responses appear to be lacking or inadequate (Allen, 2004; de Lauder, 2004;

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Hudzik, 2004). On the other hand, administrative incentives to facilitate international outreach, exchanges, and linkages are increasingly common; and faculty-driven curriculum and course changes now frequently include overt international content or flavor. These efforts are designed to provide a more globally aware and competent faculty and student body.

Defining global competency and the globally competent student remains elusive. For the purpose of this study, we conceive it as an embedded mental framework – or perhaps a “world view” – that prompts and enables a student to analyze nature and society in a truly global context. This implies some level of comprehension and appreciation of the international dimensions of the student's chosen field of study. There is a growing view among leaders and decision-makers in US higher education that college graduates should be able to help us compete in an international environment. The motive is still perhaps self or national interest; but such interests can best be served by gaining a sophistication regarding the international/global context within which we are increasingly enmeshed.

“Eurocentric diffusionism” is the implicit belief (or interpretation of history) that the rise of Europe to modernity and world geo-political and economic dominance was due to unique European qualities of race, environment, culture, mind, or spirit and that progress for the rest of the world resulted from the diffusion of European civilization (Trevor-Roper, 1965; Blaut, 1993). This ethno-historical model for analyzing world progress and developments originated in the 16th century and, not surprisingly, reached its zenith during the period of European colonialism. As racist or pejorative as this notion may (or may not) be, it still remains an overt or covert basis for many present theories of economic development, modernization, and a new world order (Levine and Campbell, 1972). It is Eurocentric in that it invents a permanent world core (Western Europe), in which socio-economic and cultural evolution is natural and continuous, and a permanent periphery (European colonies and, indeed, all the rest of the world), in which cultural evolution is mainly an effect of the emanation and diffusion of ideas, commodities, settlers, and political control from the core.

Eurocentrism provided the chauvinist rationale for colonialism and was an ideological substratum common to colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse (Blaut, 1993). Although this Eurocentric colonialist understanding of recent history is based on fallacious assumptions and not supported by historical facts, it is still quite prevalent (Blaut, 1993; Shohat and Stam, 1994). It is vigorously advocated – sometimes in more subtle ways, sometimes very overtly – in the widely read writings of sociologists and historians such as Max Weber, Lynn White, Jr., Robert Brenner, Eric L. Jones,

Michael Mann, John A. Hall, Jared Diamond, and David Landes (Blaut, 2000). Landes is representative of these Eurocentric historians (Blaut 2000). Following in the footsteps of Weber, Landes (1998) vigorously defends the thesis of European exceptionalism: that natural endowments (a temperate climate, adequate water, the absence of virulent disease) together with socio-cultural characteristics (decentralized authority, democracy, emphasis on private property rights, culture of inventiveness, distinction between the secular and the religious, empiricism, and a rational, ordered, hard-working populace) gave the developed Western world (notably western Europe) an enormous economic advantage.

The purpose of this preliminary study was to explore the degree to which students in a College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) at a land-grant institution (Virginia Tech) may hold Eurocentric views of agriculture. We posit that such Eurocentric views would be antithetical to efforts to foster a global perspective in the design and content of truly global agricultural curricula (Rist, 1994; de Lauder, 2004). Also, if such Eurocentric views exist and can be identified, it would help guide efforts and increase the rate of progress towards a goal of increasing global competency of students.

## Materials and Methods

With the help of the Office of Academic Assessment at Virginia Tech, we prepared a simple attitudinal survey, consisting of 16 Eurocentric propositions about agriculture. We framed these propositions into a multiple-choice questionnaire designed to measure the intensity of agreement with these propositions. All propositions were posited by economist David Landes (Landes, 1998), whose writings nicely capture Eurocentric theories of economic history. Following the guidelines of Henderson et al. (1987), Angelo and Cross (1993), and Fowler (1993), we edited each proposition stringently to ensure validity (Does it measure what it is intended to measure?) and reliability (Is it unambiguous and non-contradictory, ensuring consistent interpretation and response across respondents?). To guarantee anonymity, the questionnaire requested no student identification except an optional request that each indicate gender.

The following short preamble served to introduce the questionnaire: “Comparatively, North American/European agriculture is often considered to be vastly more productive than that of other regions of the world. Many reasons have been advanced to explain this perceived advantage. The explanations below are suggested in David S. Landes' book 'The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why some are so rich and some so poor' (650 pp., New York: Norton, 1998). We would like to have your frank and honest reactions to Landes' explanations.”

We administered the questionnaire to 39 freshmen enrolled in an introductory overview of crop and soil

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sciences class and to 25 seniors in a senior seminar class. Both classes are required in the Crop and Soil Environmental Sciences major at Virginia Tech, a land-grant institution founded in 1872. We asked students to give their frank and honest reactions by checking a box indicating whether they strongly agree, agree, have no opinion (neutral), disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the 16 Eurocentric propositions (Table 1) regarding North American/European agriculture (Landes, 1998; Blaut, 2000). To make subsequent cross-referencing of these questions easier in later discussion of the results, Table 1 associates keywords with each proposition.

In our view, a student with no Eurocentric bias would (by definition) tend to disagree or strongly disagree with all of these propositions. The range of choices for the responses (strongly agree to strongly disagree) was intended to assess the intensity of Eurocentric bias with respect to the particular proposition. However, we clearly acknowledge that no attitudinal measure is perfect.

The responses were treated as discrete ordinal variables, i.e., as representing some meaningful sequence on the five-point intensity scale of Eurocentric bias. The scale intervals were assumed to be uneven, since it was not possible to say how much the bias intensity varied between any two points on the scale. As a result, only logical operations could and were performed on the resulting ordinal dataset. A key consideration in the analysis was how to interpret the “no opinion (neutral)” response. That choice could mean that the respondent agreed or disagreed with the proposition but decided to remain neutral or that the respondent was unable to respond. We decided to interpret this response an indication that the respondent neither agreed nor disagreed; and therefore, for purposes of aggregation, “neutral” responses were counted in both of the broader (agree or disagree) categories.

**Table 1. Sixteen Eurocentric propositions regarding North American/European agriculture advocated by Landes (1998)**

Proposition	Keywords <sup>1</sup>
1. The climate of North America/Europe is more favorable for agriculture than are the climates of other continents	Favorable climate
2. The climate of North America/Europe is better for human comfort than are the climates of other continents	Comfortable climate
3. The soils in North America/Europe are more fertile than in the other continents	Fertile soils
4. North America/Europe suffers less from natural disasters than do other continents	Less natural disasters
5. North America/Europe was historically less ridden by human diseases than other continents	Less disease-ridden
6. The stability of North American/European agricultural productivity can largely be explained by the differentiation of these continents into distinct ecological zones	Distinct ecozones
7. Historically North America/Europe avoided land degradation caused by overpopulation	Degradation/overpopulation
8. Culturally North America/Europe avoided overpopulation because their capitalistic/free enterprise ethic counteracted such tendencies	Overpopulation/capitalism
9. North American agriculture flourished because European immigrants were particularly inventive	Inventive immigrants
10. North American agriculture flourished because European immigrants were particularly venturesome	Venturesome immigrants
11. North American agriculture flourished because European immigrants were particularly capable of scientific thought	Scientific-minded immigrants
12. North American agriculture flourished because European immigrants held strongly democratic values	Democratic values
13. North American agriculture flourished because European immigrants' family structure was particularly well suited to agricultural development	Family structure
14. North American agriculture flourished partly because European immigrants brought with them free market institutions	Free market
15. North American agriculture flourished partly because European immigrants brought with them the institution of private property rights	Private property
16. The dominance of Christianity among European immigrants contributed significantly to North American agricultural development	Christianity

<sup>1</sup> For easier subsequent cross-referencing

## Results and Discussion

All respondents answered the questionnaire completely, i.e., no missing data. The results, tabulated as percentage of the total number of students giving a specified response, are presented in Table 2 for the 39 freshmen and in Table 3 for the 25 seniors. It was clear that the percentage of freshmen agreeing with Eurocentric propositions were generally higher than the corresponding percentage of seniors. Similarly, the percentage of freshmen disagreeing were generally lower than the corresponding percentage of seniors. This would indicate that the freshmen had a greater propensity for Eurocentric views than did the seniors.

To make the results in Tables 2 and 3 more visually tractable, we used “radar plots” to compare the aggregated percentage of those strongly agreeing,



**Table 2. Responses of 39 freshmen responding to 16 Eurocentric propositions on North American agriculture expressed as % of total.**

Proposition number	Percentage of 39 freshmen who				
	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Had no opinion	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed
1	10.3	71.8	7.7	10.3	0.0
2	15.4	43.6	23.1	15.4	2.6
3	10.3	48.7	28.2	10.3	2.6
4	2.6	41.0	15.4	41.0	0.0
5	5.1	15.4	23.1	51.3	5.1
6	5.1	38.5	48.7	7.7	0.0
7	0.0	28.2	23.1	41.0	7.7
8	0.0	38.5	20.5	33.3	7.7
9	15.4	51.3	17.9	12.8	2.6
10	10.3	46.2	28.2	12.8	2.6
11	12.8	46.2	25.6	12.8	2.6
12	10.3	25.6	48.7	15.4	0.0
13	12.8	30.8	48.7	7.7	0.0
14	10.3	56.4	20.5	12.8	0.0
15	7.7	38.5	30.8	23.1	0.0
16	15.4	28.2	30.8	15.4	10.3

**Table 3. Responses of 25 seniors responding to 16 Eurocentric propositions on North American agriculture expressed as % of total.**

Proposition number	Percentage of 25 seniors who				
	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Had no opinion	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed
1	12.0	64.0	8.0	16.0	0.0
2	0.0	36.0	24.0	40.0	0.0
3	4.0	68.0	12.0	16.0	0.0
4	0.0	0.0	28.0	64.0	8.0
5	0.0	24.0	20.0	40.0	16.0
6	0.0	44.0	44.0	12.0	0.0
7	0.0	28.0	24.0	32.0	16.0
8	0.0	16.0	20.0	60.0	4.0
9	0.0	36.0	36.0	24.0	4.0
10	0.0	36.0	44.0	20.0	0.0
11	0.0	32.0	28.0	40.0	0.0
12	0.0	12.0	44.0	44.0	0.0
13	0.0	36.0	36.0	28.0	0.0
14	0.0	36.0	28.0	32.0	4.0
15	0.0	44.0	32.0	20.0	4.0
16	0.0	24.0	32.0	28.0	16.0

agreeing, and neutral with the aggregated percentage of those neutral, disagreeing, and strongly disagreeing. This division can be visualized geometrically as two overlapping circles dividing each sample into two categories: one with overall higher intensity of Eurocentric views the other with overall lower intensity of Eurocentric views. This aggregation would result in a sum of the percentage agreeing and disagreeing for a given proposition to exceed 100.

Figure 1 shows this comparison for the sample group of 39 freshmen. Examining each proposition (numbered clockwise around this radar plot), it can be seen that more freshmen disagreed than agreed only for propositions 5 and 7 (Figure 1). Those agreeing and disagreeing were practically the same for propositions 4 and 8. For all other propositions, those agreeing were overwhelmingly greater than those disagreeing. Overall, a high level of Eurocentric views on agriculture was present in the freshmen sample. It is not clear why propositions 4, 5, 7, and 8 were not in line with this overall tendency. The answer likely lies deeper within the ethno-psychology of an American version of Eurocentrism (sometimes identified as neo-Eurocentrism) and would require much more in-depth investigation.

The corresponding radar-plot comparison for the group of 25 seniors is given in Figure 2. The gap between the categories of Eurocentric views clearly narrowed for seniors as compared to freshmen. Compared to freshmen, seniors showed a lower intensity of Eurocentric views for 8 of the 16 propositions, indicated by a higher percentage disagreeing than agreeing. On the other hand, there was little or no difference between freshmen and seniors for propositions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 15.

For each proposition the difference in percentage between the high and low intensity categories for freshmen were calculated and plotted in Figure 3. More disagreement than agreement for a given proposition would plot below the zero line; the distance below the zero line indicating the magnitude of the difference. Similarly, more agreement than disagreement would plot above the zero line with the distance above indicating the magnitude of the difference. For comparison, the corresponding differences for seniors

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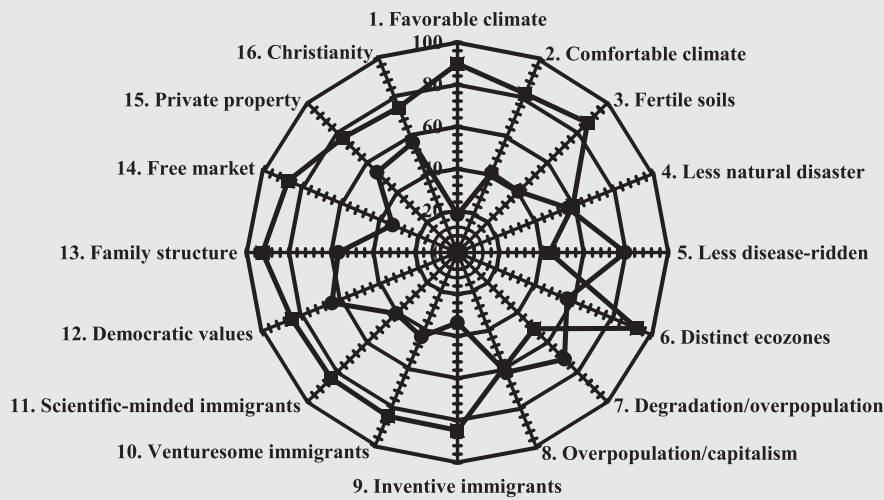


Figure 1. Radar plot comparing aggregated % of 39 freshmen who agreed (solid squares) or disagreed (solid circles) with 16 Eurocentric propositions (Table 1) about North American agriculture. Students who neither agreed nor disagreed were aggregated into both categories.

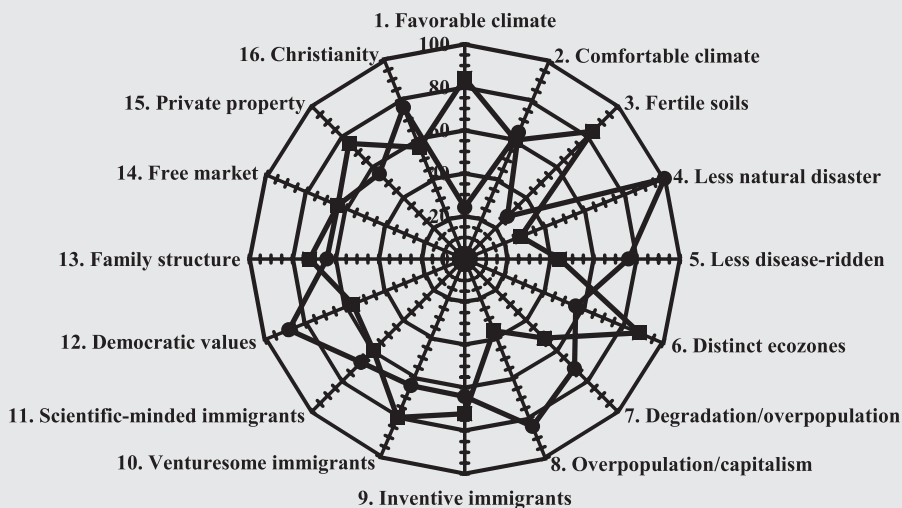


Figure 2. Radar plot comparing aggregated % of 25 seniors who agreed (solid squares) or disagreed (solid circles) with 16 Eurocentric propositions (Table 1) about North American agriculture. Students who neither agreed nor disagreed were aggregated into both categories.

were also calculated and plotted in Figure 3. For each proposition, the relative positions of the plotted points for freshmen and seniors above and below the zero line reveal differences between the two sample groups for each proposition much more sharply and quantitatively than the visual comparison of Figures 1 and 2.

Based on Figures 1 through 3, it may be tempting to conclude that 4 years of exposure to undergraduate agricultural courses lowers intensity of Eurocentric views. But it is also possible that liberal education components of the broader curriculum could have been the agents for change. In addition,

seniors are four years older and might be expected to be more mature and more sophisticated in a variety of ways areas.

To visualize differences in the degree of Eurocentrism associated with academic level, two further radar plots were generated comparing freshmen versus seniors – one plotting responders who agreed (Figure 4) with the views and another plotting responders who disagreed (Figure 5). As before, the aggregated percentage included neutral responders in both broad categories (agree or disagree). These plots clearly show that seniors were less Eurocentric for practically all propositions than freshmen.

Explaining why samples of university-level students in agriculture from a variety of academic and socio-economic background would hold Eurocentric views of agriculture well into their senior year may be quite complex. For one thing, it undoubtedly reflects how ingrained and unconscious such biases (if, indeed, they are biases) may be. Eurocentric views in general are historically and culturally embedded in the (essentially neo-European) North American psyche (Levine and Campbell, 1972; Blaut, 1993; Shohat and Stam, 1994; Mowitt, 2001; Hughes, 2003).

Despite the passage of over 225 years since the Declaration of Independence, North American socio-culture remains strongly European and uniquely conditioned by the events and ideologies associated with European colonialist expansion.

Eurocentric diffusionism has shaped overall US national attitudes and ideologies concerning society, politics, race, environment, psychology, and technology (Blaut, 1993, 2000). Hughes (2003) reduces these attitudes to five basic and commonly-shared socio-cultural convictions that pervade North American (and essentially neo-European) politics, culture, and

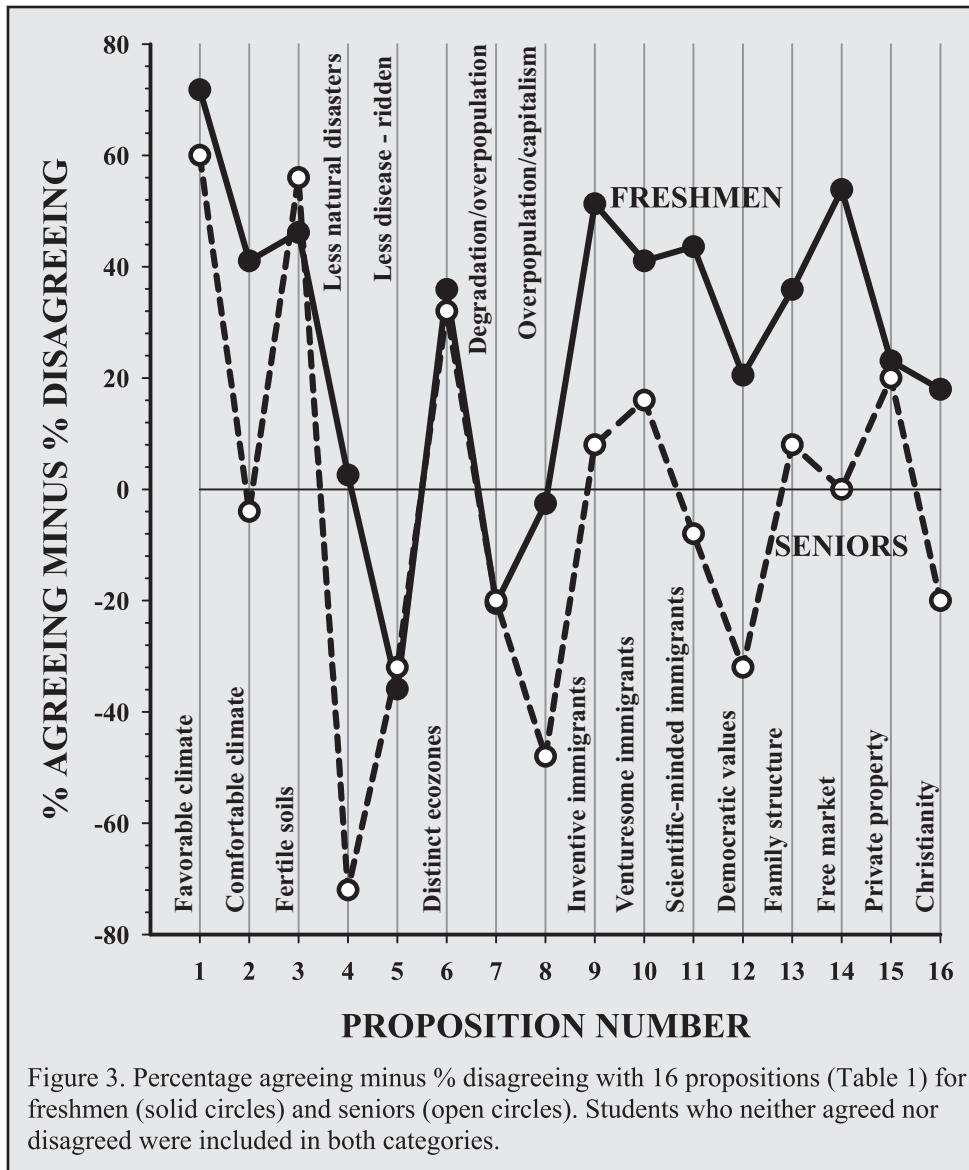


Figure 3. Percentage agreeing minus % disagreeing with 16 propositions (Table 1) for freshmen (solid circles) and seniors (open circles). Students who neither agreed nor disagreed were included in both categories.

socio-economics and give an enduring meaning to American nationalism. He calls them the "myths" of chosen nation, nature's nation, Christian nation, millennial nation, and innocent nation; not in the sense that they are patently untrue, but in the sense that they are the commonly shared socio-cultural convictions that, when intertwined and combined with the American Creed (We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.) give an enduring meaning to American nationalism (Hughes, 2003).

Hughes (2003) discusses these five myths in great detail. They are briefly summarized below:

1. The concept of 'chosenness' rooted in Puritanism, originally meant 'chosen for the good of the neighbor'. Woven into the fabric of American nationalism it came to mean that America was chosen for a special and redeeming role on the world stage.

2. Nature's nation tends to affirm the naturalness of the 'American Way' to the exclusion of any other

viable alternatives. Other traditions and other folkways tend to be perceived as perverse and unworthy.

3. The Christian nation myth is rooted in the tradition of adherence to Biblical teachings but, when married to the myth of chosenness, became the notion of cultural superiority and a belief that God had chosen America for a special role and privilege precisely because it was a Christian nation.

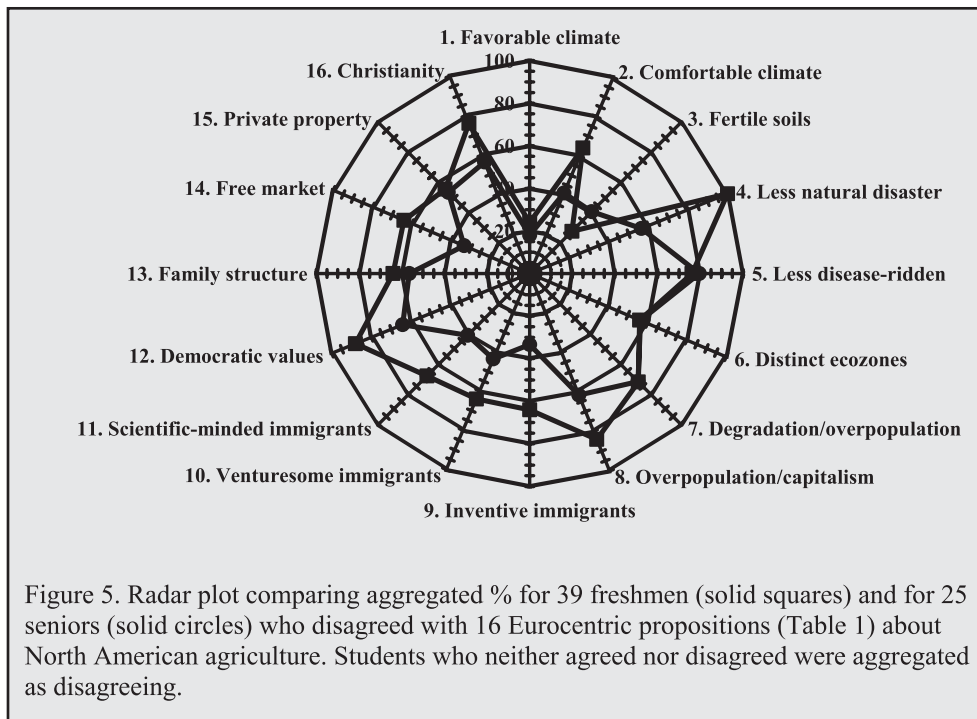
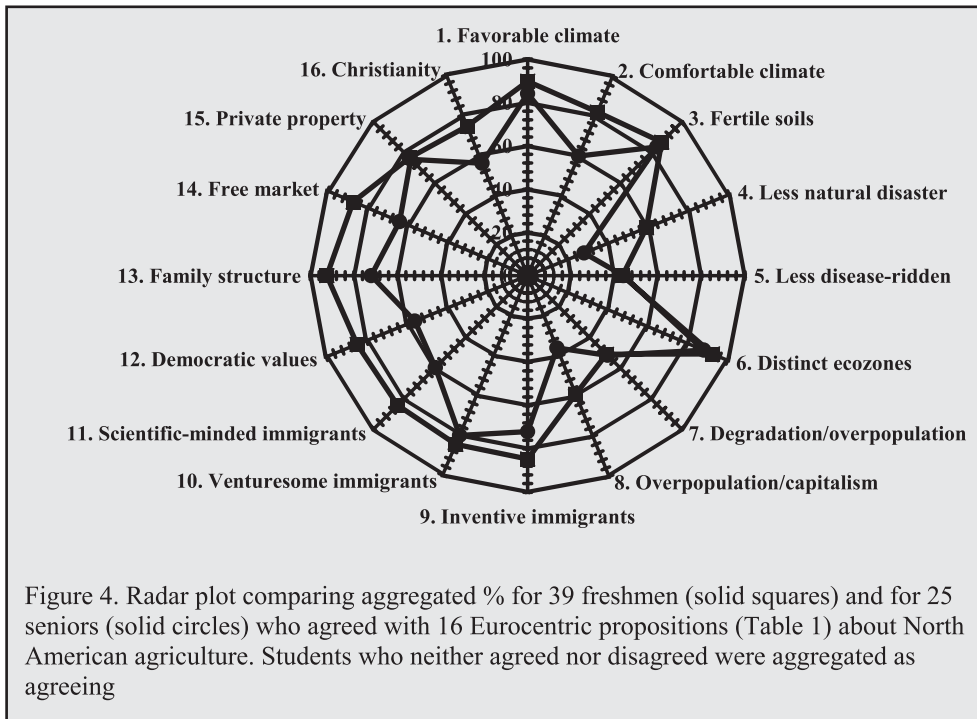
4. The millennial nation myth insinuates that America is destined to usher in a millennial age of freedom and blessing for the whole earth be it through domination or by moral force of example and leadership. The millennial vision is well-described in the imagery and wording on the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States as the unfinished pyramid (representing the American nation and dated 1776 in Roman numerals) that rises above a barren desert terrain. The all-seeing eye (of God) looks down with approval beneath the Latin inscription "annuit coeptis"

meaning "He has favored our undertakings". Below the pyramid is the inscription that truly underpins the millennial concept "*novus ordo seclorum*" or "a new order of the ages".

5. The innocent nation myth emerged out of a conflation of the previous four myths following America's involvement in two world wars and its rise to world dominance. In its current form it manifests in the tendency to cloak actions at the national level in an air of righteousness and innocence and therefore to reject justifiable historical judgment and criticism. It gives America a sense of absolution from unsavory historical actions of state and serves as the apology for a reinvention of the 'manifest destiny' doctrine on a global scale.

Hughes (2003) also points out that while American capitalism promoted hard work and individual effort it was distorted over time into a 'Gospel of Wealth', a 'Law of Competition', 'Unbridled Greed', and 'Economic Survival of the Fittest'. These and other mythical dimensions of American capital-

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ism were (and still are) used to rationalize and justify national geo-political self-interests, and to serve as handmaid to the myths of chosenness, Christian nation, and millennial nation (Hughes, 2003). The myths of chosen nation, nature's nation, and Christian nation along with the mythical dimensions of American capitalism are very closely linked to neo-Eurocentric diffusionism (Blaut, 2000; Hughes, 2003).

In this preliminary study, the 16 propositions of Eurocentric bias can be reasonably construed as corollary to the five basic socio-cultural myths

proposed by Hughes (2003). However, only further and more in-depth studies can determine inter-relationships between these socio-cultural myths and the Eurocentric views reflected in the students' perceptions about North American/European agriculture.

## Summary

Taken in its entirety, this limited study shows that the views of the sample groups of students were generally Eurocentric. Seniors tended to hold less intense Eurocentric views than freshmen but were still far from being immune to Eurocentric socio-cultural influences. It is not clear whether the differences in intensity between freshmen and seniors were due to academic exposure or to social maturity. Nevertheless, in a period of rapid globalization, these observations suggest that students may need to be guided and encouraged to unlearn Eurocentric socio-cultural views in order to be more globally competent (Shohat and Stam, 1994).

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