

Viewpoint: What Charles Mann's 'Wizard and Prophet' book gets wrong about food and agriculture

I've been reading Charles Mann's latest book [Wizards and Prophets](#), which was released earlier this year.

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While I thought the book was well done and well worth reading, Mann gets one aspect of this debate wrong. Because I've seen [other writers make the same mistaken point](#), it's worth delving into a bit.

Throughout the book, Mann refers to the Borlaug way of thinking as "top down" and the "hard way," and he contrasts this with Vogt's approach which he depicts as "bottom up", "localized", etc. This is exactly backward.

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If [Vogt's] resource-constrained view is a core belief, how do you solve the problem? Adherents to this point of view typically urge folks to consume less or use less resource-intensive systems/products or to constrain population in some way. But, most individuals don't want less. ... Thus, the only fully effective way for the prophets to accomplish their goal (preventing catastrophic collapse) is to force or constrain the population to adopt outcomes few individuals would choose on their own.

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The wizardly Borlaug view, by contrast, operates via entrepreneurial innovation and individual decisions of whether to adopt or not. ... Yes, the types of seeds and production practices developed by Borlaug et al. spread far and wide, but it was largely because they "worked" not because it was mandated from on high.

Editor's note: Jayson Lusk is an agricultural economics professor at Purdue University

Read full, original post: [Wizards and Prophets](#)