Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America

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Agrarianism—the celebration of agriculture and rural life for the positive impact thereof on the individual and society—is a philosophical perspective that was well articulated in the ancient world. In the United States agrarianism has generally thrived, drawing intellectual sustenance from such figures as Thomas Jefferson, one of our few truly formidable political thinkers, and Henry David Thoreau, one of the giants of American letters.

While all agrarians have much in common, one can certainly make distinctions among them, and one distinction I have found useful is that between “rational” and “romantic” agrarians. Rational agrarians, operating in the tradition of the Physiocrats and Jefferson, stress the tangible contributions agriculture and rural people make to a nation’s economic and political well being. Romantic agrarians, following the path trod by Thoreau, emphasize the moral, emotional, and spiritual benefits agriculture and rural life convey to the individual.¹

Anyone who pays even cursory attention to any Congressional farm bill debate is well aware that rational agrarianism is alive and well, but its equally vital romantic sibling usually draws less public attention.

Despite its relative obscurity, romantic agrarianism is an intriguing and revealing phenomenon for at least two reasons. First, insofar as it has

¹. A thoughtful and stimulating examination of agrarianism is James A. Montmarquet’s The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-Gatherer to Agrarian Radical In Western Culture (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1989). Montmarquet also uses the term romantic agrarianism, though his conception of it is somewhat broader and more literary than mine.
served mainly as a vehicle for criticizing a capitalistic, technologically oriented, urban-industrial society, romantic agrarianism has been an especially vital ideology in a century and in a country in which those tendencies have reached their zenith. The second reason why romantic agrarianism is particularly compelling is because it provides an excellent twentieth-century illustration of a number of American values and myths, especially of that durable strain of American thought that R.W.B Lewis referred to as the “Adamic Myth,” the belief that the individual could recapture a lost innocence.2

Romantic agrarianism has waxed and waned throughout American history, but it became increasingly popular around the turn of this century. The reasons for its revival had little to do with rural America and much to do with social and economic changes extrinsic to agriculture. The increasingly urban and industrial nature of society, the rise of organized effort in a variety of endeavors and the consequent declension of individual efficacy, the growing dominance of the factory in work and of commercial values in human relations, and the deterioration of the authority of traditional social institutions spread disquiet as well as awe in the United States.

American culture was undergoing a sea-change, was being “incorporated” to borrow Alan Trachtenberg’s useful image. Many accepted that change, even rejoicing in it. Others resisted, by urging a return to traditional values, by joining unions, by embracing Populism, or by engaging in any of a dozen other activities. Among members of the upper-middle class, as T.J. Jackson Lears has shown, “antimodernism” became a popular means of criticizing cultural developments and posing alternatives to them.3

An important expression of the antimodernist impulse was a back-to-the-land movement rooted in a critique of modern urban-industrial society and that society’s effect on human happiness and right living. Those, such as Gustav Stickley and his colleagues on The Craftsman, Bolton Hall, and even Henry Ford, who urged urban people to flee cities and take up small acreages did so less out of affection for the countryside than out of rejection of the cities. The return to the land offered what one champion tellingly characterized as an escape “from the horrors of city life.” The Craftsman recommended it to “the city person who has grown to realize the worthlessness and the unwholesomeness of the average metropolitan existence.”4

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When they spoke of what rural life had to offer, advocates of a return to the land always pointedly contrasted it with urban ills and implied that rural living would allow a restoration or recapture of a free and natural existence that had been lost. “We want to check . . . needless want and misery in the cities,” Bolton Hall assured the readers of Three Acres and Liberty in 1907, “and this can be done by restoring the natural condition of living.” Prominent back-to-the-lander Walter Dyer argued for farming in The Craftsman, contending that “every other vocation is conducted in chains” shaped by “the demands of employers, or directors, or stockholders, or a spoiled public. It is only the farmer who is free of these things.” Liberty Hyde Bailey, a sympathetic observer of the back-to-the-land phenomenon, captured the essence of the movement when he noted that it “expresses the yearning of the people . . . for escape from complexities and unessentials.” It was part of what David Shi characterizes as the quest for “the simple life” in an increasingly complicated America.

Back-to-the-landers were not the only agrarians in progressive-era America. The Country Life Movement included many people who shared both the back-to-the-landers’ critique of urban society and their appreciation for the moral and spiritual benefits of farming. When Kenyon Butterfield rhapsodized that “bird and flower, sky and tree, rock and running brook speak to him [the farmer] a various language. He may read God’s classics, listen to the music of divine harmonies, and roam the picture galleries of the eternal,” the rural sociologist displayed as romantic a view of farming as did any of his contemporaries. And when Bailey damned the city for being “parasitic . . . elaborate and artificial” and lauded “the plain and frugal living of plain people” he spoke the same language as the back-to-the-landers.

Bailey and Butterfield and like-minded agrarians parted company with back-to-the-landers on the issue of the nature and future of American life. Like most other people in the Country Life Movement, Bailey and Butterfield accepted the reality that the United States was becoming urban. They believed that country life must be reformed so that it would remain vital.

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and vibrant, so that it would advance as urban life advanced, and so that it could continue to serve the social and economic needs of an urban nation. Achieving those goals meant making the countryside more like the city—making rural people more efficient and sophisticated, organizing them more fully, and mechanizing and commercializing their operations. The Country Lifers thought such changes would preserve rather than destroy the essence of rural life. As articulate and consistent critics of urban life, who loved the countryside precisely because it diverged dramatically from the city, back-to-the-landers could not agree.

The back-to-the-land movement faded before World War I, but the anti-modernism it expressed never disappeared. During the 1920s the leading romantic agrarian in the United States was Ralph Borsodi, a New York advertising man who, in 1922, moved onto a small farm on Long Island. There his family attempted to maximize its self-sufficiency, while eschewing neither modern conveniences nor Borsodi’s advertising salary.

Borsodi’s experiment in rural living was rooted in his alienation from urban-industrial society, an alienation he detailed in *This Ugly Civilization*, published in 1929. For Borsodi, the factory symbolized modern life, and he damned it for “robbing the worker, his wife, and his children, of their contact with the soil; depriving them of intimacy with growing things . . . and destroying their capacity for fabricating things for themselves and of entertaining and educating themselves.” *This Ugly Civilization* made Borsodi the leading romantic agrarian of the interwar years. It has not aged well. It displays an arrogant, Nietzschean elitism, and an insensitivity to women that was remarkable even by the standards of 1929.7

The sexism of *This Ugly Civilization* and a series of articles in the *New Republic* drawn from it called forth telling criticism. One woman wrote that “for the past two hours I have been in the garden picking beans and brooding darkly on the exquisite Arcadian existence described so alluringly . . . by Mr. Borsodi” and accused him of promoting a return to “patriarchal ways.” Another wrote: “Perhaps I had too much of farm life in childhood and youth. Up at four o’clock in the morning to get berries picked and hoeing done before the heat of the day . . . washing milk bottles and heavy cans, milking, into the house at night—the dirty dishes of the hasty breakfast still on the table, often too tired to eat or do anything but drop into the unmade bed.” This woman concluded with the confi-

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dence that, whenever she saw farm women and children at work, "instinctively a prayer wells up from every cell of my being: 'Thank God I'm not there.' It is the most profound prayer I ever make."8

While it would be unwise to generalize from This Ugly Civilization or the reaction to it, these letters suggest a clue to why there have been—and are—few women numbered among prominent romantic agrarians. Perhaps it is the case that males have experienced a much more profound and dehumanizing loss of efficacy, independence, and mastery with industrialization than have women. Perhaps the latter have even found that industrialization has been what such turn-of-the-century feminists as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner suggested it would be—a liberating and generally positive experience. Certainly, Borsodi’s female critics demonstrated little inclination to embrace a life they associated with physical drudgery and suppression of the individual personality.9

However unappealing it might be to most women, romantic agrarianism achieved intellectual respectability in 1931 with the publication of I’ll Take My Stand by twelve of the "Nashville Agrarians," most of whom were associated with Vanderbilt University. The twelve essays in I’ll Take My Stand, while as disparate and idiosyncratic as their authors, were united in their celebration of a Southern society based on strong kinship and community ties, traditional values, and religion, and in their rejection of a dominant American society which they perceived as overly industrial, scientific, materialistic, and collectivist in nature. In an industrial age, they forthrightly embraced "the theory of agrarianism . . . that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations."10

Neither Borsodi nor the Nashville Agrarians could foresee the Great Depression, of course, but that cataclysm turned them into prophets and gained respectful attention for their ideas. No doubt sooner than any of them had anticipated, the economic collapse seemed to validate their socio-cultural criticism and herald the demise of an overly industrialized and urbanized society. "In 1929, when the country was most deliriously celebrating the great boom of which Henry Ford was the prophet and mass production was the gospel . . . no one wanted to be told that the


9. See, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution (New York: Small, Maynard, 1898), and Olive Schreiner, Women and Labor (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911). Richard Crepeau notes that Melbourne Village was founded by three of Borsodi's female followers, Margaret Hutchison, Elizabeth Nutting, and Virginia Wood. They provide important exceptions to the general rule of male domination and prominence in romantic agrarianism.

whole industrial world was mistaken,” Borsodi reminded the readers of Flight From the City in 1933. But now they were quite willing to be told, and the romantic agrarians were quite willing to tell them.11

A large variety of groups and individuals joined such stalwarts as Borsodi and the Nashville Agrarians in perceiving rural solutions to the nation’s economic and social problems in those early depression years. The result, as Paul Johnstone noted laconically in 1942, was a “back-to-the-land movement [that] made many strange bedfellows.”12

Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other devotees of English Distributism argued that population and economic activity had come to be too heavily concentrated in too few urban centers. The Catholic Rural Life Conference urged a return of population to the land. Individuals and families did flow back to the land, to ride out the economic storm, at least. Sometimes they joined with others in communal settings, an activity romanticized by King Vidor’s 1933 film, “Our Daily Bread.” Articles and books, such as M.G. Kains’ Five Acres and Independence, appeared to advise former clerks and factory workers how to embark on farming.13

Agrarians gained sympathy in high places with the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in 1933. Roosevelt had long championed rural living and had come to think that the nation was overurbanized. He shared the dream of many that villages might be developed in which semi-subsistence farming and light manufacturing could be pursued. Holding that idea, Roosevelt was favorably inclined to the Subsistence Homestead program created by Congress in 1933 and administered by his Interior Department.

The creation of the Subsistence Homestead program was a tangible indication of the new popularity of agrarian ideas. It did not prove to be a means to public influence for many agrarians. Part of the reason lay in the fundamental disjunctions between cultural criticism and public policy, even when the latter was partially inspired by the former. The Nashville Agrarians were basically humanistic theorists who lacked the patience,

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attentiveness to detail, and willingness to compromise that policy forma-
tion demanded. Personality factors also played a role. Borsodi, enthusi-
astic initially about subsistence homesteads, was a rigid and stubborn ideo-
logue who soured on what he perceived as New Deal collectivism and
regimentation. Richard Crepeau’s assessment of Borsodi as “brilliant, char-
monger, idealistic, . . . a great thinker . . . but also . . . a jackass, dishon-
est, . . . manipulative, self-righteous, and intolerant” clearly indicates why
his relations with those in the Subsistence Homestead program were diffi-
cult at best and impossible at worst.14

Related to these problems was a basic difference in outlook between
romantic agrarians and the people who ran the Division of Subsistence
Homesteads, a difference paralleling that between back-to-the-landers and
other Country Lifers a generation before. As David Shi notes, Director M.L.
Wilson “hoped to use his agency to create a new community life” that
would be more “simple, humane, and socially minded” than what com-
monly existed in modern society. However, he and his colleagues did not
reject the modern world, believe its demise to be desirable or feasible, or
agree with many agrarians that industrialism was, in Paul Conkin’s words,
“the great enemy of mankind.”15

In light of the fact that the Subsistence Homestead program itself was
effectively scored by conservatives for its utopianism, it is not surprising
that the romantic agrarians who found it inadequate were widely por-
trayed as impractical dreamers. But such criticism, while not really unfair,
missed the basic issue. Agrarianism was—and is—an oppositional and
critical point of view rather than a programmatic blueprint. As two recent
interpreters have noted of I’ll Take My Stand, it was less “a literal call to
reify a pastoral dream” than it was “a metaphorical way of drawing the
contrast between a society organized solely for the purpose of producing
and acquiring material goods . . . and one that might find better means of
fulfilling the rational and spiritual . . . needs of man conceived in a fuller
human dimension.” In that role, agrarianism was—and remains—an ideo-
logy for all seasons, attractive to great varieties of people who are called
upon to share no more than a degree of alienation from modern society.16

15. Shi, The Simple Life, 238; and Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 295. The background
and administrative history of the Subsistence Homestead program is covered in Richard S.
Kirkendall, Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (Columbia: University of
Missouri Press, 1966). For Franklin Roosevelt’s ideas see “Back to the Land,” Review of Reviews
84 (October 1931): 63–64.
16. William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan, eds., A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrari-
ans After Fifty Years (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982). 9. Paul Conkin also points
to the transcendent appeal of I’ll Take My Stand in The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville: Univer-
8  agricultural history

But even as an oppositional perspective agrarianism has always needed to illustrate a credible alternative to urban-industrial culture and all that it symbolizes. Traditional rural society and agriculture provided that alternative, but romantic agrarians have watched as this last haven of the values and behaviors they cherish has fallen increasingly under the domination of a hegemonic modern culture.

As this century has proceeded agriculture and rural society have come increasingly to resemble industrial-capitalist culture and urban society. Commercialization, mechanization, chemicals, and science have transformed agricultural production into an enterprise more and more similar to industrial production. The material, social, and cultural experiences of rural Americans are increasingly distinguishable from those of their urban counterparts. Material changes have been paralleled by changes in the habits of mind. Farmers commonly think like businessmen and their families share the views of middle-class suburbanites.

By the 1920s, romantic agrarians were already troubled by these changes. In This Ugly Civilization, Borsodi bemoaned “the tendency of the age for the rural family to imitate the urban family’s habits of living” and “the application of the factory system to our agriculture.” In I’ll Take My Stand, John Crowe Ransom argued that man “cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love . . . an assemblage of ‘natural resources,’ a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market or a credit system. . . .” and complained that “it is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer’s farm.” His fellow contributor Andrew Nelson Lytle complained of “industrial imperialism and its destructive technology. . . .” and of those urging “industrialize the farm; be progressive; drop old-fashioned ways and adopt scientific methods.” If such advice was followed, Lytle concluded, the rural way of life would be destroyed rather than strengthened.17

One of the ironies of the Great Depression was that even as it exposed the serious flaws of the modern economic and social systems, it highlighted the degree to which farmers had become enmeshed in them. The tribute the New Deal paid to romantic agrarian notions in the form of the Subsistence Homestead program should not be allowed to obscure the reality that the main thrust of Roosevelt’s farm program was toward the relief of commercial producers. Moreover, the programs had the effect, perhaps unintended, of advancing commercialization by lavishing rewards on the largest, most efficient, and most market-oriented farmers. Other developments as well pushed rural America in the direction of modernity. Not least among

17. Borsodi, This Ugly Civilization, 272–73 and 275; John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed But Unregenerate,” in I’ll Take My Stand, 20; and Andrew Nelson Lytle, “The Hind Tit,” in I’ll Take My Stand, 204.
them was government-sponsored rural electrification, which promised to obliterate the major source of most material differences between urban and rural life.

As Paul Johnstone pointed out so insightfully in his provocative 1940 essay, “Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life,” agriculture and rural society were rapidly becoming part of modern life. Observant romantic agrarians ruefully agreed. By 1939 Borsodi had concluded that agriculture had become part of the problem rather than part of the solution for the ills of modern America. “There is not only something wrong with modern agriculture but there is also something wrong with modern life,” he wrote. “What is wrong with agriculture today is caused by the effort which we have made for over a century to modernize it by commercializing, by industrializing, and by urbanizing it.”

The transformation of agriculture and rural society, disturbing though they were to Borsodi and his contemporaries, did not prevent a new generation of critics of American culture from perceiving a viable and attractive alternative to modern life in the countryside. Indeed, the late 1960s and the 1970s, marked as they were by heightened environmental consciousness, disillusionment with modern American society and its values, and distrust of science and technology, witnessed a revival of romantic agrarian thought and action reminiscent of that of the 1930s. Young people formed rural communes, authors wrote hopefully of de-industrialization and a more satisfying style of life, and such half-forgotten prophets as Borsodi and Helen and Scott Nearing were rediscovered by a new and appreciative public. But while the image of the countryside attracted this new cadre of romantic agrarians, what they found there when they closely examined reality repelled them.

Ever since Henry David Thoreau, romantic agrarians have considered contact with nature in general and the land in particular to be the primary component of agrarian superiority, and it is the component that they now see in greatest danger. Modern agriculture was wrong, Aldo Leopold contended in 1949, because it regarded land “as a commodity belonging to us” rather than “as a community to which we belong.” Leopold’s land ethic is reflected in much of the contemporary criticism of American agriculture.


19. Helen and Scott Nearing’s Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World and Flight from the City were brought out in new editions in 1970 and 1972, respectively, both with introductions by Paul Goodman. One popular manifesto of the period that suggested agrarian solutions to America’s problems was E.F. Schumacher’s Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
“Land is not a resource any more than humans are resources,” Wes Jackson insists. “Call chrome a resource or petroleum a resource, but not land or people.” Going a step farther, Wendell Berry argues that our error began when we made a distinction between ourselves and nature. “We have given up the understanding . . . that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another . . . all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another.”20

Modern agrarians argue that the prevailing attitude toward the land in contemporary agriculture is wrong because land is in some sense sacred and is connected with people and other living things. But they also contend that the modern rural attitude is wrong because it contributes to farmers’ alienation from the very natural world which is their métier and on which, their attitudes notwithstanding, they ultimately depend. Modern industry alienated the worker from his work, and the industrialization of agriculture has alienated the farmer from his.

Romantic agrarians contend that alienation from work and disconnection from nature have contributed to alienation from humanity and disconnection from the community. The pursuit of commercial goals at the expense of an emotionally satisfying life has damaged both the family and the community. “The family farm is failing . . . .” Wendell Berry argues simply, because of “the universal adoption by our own people . . . of industrial values.” And where the family goes, the community follows. As Berry puts it in his characteristically arresting way, “the great breakthrough of industrial agriculture occurred when most farmers became convinced that it would be better to own a neighbor’s farm than to have a neighbor.”21

If farmers have sacrificed the natural and social lives their forbearers supposedly enjoyed, at least they have showed themselves to be adept at producing crops. But modern agrarians contend that the costs far exceed the benefits. Wes Jackson points to the destruction of the soil and the dependence on non-renewable resources that modern agriculture entails. And Berry suggests that material gain has come at the cost of the farmers’ soul. “That one American farmer can now feed himself and fifty-six other people may be . . . a triumph of economics and technology,” Berry argues, “by no stretch of reason can it be considered a triumph of agriculture or of


culture. It has been made possible by the substitution of energy for knowledge, of methodology for care, of technology for morality.”22

Agribusiness techniques and values have become so pervasive that it has become difficult for romantic agrarians to present many examples worthy of emulation. In the early years of the century back-to-the-landers could reasonably include most farm people when they wrote of the natural and human values inculcated by farm life. By ignoring a few anomalies, the Nashville Agrarians could include much of their region. Romantic agrarians today fall back most often on the Amish. This shrinking sphere reflects the utopianism and the alienation of romantic agrarians today. But it also eloquently underscores their insight regarding the compelling hegemony of the urban-industrial ethos.

Despite the fact that ours is a decreasingly rural society, and despite the reality that a shrinking portion even of rural society resembles the image romantic agrarians portray, theirs remains a vital and important point of view. It is important in part because it has played a role in stimulating some new and promising developments in agriculture and agricultural research, such as organic farming and low-input sustainable agriculture. And it is important because it forces us, in an uncompromising fashion, to confront ourselves and what we have become, to take stock of our values, and to consider seriously the nature and purpose of life.

It is worth asking, regardless of the power and validity of their critique, why the solution offered by romantic agrarians has been, and remains, so compelling. Why is it, as James Montmarquet notes, that “the power of the romantic critique of this civilization retains a kind of force, even as the possibility of a truly agrarian alternative belongs to a long buried past.” Compare romantic agrarianism to Marxism, for example. The latter has provided a powerful prescription for the problems of our system and perhaps a more relevant one given the nature of our modern world. Yet Marxism has never been very popular here and is fading badly now, while romantic agrarianism keeps rolling along.23

The popularity of romantic agrarianism, I believe, relates to its Americaness. While it is not a native ideology, it is especially attractive to Americans because it appeals to cultural myths and values at the core of our existence. It is an individualistic ideology, stressing the possibility—even the necessity—of individual solutions to social problems. It appeals to our sense of guilt, our sense that we have misused the advantages bequeathed to us, and that we are thus unworthy. It appeals to that very American notion that the individual can escape the constraints of society

22. Berry, Unsettling of America, 33.
and recapture a lost innocence, that he or she can reclaim a lost freedom in a lost Eden, a paradise almost always associated with nature and almost never with civilization. Romantic agrarianism appeals to that part of us that admires Huck Finn lighting out for the territories, or Jay Gatsby trying to capture Daisy; that part of us that envies John Wayne and Kevin Costner’s character in “Dances With Wolves”; that part of us drawn to products labelled “free” and “natural.” And it has a nostalgic quality, like the mythic “family farm” to which it is related, always pulling at the heart-strings and appealing to our social memory. For all of these reasons, romantic agrarianism is likely to endure. It may never be relevant to American society. It will always be relevant to the American mind.