

Why Americans Value Rural Life

Rural America has traditionally been valued in our society less because of what it is than because of what it is not. The Founders valued rurality because it set us apart from England, giving us a separate identity. By the mid-19th century we were valuing rural America because it was not urban America. In this century, celebrating rural America has served as a means of criticizing our urban industrial society and its values. We will probably always celebrate rural America, both because doing so allows us legitimately to criticize our society and because it provides a blank screen on which we can project our hopes and dreams.

The Roots of American Agrarianism

Our national reverence for rural life is so deep and unquestioned that we are tempted to think it has always been a component of the American mind, but such is not the case. Indeed, our agrarianism developed slowly, and has changed substantially in the nearly four centuries since English colonies were planted in what is now the United States.

The early English colonists revered the town and city, not the countryside. Virginians lived in Jamestown long after the unhealthiness of the place had become apparent to all. In New England, Pilgrims and Puritans clustered together in towns, going out to their fields during the day. South Carolina planters much preferred life in Charleston to life on their rice plantations. And William Byrd fled his Virginia estate for London whenever he had sufficient funds.

There were practical reasons for living in towns, such as the threat posed by Indians in some places, but, like most of their ideas, the colonists brought their regard for urban living along with them from Europe. For Europeans, towns and cities were places of civilized life, while the open country was the domain of barbarism. European Christians believed that the city was the province of God while the wilderness was the domain of Satan. It was by no means accidental that New England Puritans assumed that witches' sabbaths were conducted outside of towns, in the forests.

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During the 18th century, this European attitude was challenged by Enlightenment thinkers, such as the French Physiocrats, who damned cities for their excessive artificiality and praised more "natural" styles of living. Enlightenment philosophers especially celebrated farmers, whom they believed combined elements of urban civilization with rural naturalness, while avoiding the moral corruption of the former and the savagery and barbarism frequently associated with the latter.

Alterations in European philosophical fashions had no major effect on the thinking of most Americans. Americans increasingly lived in the open country, but that was a response to the demands of pursuing an extensive agriculture in a large geographical area rather than a reflection of a new philosophical commitment. Indeed, Americans viewed the rural nature of the colonies mainly as a sign of cultural deficiency compared with England. Its more urban nature underscored England's sophistication relative to the rough and crude colonies.

All of this changed rather dramatically with the American Revolution. Suddenly, what had been a creolized English society became an independent country. Independence meant not only the necessity of new political institutions, but also that a new and separate identity had to be developed. Those aspects of American life that had set the colonies apart from the Mother Country, and had thereby connoted colonial inferiority, quickly became components of a new identity. In the hands of American patriots, the

new republic's ruralism became an essential part of its identity and, in Enlightenment terms, a sign of its superiority to England.

Beyond helping America establish its distinctive identity, our rurality also helped us come to terms with our political system. The United States in 1776 was the major republic in a world in which republics were viewed as dangerously unstable forms of government because they placed authority in the hands of the people, who were, everyone agreed, volatile and vicious. Thomas Jefferson and other agrarians argued eloquently that republicanism, which had failed in Greece and Rome, would succeed in the United States because it was peopled by farmers, who were by their very nature and by virtue of their surroundings independent, moral, and patriotic. In these early years, an accepted and heretofore unexamined fact of life—that most Americans lived on farms—was turned into a proof of superiority.

Implications of Early American Agrarianism

A pattern can be discerned in this early American agrarianism that continues to inform it today. The countryside was celebrated as much for what it was not as for what it was. The rurality of America was good because it meant the country was not England, and the fact that Americans were farmers was good because it meant they were not vicious and corrupt. What America and its people were was glossed over by polemicists like Jefferson, who generally ignored the largely rural institution of slavery as well as the greed, avarice, brutality, and crudity that were certainly present in rural life.

One effect of making ruralism an essential component of American identity and a key to the survival of republicanism was to impart inferiority and deficiency not only to Europe, but also to American cities. Jefferson was quite explicit in his condemnation of cities, scathingly likening them to sores on the body politic. Thus, agrarianism had both a positive and a negative side, celebrating and elevating one style of life while condemning another as deficient. As the Revolution faded from memory, and as cities grew and became more significant in American life, this antiurban aspect of agrarianism assumed increasing prominence.

By the antebellum period, rural life was being celebrated mainly because of the contrast it offered to urban life. Tamara Plakins Thornton (1989) studied Boston merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and professionals who purchased farms because they viewed the countryside as a refuge from the busy and fast-paced city, and hoped part-time farming would help inoculate them from the materialism and spiritual corruptions of the world in which they earned their livings. As the countryside came to be seen as a refuge and a place of escape, farming as

such, so important to Jefferson, assumed a less significant place in agrarian thinking. For antebellum Americans, the countryside became relatively less important because of the nature of the people who lived there and relatively more important because of the natural surroundings there. It was in the antebellum period that some Americans, most eloquently represented by Henry David Thoreau, discovered and embraced the wilderness. The popularity of James Fenimore Cooper's novels and of such semimythic figures as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett indicated that the American fascination with the wilderness was strong and that, as the wilderness receded, it would probably grow.

Agrarianism and Antiurbanism

The antiurban dimension of agrarianism in the 19th century became more prominent as the United States became more urban and industrial. While the process of urbanization and industrialization was exciting to Americans, and was the source of no small amount of pride, it also stimulated unease and called forth a vigorous counter-reaction.

By the late 19th century, the perceived ills of urban living—especially the materialism and selfish individualism it supposedly inculcated and the mental and physical disorders it presumably inflicted on the middle class—were broadly enough acknowledged that a substantial body of elite opinion celebrated the natural life as an antidote. As T. J. Jackson Lears (1981), David Shi (1985), and others have pointed out, late-19th-century social critics celebrated the wilderness and rural living as counterweights to an urban existence and the maladjustments that came with it. While some of those maladjustments were physical, mental, or spiritual, others were sociocultural. Lurking beneath the surface of 19th-century agrarianism was the sense that the countryside represented the true America, while the cities, increasingly dominated by immigrants with alien languages, customs, and religions, did not. Thus, the ethnic and racial biases that continue to contribute a dark subtheme to agrarianism made their first appearance.

However mixed their motives were, critics of urban life after the Civil War searched for refuge outside the city limits. Their efforts bore fruit in a number of developments, including an impressive expansion in national parks, growing popularity for summer resorts near cities, such as those in the Catskills, an explosion in suburban development near major cities, and a vigorous back-to-the-land movement.

In close conformity with the modern, antiurban thrust of post-Jeffersonian agrarianism, turn-of-the-century back-to-the-land enthusiasts celebrated the countryside not for what it was, but for what it was not. To those who urged city people to take up farming, the countryside served as a

counterweight to an urban existence that was artificial, physically and mentally taxing, and socially destructive. Bolton Hall, whose 1907 book *Three Acres and Liberty* served as sort of a Bible for back-to-the-landers, recommended rural living as a means of checking “needless want and misery in the cities.” Cornell horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey, who chaired Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission in 1907, damned cities as “parasitic...elaborate and artificial,” and another back-to-the-lander simply condemned “the horrors of city life” (Dixon, 1902).

This spasm of back-to-the-landism ran its course, but agrarianism sprang back into vibrant life in the 1930’s, when the Great Depression raised serious questions about the nature and future of urban life and industrial capitalism. Ralph Borsodi, whose 1929 book, *This Ugly Civilization*, was a damning critique of the artificiality and regimentation of urban life, became a popular figure and one of the intellectual fathers of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Subsistence Homesteads Project. In 1931, 12 scholars associated with Vanderbilt University published *I’ll Take My Stand*, a celebration of rural life for its strong community and kinship ties, its traditional values, and its deeply held religious faith, and a condemnation of an urban society the Nashville Agrarians took to be overly industrial, scientific, materialistic, and collectivist.

This was a popular and reasonable position to take at a time when it appeared that the country had become overly industrialized—when the American Federation of Labor lobbied Congress on behalf of a bill mandating a 30-hour workweek and when such social thinkers as Lewis Mumford and Frank Lloyd Wright urged the depopulation of cities and the distribution of residents to the countryside. But Borsodi, the Nashville Agrarians, and their followers disliked cities in good times as well as bad, not for their economic shortcomings, mainly, but for their social flaws.

In addition to the usual social indictments of urban life, the agrarians of the 1920’s and 1930’s damned the city for its corrosive effect on the family and praised the countryside for its traditional family structure. Borsodi and the Nashville Agrarians held no brief for the New Woman of the 1920’s and her ambitions for full equality in American society. Indeed, the patriarchalism Borsodi demonstrated in *This Ugly Civilization* was so blatant and heavy-handed as to draw forth several sharp rejoinders in the New Republic from women.

Perhaps it is the case that, while men have frequently sensed a loss of independence and mastery in urban-industrial society, women have found opportunities for self-realization and fulfillment there that are absent in the countryside. In any event, the leading agrarian ideologues

in American history have overwhelmingly been male, and their ideology seems especially attractive to other men.

The Enduring Function of Agrarianism

For the present-day heirs of Borsodi and the Nashville Agrarians, celebration of rural America continues to serve at least in part as a means of criticizing the dominant urban-industrial society and its values. Such modern agrarians as Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson are deeply alienated critics of our modern urban, industrial, capitalist society, so much so that they even criticize rural America—correctly, I think—for manifesting negative traits historically associated with cities. Urban, industrial, capitalist culture is so pervasive and hegemonic that it has largely overwhelmed the rural society that has traditionally been viewed as its antidote. “The family farm is failing...” Berry (1977) concludes, because of “the universal adoption by our own people...of industrial values.”

While the Wendell Berrys of the world are likely to continue to be disappointed by the reality of rural America, the idea of rural America will continue to be popular with critics of modern urban industrial capitalism. Agrarianism is attractive because it offers a critical perspective that is remarkable for its legitimacy. The United States lacks a traditional conservative and/or reactionary critique of industrial capitalism because, as a post-reformation and post-feudal country, it lacks a traditional conservative and/or reactionary class. Likewise, the United States has never been congenial to the Marxist critique of industrial capitalism, and, while life is full of surprises, likely never will be. Hence, agrarianism fills a vacuum that, in other Western societies, is filled by developed ideologies critical of industrial capitalism and its values. Agrarianism can fill that vacuum so comfortably because it is so American. It goes back at least to the Founders, and it is so tied up with such sacred values and mythic concepts as individualism, liberty, equality, community, and family as to be virtually invulnerable to effective criticism.

But we love rural America for more than just its utility in providing us with a legitimate critical perspective. We also love it because of its plasticity; because we can impart virtually any values we want to it. At various times, the countryside has been the source of our identity and the strength of the republic. It has been a refuge from the city and the values thereof. It has been the place where people live genuine lives, where both individualism and community thrive, and where physical and mental health are restored. It is the heartland of American values of liberty and equality, and the last redoubt of the patriarchal family and the White Anglo-Saxon American. Small wonder that it has attracted people as diverse as Jefferson and Thoreau, Borsodi and Berry, or that groups as disparate as counter-culture commune builders and the Aryan Nation have

sought solace there. Whatever the reality of rural America, the idea of rural America will always be popular with major segments of our population because, in the last analysis, it is America's field of dreams.

For Additional Reading . . .

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