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The AGRARIAN TRADITION

and Its Meaning for Today

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ONE of the most notable developments in American history during the last hundred years has been the rapid decline in the economic, political, and social position of American farmers. Not many years ago, the most idealized man in American life was the hard-working, independent son of the land. He was viewed as the prototype of everything good and worthwhile. As Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, farmers were "the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people."¹ But history has a way of being fickle, and in her unfaithfulness Clio has produced a new national idol far different from the self-reliant yeoman of earlier generations. The farmer has been replaced by the image of a prosperous business or professional man who works in a white collar, who lives in the suburbs, and who is more likely to spend his early evenings with a cocktail glass than a milk pail.

The declining importance of agriculture and the weakening of the agrarian tradition is perhaps best reflected in our national political life. No longer is it necessary to boast of a rural background or of agricultural forebears in order to run successfully for public office. During the presidential campaign of 1924, Calvin Coolidge was shown in the field pitching hay, but this would look ridiculous

today. Although wealthy former Senator Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma used to picture the log cabin of his birth and distribute jugs of good old country sorghum during campaign forays, neither Averell Harriman nor Nelson Rockefeller — both multimillionaires — found it necessary to have his picture taken hauling hay or milking cows during the 1958 election in New York.

So great has been the impact of industrialization upon our culture that Christ's parable of the sower is in danger of losing its meaning to modern young urbanites, who neither sow nor reap, but who spend a lifetime on asphalt or concrete. Many of today's children know cows, horses, sheep, and hogs only as animals that stand idly and sleepily beside bears, elephants, monkeys, and giraffes in the city zoo. James Whitcomb Riley's "When the Frost Is on the Pumpkin and the Fodder's in the Shock" is meaningless to a generation which hardly recognizes pumpkins outside a can and which thinks that fodder may be a new breakfast food. Indeed, the rural imprints have been rapidly blurred by factories, shopping centers, airfields, apartment houses, and suburbs.

Only recently, however, has the secondary place of agriculture been recognized and accepted in American national life. And even yet many citizens espouse the idea that there is something particularly desirable and morally good about farmers and farm life. In a

¹ Quoted in Everett E. Edwards, *Jefferson and Agriculture*, 23 (Washington, 1943).

book written in 1960, Ezra Taft Benson, secretary of agriculture in the Eisenhower administration, wrote: "We have always had a feeling that there is something basically sound about having a good portion of our people on the land. Country living produces better people. The country is a good place to rear a family. It is a good place to teach the basic virtues that have helped to build this nation. Young people on a farm learn how to work, how to be thrifty and how to do things with their hands. It has given millions of us the finest preparation for life."² The sentiments and ideas expressed by Secretary Benson have been prevalent throughout American history; agriculture has always been praised both as a business and as a way of life.

IN TAKING this position, Americans have simply continued and fortified a strong agrarian tradition which went back to the time of Greece and Rome. Centuries before Thomas Jefferson became this country's most outspoken and influential purveyor of agrarianism, Plato, Cato, Seneca, Cicero, Diocletian, and other ancients had established the tradition. Agriculture, it was said, was the most noble of all employments; it was useful, enjoyable, righteous, healthful, and even blessed of God.

The idea that peculiar and highly desired virtues were associated with tilling the soil was strengthened and solidified in the Medieval and Early Modern periods throughout Western Europe. Indeed, by the eighteenth century reverence for farming and farm life had become nearly a cult. In both England and France numerous treatises praising agriculture were written and widely read. Arthur Young, one of the best known and most prolific writers on farming and agricultural reform in England during the late eighteenth century, declared in his book, *Rural Economy*, that "perhaps we might, without any great impropriety, call farming the reigning taste of the present times."³ Even King George III operated a farm and seems to have taken delight in being called

"Farmer George." Benjamin Franklin, one of the best known and most highly respected citizens in Colonial America, held that agriculture was the most valuable economic pursuit, much to be preferred over industry. Although a town dweller all his life, Franklin deplored the social evils associated with manufacturing and exalted the joys and moral values he thought were connected with agricultural enterprise.

The development of a strong agricultural orientation should not be surprising when we consider the fact that during the majority of man's existence he has been a farmer or herdsman. The shift to industrialism and urban living in Western Europe and the United States is almost a current development and has no parallel in the broad sweep of history. Many people still living can remember when the nation was primarily agricultural. In 1790, when the first United States census was taken, over 96 per cent of the people were considered rural. Only five towns had a population of 8,000 or more. Philadelphia and New York, numbering only 42,000 and 33,000 respectively, were the largest cities. The vast majority of the people actually lived on farms, and according to the best estimates, agriculture was responsible for nearly 40 per cent of the private production income, compared to less than 5 per cent for manufacturing. The country's exports consisted almost exclusively of farm products. Under these conditions it is not surprising that the nation's leaders saw the greatness of America in her soil, in the people who tilled it, and in the institutions which grew out of a rural way of life.

Many of the founding fathers were strong agrarians. George Washington loved farm life and each time he left Mount Vernon, where he settled in 1759, he departed with greater reluctance. Moreover, unlike many

² Ezra Taft Benson, *Freedom to Farm*, 109 (New York, 1960).

³ Arthur Young, *Rural Economy: or, Essays on the Practical Parts of Husbandry*, 173 (London, 1770).

of those who praised the virtues of farming, Washington was a successful agriculturist in his own right. In 1786 he wrote to Arthur Young that "agriculture has ever been amongst the most favourite amusements of my life."⁴

The most influential and articulate spokesman for agrarianism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was, of course, Thomas Jefferson. In his *Notes on Virginia* Jefferson argued that the main efforts of American citizens should be in developing the soil. "While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe." Jefferson declared that he had never known "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators," but "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body." To Jefferson the cultivators of the land were the most valuable citizens; they were the most "vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds."⁵

THROUGHOUT the early nineteenth century farms and plantations produced a heavy proportion of the country's political leadership. Most of the presidents as well as other leaders in the pre-Civil War period had strong agricultural ties. Andrew Jackson, for example, owned many acres of land around the Hermitage near Nashville, Tennessee, and was a practicing farmer when not away serving his country. Henry Clay was also a successful agriculturist. Indeed, a rural back-

ground was considered a definite political asset.

Moreover, by the 1820s and 1830s agricultural journalism had become well established, giving farmers and their spokesmen additional opportunities to express the ideas which composed the agrarian tradition. Among these spokesmen were John S. Skinner of Baltimore, Thomas G. Fessenden of Boston, Jesse Buel of Albany, and scores of others. As might be expected, farm editors filled their columns with praise of agriculture.

Yet long before the Civil War, it was obvious to a great many people that farming paid small dividends and that the sources of real wealth were to be found in commerce, industry, or trade. Complaints were widespread that returns from agriculture were small. A farmer near Hillsdale, New York, wrote in 1849 that farming might be the most happy pursuit of man, but it certainly was not the most profitable. It must have been discouraging to farmers and planters to read Moses Yale Beach's *Wealth and Biography of Wealthy Citizens of New York City*, published in 1845. Beach found that there were 962 men or women in New York City alone who were worth \$100,000 or more, a sum which seemed astronomical to most farmers. John Jacob Astor headed the list with property valued at \$25,000,000, accumulated through business and land speculation.

To make matters worse, farming was assuming an ever lower social status in the minds of many people. A contributor to the *New England Farmer* wrote that "every farmer's son and daughter are in pursuit of some genteel mode of living. After consuming the farm in the expenses of a fashionable, flashy, fanciful education, they leave the honorable profession of their fathers to become doctors, lawyers, merchants, or ministers or something of the kind."⁶ Jesse Buel, founder and editor of *The Cultivator*, lamented that "thousands of young men do annually forsake the plough, and the honest profession of their fathers . . . [because

⁴ Quoted in Everett E. Edwards, ed., *Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Agriculture*, 14 (United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics — Washington, 1937).

⁵ Quoted in Edwards, *Jefferson and Agriculture*, 23–26.

⁶ Quoted in Percy W. Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620–1860*, 205 (Washington, 1925).

they believe] agriculture is not the road to wealth, to honor, nor to happiness.”⁷

The more evident it became that agriculture was not the way to wealth or social prestige, the more vigorous did supporters and propagators of the agrarian tradition become in its defense. A writer whose letter was published in the *Southern Cultivator* in July, 1844, declared that “the farmer is the main support of human existence. He is the lifeblood of the body politic, in peace and war, . . . Freedom, patriotism and virtue, after being driven from the degeneracy and corruption of the cities, will find their last resting place in the bosom of the agriculturist.”⁸ After relating the story of Cain and Abel, Benjamin F. Thomas of Boston said that many young farmers were going out from the presence of the Lord and deserting the quiet rural life for the sins of the cities. In an effort to refute the idea that farm life was unprofitable, he continued: “no shares — factory, bank, or railroad — . . . in the long run pay better dividends than the ploughshares.” Even New England agriculture, he declared, would bring a man as much wealth “as it is good for a man to have.”⁹

DESPITE THE LOSS of some economic and social prestige before the Civil War, any serious challenge to the supremacy of agriculture in American life seemed remote in 1860. Some 80 per cent of the country’s population lived on farms or in villages of less than 2,500, communities almost totally dependent upon agriculture. The value of farm land and equipment was about six billion dollars in 1859 compared to less than two billion dollars for all of the 140,000 manufacturing establishments. Moreover, tremendous agricultural expansion was in the offing as the vast expanse of the western prairies and the Great Plains became settled. Between 1860 and 1910 some 400,000,000 acres of land were added to the nation’s agricultural domain — more than had been brought under cultivation between the founding of Jamestown and the election

of Lincoln. The number of farms increased from about 2,000,000 to more than 6,000,000 in the fifty years after 1860. In Minnesota alone 138,000 new farms added some 25,000,000 acres of land to the nation’s agricultural production in the half century after 1860.

Never before in the history of the world had men seen such a flow of farm commodities from fields and ranches. Wheat production jumped from 235,000,000 bushels in 1870 to 695,000,000 in 1910; cotton increased from around 4,000,000 to nearly 12,000,000 bales in the same period. Railroads creaked and ship bottoms bulged as this torrential output moved to markets at home and abroad. Indeed, agriculture was expanding at a faster rate than at any time in history, and under the circumstances, it is no wonder that the agrarian tradition waxed strong.

It was soon evident, however, that agriculture’s historic position of economic supremacy was being seriously threatened. In 1889, for the first time, the federal census reported that the value of manufactured goods surpassed that of farm products. Despite reversal of this in some years after 1889, the tide had definitely turned in favor of an industrial America. The period around 1890 was a kind of watershed in American economic history, and after that time agriculture dropped rapidly in economic, political, and social importance compared to industry, transportation, and finance.

The census of 1920 reported that slightly over half of the nation’s population was urban. A decade later, only 25 per cent of the American people actually lived on farms, and by 1963 this figure had dropped to a mere 7 per cent. The population trend, however, was only part of the story. By the early 1960s a mere 8 per cent of the nation’s labor force was employed in agriculture, and farming produced an ever smaller proportion of

⁷ Quoted in Bidwell and Falconer, *Agriculture in the Northern United States*, 205.

⁸ *Southern Cultivator*, 2:120 (July 24, 1844).

⁹ Benjamin F. Thomas, “Advantages of Rural Pursuits,” in Massachusetts State Board of Agriculture, *Annual Report*, 1862, p. 46–55.

the national income. In 1900 agriculture was still responsible for about 20 per cent of the national private production income, but by 1929 this figure had declined to around 10 per cent, and by the early 1960s farm income had dropped to less than 5 per cent of the nation's total.

DESPITE the growth of an industrial economy and the development of an urban society, the agrarian tradition continues to flourish. Indeed, as farming has experienced a sharp relative decline in American national life, the claims that agriculture is vitally important to the country's welfare have actually increased.

The Grange, which is commemorating its hundredth anniversary this year, has played a major part in fostering agrarianism. Like other farm organizations, it has drawn on the ideas associated with this tradition to justify its demands for improvement in the social and economic life of the farmer. Leaders of the Grange have argued for a century that to help farmers would be to benefit the entire nation. Oliver H. Kelley, father of the Grange and a prominent Minnesota farmer, wrote in 1868 that the object of the new organization "is not only general improvement in husbandry, but to increase the general happiness, wealth and prosperity of the country."¹⁰ Another early Grange leader declared that farmers were organizing to protect their own interests, "because we know that our interests are fundamental, that our prosperity means the prosperity of the nation."¹¹

It is not uncommon for a group to identify its special interest with the general interest, but farmers and their spokesmen have done

this with unusual vigor and sincerity. Congressman William C. Lankford of Georgia illustrated the agrarian dogmatism that has been so common in American history when he told his House colleagues in 1919: "Who built our Nation? The farmer. Who gained our independence? The farmer. Who kept our nation going since its beginning? The farmer. . . . Who will save this Nation from its downfall? The farmer."¹²

With some 70 per cent of Americans living in cities, one would expect contemporary Americans to have rejected the agrarian tradition and substituted an urban philosophy more in keeping with the facts of American life and society. But this has not happened. Indeed, scarcely anyone sings the praises of city life or argues that urban living is a source of moral and spiritual strength for the nation. The great majority of Americans still seem to believe in the main elements of the agrarian tradition: that virtue, honesty, righteousness, hard work, and freedom are more likely to stem from the soil than from the pavement. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, discussing farm policy before Congress in 1956, explained that "more than prices and income are involved. American agriculture is more than an industry; it is a way of life. Throughout our history the family farm has given strength and vitality to our entire social order. We must keep it healthy and vigorous."¹³ One of Minnesota's most illustrious citizens echoed these views. Testifying before the House Committee on Agriculture in 1960, Governor Orville L. Freeman said that "the disastrous decline in farm income must be halted and reversed in the interests of our entire economy." In a special report Freeman told House members that the family farm was an efficient unit of production and that it was "an indispensable factor" in maintaining "sound rural life and a healthy economic base for towns and cities in rural areas."¹⁴

Some recent writers have become lyrical in their praise of agriculture and farm life. The editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, a millionaire urbanite, wrote on April 20, 1957,

¹⁰ O[liver] H. Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States*, 125 (Philadelphia, 1875).

¹¹ Quoted in Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 258.

¹² *Congressional Record*, 66 Congress, 1 session, 4989.

¹³ *New York Times*, January 10, 1956, p. 16.

¹⁴ *General Farm Legislation: Hearings Before the House Committee on Agriculture*, 86 Congress, 2 session, serial SS, part 1, p. 467-471.

that, while farming was “no bed of ease,” the farmer’s position had abundant compensations. He went on to say that “no man who sees the dawning and hears the whisper of the passing winds and beholds the stately march of the seasons can fail to appreciate that he is among the most fortunate of all God’s children. However cruel his lot may be at times and no matter how bitter his disappointments . . . , he has the realization of knowing that he is living close to the heart of the Infinite.” Wheeler McMillen, writing in the *Farm Journal* in May, 1957, asked: “Doesn’t America still need a sound backlog of farm-grown, farm-experienced people with farm-grown character?”¹⁵ Expressions such as these could be multiplied endlessly from current literature and they indicate that in the minds of a great many people the agrarian tradition is still a compelling idea.

THE INFLUENCE of this idea can be seen in the national concern over the welfare of agriculture itself during the last forty years. Scarcely any other domestic question has received so much attention in Washington. The New Deal administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt gave vigorous support to the restoration of agricultural prosperity through such measures as the Agricultural Adjustment Acts, credit laws, and resettlement measures. After World War II farm spokesmen continued to draw on the strength of agrarianism as they sought to pass additional farm relief laws. A good example of this can be found in the introduction of the “Family Farm Income Act of 1960.” After stating that the family farm was a main bulwark against all kinds of collectivism and the foundation of free enterprise, Congress declared that “it holds for the future the greatest promise of security and abundance of food and fiber and that it is an ever-present source of strength for democratic processes and the American ideal.”¹⁶ Since World War II, appropriations for conservation, price support operations, and other farm relief measures have been among the

largest items in the federal budget, outside of national defense and interest on the public debt.

The influence of agrarian beliefs is evident in other areas of American national life. On the basis of need and importance, we should have had a department of urban affairs fifty or sixty years ago. But this proposal was either not considered or was defeated until after the nation’s population had become more than 70 per cent urban. It did not make any particular sense for the federal government to maintain a department to look after the welfare of farmers, while refusing to set up one to deal with urban problems. But that has been the situation. The whole question of reapportionment of state legislatures has been closely tied to a widespread belief that state government in the hands of predominantly urban legislators would somehow be a bad thing for American democracy — just as Thomas Jefferson said. The survival of rural influence in education is seen in the fact that high schools offer vocational training in agriculture long after most high school graduates have ceased going into farming.

Further examples of the hold that agrarian values have on the American imagination can be seen in our national advertising. Goodyear tires have as firm a grip as a good team of horses; a rugged westerner smokes a satisfying, dependable cigarette. State Farm Insurance is sold mostly to people who live in town, but the company does not drop the word “farm” from its name. Nickerson Farms is a chain restaurant and curio shop found along superhighways and patronized almost exclusively by city people. But the word “farms” in the firm’s name engenders the idea of good food served in a relaxed, homey atmosphere. Some of the largest banks have retained “farmers” in their names long after they ceased doing business with actual tillers of the soil. Advertisers would

¹⁵ *Farm Journal*, Southern edition, May, 1957, p. 23.

¹⁶ *General Farm Legislation*, 86 Congress, 2 session, part 1, p. 1.

not be picturing rural life and concepts if they did not think the agrarian ideal still touched the minds and hearts of many Americans.

HOW CAN we account for the continued agrarian strength in a society so predominantly urban? There are a few fairly obvious answers: Something ingrained so deeply in American thought and character cannot be expected to evaporate in a single generation. Ideas which have become fundamental in a society are often justified long after the basis for them is gone. Moreover, millions of urbanites are only a generation, or less, away from the farm. As these people reach middle age they tend to look back on their childhood experiences and homes and idealize them out of any resemblance to the actual circumstances. Thousands of persons who would not think of returning to the farm to live maintain nonetheless that it represents the best way of life. Louis Bromfield, who made thousands and thousands of dollars from his writing, insisted until the last that life on a farm was superior to any other.

In considering the disproportionate economic and political influence of agriculture, we must remember that thousands of town and city people have bought land and farms in recent years, giving them a personal stake in the soil bank, price supports, and other measures designed to help farmers. In some years since World War II as much as a third or more of the agricultural land which changed hands was bought by nonfarmers. This helps account for the support given to federal farm programs. Of perhaps even greater importance is the backing given these programs by businessmen who handle farm commodities or who sell products to farmers. While actual farm income is only around 5 per cent of total national income, this by no means represents the importance of agriculture in our over-all economy. Many businesses and industries are wholly or par-

tially dependent upon agriculture. Moreover, farm groups have become well organized and have resorted to full-scale lobbying in both state capitals and in Washington.

As important as these practical factors may be in the continued support of agriculture in Washington, much of the Congressional concern about the position of farmers is undoubtedly due to an emotional attachment to the land and a continued belief in agricultural fundamentalism. Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1956, columnist Stewart Alsop caught the spirit of this national nostalgia in an article entitled "Why Do I Keep the Damned Place?" He told of buying a farm about thirty miles north of Washington in Maryland and wondered "if other farm-bred immigrants to the city have completed the same cycle I have." Alsop wrote: "When you are very young, the country seems a dim and dusty place, and all the world's glory and wonder are in the big city. Then, after some years of walled-in anonymity, you begin to feel a fretful desire for green and growing things . . . [and] some land, however corned-out and weed-infested, that you can call your own."¹⁷ There can be no doubt, it seems to me, that many, many of the first-generation citizens of our cities have been weaned away from the farm only in body and not in spirit.

Thus, despite the great relative decline of the economic, political, and social importance of farming, there remains a strength in American life which draws succor from the agrarian tradition that has been such an important part of the country's thought and life. Yet in all of this there is a basic irony, and it is expressed in the following verse:

The toiler in the city
Admits the country's charm;
He toils away and hopes some day
To buy a little farm.

The farmer, too, is busy,
He salts his profits down;
The prospect cheers, ere many years
He hopes to move to town.

¹⁷ Stewart Alsop, "Why Do I Keep the Damned Place," in *Saturday Evening Post*, September 15, 1956, p. 81.



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