
CONTESTED
TERRAIN

Agriculture and Political Culture

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. New York: Avon Books, 1978.

In December 1977, several thousand Georgia farmers formed a thirty-mile “tractorcade” and rolled into Atlanta as part of a nationwide protest. The combination of falling prices and skyrocketing production costs had pushed many of them to the edge of ruin. Since the early 1970s, real farm income had declined while the national farm debt had doubled. The demonstrators, representing family-owned and -operated enterprises, demanded relief—principally the restoration of full parity—and headed for a noontime rally at the state capitol. An impressive structure whose dome still glitters with gold leafing mined in north Georgia, the capitol is ringed by four statues: one of John B. Gordon, the Confederate general, Klan organizer, and Gilded Age politician; one of Eugene Talmadge, the red-gallused political boss of the New Deal era; one of Richard B. Russell, the long-serving United States Senator and ardent foe of civil rights; and one of Thomas E. Watson, immortalized in stone as an “editor, lawyer, historian, author, orator, and statesman.” As the tractors slowly circled the grounds, several of the farmers drove up the capitol steps, climbed on Watson’s statue, and taped a protest hat on Watson’s head.¹ They apparently remembered what the statue’s donators did not care to—that Watson was also a leader of Populism, the radical agrarian movement of the 1890s.

This expression of fraternity with Watson, who championed the cause of debt-ridden farmers in his day, is particularly telling, for the family farm has been

¹ Atlanta *Constitution*, December 11, 1977.

at once the most vulnerable and the most resilient of American economic institutions. However much we may idealize the rural past, life has been a continuing struggle for those on the land. Unfavorable weather and natural calamities have perpetually loomed as threats. Within two generations of colonial settlement, demographic growth began to tax the resources of farm households and loosen the bonds of kinship and community. As the market economy expanded and absorbed new regions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasing numbers of farmers fell subject to the fluctuations of prices, credit, and the money supply. The 1820s saw the first significant migrations from the countryside to the cities and towns, initiating a process that has steadily reduced the size of the rural population. Today, fewer than three in one hundred Americans engage in agriculture. Yet, quite remarkably, the household has remained the dominant productive unit. The large cattle and grain estates of the eastern prairies and the "bonanza" wheat farms of the Dakotas and Minnesota, both relying upon wage labor, had but a brief history.² Plantations worked by gangs gave way, in the aftermath of slavery, to tenant and yeomen farms as the basis of Southern cotton culture.³ And even in this age of multinational agribusiness, nonfamily corporate holdings account for a limited share of all farm income and a minuscule share of all farms.⁴

Recent trends, of course, are decidedly in the direction of agribusiness and highly capitalized operations generally, with important consequences for rural America. The initial thrust of agricultural mechanization, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, bolstered the efficiency and competitiveness of smaller units, quite unlike manufacturing where the reverse held true. Household pro-

² Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1945), pp. 154-61; Harriet Friedmann, "World Market, State, and Family Farm: Household Production in the Era of Wage Labor," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (October 1978): 572-74.

³ After the Civil War, plantations were divided into smaller units and farmed by black families on a rental or sharecropping basis. At the same time, white yeomen were increasingly drawn into cotton production. This system prevailed at least until the Great Depression. See Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978).

⁴ According to a recent report of the United States Department of Agriculture, 88.1 percent of the owners of farm and ranch land are either sole proprietors or husband-wife co-owners. An additional 7.4 percent are family partnerships or family corporations. Only 4.5 percent are nonfamily partnerships and corporations. See U.S.D.A., *A Time to Choose: Summary Report on the Structure of Agriculture* (Washington: U.S.D.A., 1980), p. 74. Also see Carol MacLennan and Richard Walker, "Crisis and Change in U.S. Agriculture: An Overview," in Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, eds., *Agribusiness in the Americas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), p. 31.

duction, based primarily upon family labor, thereby prevailed in the countryside while capitalist wage relations expanded elsewhere.⁵ In part, this reflected the resistance of agriculture to full industrialization. Corporate concerns like Tenneco and Del Monte still find it more profitable to subcontract with small farmers for certain crops than to invest directly in production.

Since the 1950s, dizzying technological advances have had a far-reaching impact. The introduction of hybrid seed crops, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and sophisticated machinery has greatly enhanced productivity; it also has greatly augmented fixed costs, saddling small and medium-sized farms with mounting debts that even unprecedented harvests cannot defray. Declining net farm income has forced many of these families to depend heavily on nonfarm earnings, if not to abandon farming entirely. Large farms, on the other hand—those boasting over \$200,000 in annual sales—have taken up the slack, expanding their acreage, enlarging capital investment, and utilizing more wage labor, both permanent and seasonal.⁶

Despite public warnings, these developments seem not to overly trouble government officials and other planners, who look to agriculture as a means of resuscitating American economic and political power. If anything, they wish to hasten the process, mesmerized as they are by the issue of productivity. After all, food has become, in the words of Agriculture Secretary John Block, “an instrument or tool of foreign policy in this country.”⁷ Economists now prate that one

5 The ratio of family to hired labor in agriculture has remained roughly constantly at 3:1 during the twentieth century. It should be noted, however, that family-operated farms became thoroughly devoted to commodity production, that a considerable number of farmers rented their land, and that in the South sharecroppers were legally defined as wage laborers—they neither owned their land nor had claims to the growing crop. See Harold D. Woodman, “Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law,” *Agricultural History* 53 (January 1979): 319–37; Friedmann, “World Market, State, and Family Farm,” pp. 545–86; and MacLennan and Walker, “Crisis and Change in U.S. Agriculture,” pp. 20–40.

6 John L. Shover, *First Majority—Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 143–73; U.S.D.A., *A Time to Choose*, pp. 43–46; MacLennan and Walker, “Crisis and Change in U.S. Agriculture,” pp. 20–40.

7 United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, *Nomination of John R. Block to be Secretary of Agriculture*, 97th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981), pp. 9–11. Block assured the Senate committee during his confirmation hearings that the Reagan administration’s abandonment of the Soviet grain embargo did not signal a fundamental policy change. Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz is, of course, best known for calling food “a weapon in the U.S. negotiating kit.”

farmer is able to feed himself and fifty-six additional persons and suggest that the foremost problem confronting American agriculture is a surplus of farmers themselves. The language and mind-set of the technocrat have thoroughly suffused the discourse on agricultural policy. Scientists and engineers dream of vast, computerized, climate-modulated farms, with fields "stretching like fairways" and livestock pens resembling "high-rise apartments," all supervised by a handful of managers busily monitoring their electronic control boards. It appears a blueprint solution to the "problem" of rural economic overpopulation. In such a future, the family farmer has no place.

It is the unceasing erosion of family farming and the hegemony of this "modern agricultural ideal" that draw the attention and fire of Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America*. A man of remarkable literary range and eloquence, Berry has, in this work, brought together many of the concerns and themes expressed in two decades of his poetry, novels, and essays: the relationship between ecological and cultural crisis, the ascendancy of technology and power over value and morality, the destructive and authoritarian logic of modern society.⁸ Perhaps best known as an ecologist, Berry would nonetheless shun such a label, smacking of the specialization he decries. He writes and teaches; most of all, he farms in Henry County, Kentucky, and for Berry farming is not a discrete "occupation" but a way of life quite at odds with the vision of contemporary policy makers. Indeed, Berry styles himself something of a "mad farmer," irreverently defying convention. Doubtless he would derive some satisfaction from reading a Cornell rural sociologist's review of *The Unsettling of America* that finds his ideas bewildering and dismisses them as cranky and foolishly nostalgic.⁹

⁸ Berry's poems are collected in *The Broken Ground* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964); *Openings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968); *Findings* (Iowa City: Prairie Press, 1969); and *Farming: A Hand Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970). His novels include *Nathan Coulter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) and *A Place on Earth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967). His essays, originally published in *The Nation*, *The Hudson Review*, and *Religious Humanism*, among other journals, can be found in *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969) and *The Hidden Wound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970).

⁹ The review appears in *Agricultural History* 52 (October 1978): 572-73. On the "mad farmer," see Berry's *Farming: A Hand Book*, pp. 42-45, 48-49, and 56-63.

There is a tinge of nostalgia to Berry's survey of the rural landscape. A self-proclaimed Jeffersonian, Berry argues that a vital democracy hinges on an independent citizenry whose integrity and common bonds grow out of wide ownership and careful use of the land (or of productive resources in general). Such citizens would not become hostage to the "ups and downs of Dow Jones," to the demands of technology, or to the graces of the state. They would be able to provide for themselves and, in so doing, recognize their dependence on the continuing health of the earth while meeting one another with mutual responsibilities and destinies. Berry, then, looks fearfully at the rise of big business in agriculture and the plight of surviving family farms, pointing instead to the "small country town of our agricultural past" as "the best model we have of a community."¹⁰

Yet Berry hardly beckons us to return to the "good old days," which he sees as fleeting in any event. He conjures up a somewhat glorified past as part of a standard by which to assess our own condition—a standard informed as well by his experiences in Kentucky and, therefore, one that makes *The Unsettling of America* powerful and incisive social criticism. Berry's peculiar talent is to probe the inner contradictions of developments we take as a matter of course and to treat those contradictions in a most expansive way. Thus, when considering the the reigning orthodoxies in agriculture, Berry finds a logic, not only that promotes ecological havoc and human displacement, but that embodies the ultimate corruption of agriculture itself; the triumph of utility over responsibility, exploitation over nurture, destruction over health. Food, Berry explains, "is a cultural product," both the means of individual sustenance and the symbol of complex interdependencies over time and space. Food represents accumulated memory, wisdom, and aspiration, human necessities and limitations, our ties to nature and to each other. True husbandry is an art and a ritual, embracing independence and cooperation, received knowledge and creative judgment, appropriation and preservation. It acknowledges the diversities and intricacies of the living world and enacts "our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness," linking past, present, and future. Hence, the "modern agricultural ideal," with its celebration of technology, quest for uniformity, and reverence for quantity rests upon and furthers the deformation of character, the dissolution of community, the denial of history, and the demise of freedom.

Indeed, the transformation of agriculture into a science and business whose aims and achievements are to be measured quantitatively reflects, according to Berry, a wider cultural crisis—the compartmentalization of social life and the rise

10 See Berry's essay "The Loss of the Future" in *The Long-Legged House*, p. 62.

of bureaucratic rationality which establish individuals as ostensible sovereigns while rendering them helpless and dependent. The historical separation of household and workplace and the growth of specialization have narrowed dramatically the range of personal competence, perception, and responsibility and obscured the connection between endeavor and consequence. "When people do not live where they work," Berry writes, "they do not feel the effects of what they do." The specialists who now shape farm policy, as they have for some time longer industrial policy, tackle problems in a strange isolation. Plant and soil scientists, chemists, and engineers mightily pursue their neatly defined projects with limited awareness of the ramifications beyond the calculus of productive potential and cost efficiency. Seeking total control over their own domains, they leave everything else totally out of control. The result is a frightening mixture of authoritarianism and chaos where the only solution is more authority. Such is the logic of "expert knowledge" with no "cultural depth," for to "think or act without cultural value and the restraints invariably implicit in cultural value, is simply to wait upon force."

So pervasive is the logic of modern agriculture (and, by extension, modern society) that it has left an indelible imprint on the character of its critics, effectively defining the boundaries of dissent. Alarm has been growing over the deteriorating position of small farms, the rapid inflation of food prices, the contamination of crops and livestock by chemicals and pesticides, the pollution of waterways by toxic wastes, and the ravaging of the environment, but often within the very framework that has contributed to the problems in the first place. Those, for example, who lobby on behalf of consumer-protection legislation present themselves merely as consumers, thereby accepting the distinction between production and consumption and reinforcing their dependence on producers or the agencies that regulate them. Ecologists, moreover, tend to homogenize the land, streams, and forests as the "environment," as that which "surrounds us," confirming "a profound division between it and ourselves." Not surprisingly, Berry notes, the ecology-minded can buy up land in the countryside, do nothing with it, and post it to keep out hunters and other local "trespassers"—behavior dubbed by one Vermont resident as "elitist." Not surprisingly, too, some of the most respected conservationist organizations have owned stock in the very corporations culpable of the abuses they have fought against. Plying their own brand of specialization, more attentive to symptoms than causes, even well-meaning reformers have encouraged the trend toward limited personal responsibility and greater bureaucratic authority.

The roots of this authoritarianism, Berry claims, are to be located in a "revolutionary mentality of exploitation" that accompanied the European colonization of North America. Many of the whites arriving on these shores did not "look upon the land as a homeland." Instead, they looked upon it as a way

station to another destination or as a repository of riches begging to be extracted. And they proceeded to "unsettle" those standing in their path, beginning with the native Americans. There were, to be sure, newcomers who did not share this lust for conquest and greed, "who saw they had come to a good place . . . saw its domestic possibilities [and] . . . wished to establish agricultural settlements." But they, also, were "almost systematically overthrown." Small farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen—members of any settled group or community, presumably typified by the country town—eventually became "redskins . . . the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation." The only way to avoid victimization "has been to . . . 'make it' into the class of exploiters." The economy, Berry contends, "is still substantially that of the fur trade, still based on the same general kinds of commercial items: technology, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and drugs." The difference is that now consumers are entirely deprived "of any independent access to the staples of life" and local or regional variations in the overall patterns have been eliminated.

Under what conditions the "exploitative mentality" emerged and how it came to dominate American society are left unclear. Berry is not a historian and may be excused for his rather schematic account. But two matters deserve closer consideration because they speak to an analytical shortcoming of the book. First, although he romanticizes and simplifies them, Berry understates the perseverance and importance of alternative social visions. Second, he does not acknowledge sufficiently that the ascendancy of modern agriculture is the result of protracted political struggles and the transformation of the larger political culture. The two points are related, for the political struggles would not have been as intense or prolonged had the alternative visions not established a significant foothold. The two problems are related, for Berry's penchant for discounting the vibrancy of alternative social visions leads him to slight the political traditions that made them subjects of public debate. Berry is wary of politics and political organization, apparently believing that they, too, quickly came under the sway of the "exploiters" and took on a bureaucratic cast. Ironically, while he is deeply concerned about the political implications of the "modern agricultural ideal," Berry reflects some of the current popular political exhaustion and immobilization that the ideal itself is strengthened by. In the end, he gives us a populism curiously bereft of politics and thus a populism with no means of fulfillment.

The exploitive mentality that Berry discusses was actively promoted during the age of commercial capital and the absolutist state (c. 1450–1750), when the military commonly mediated international affairs and "beggar thy

neighbor” proved the surest method of accumulating the fortunes so desperately needed by European monarchs intent on consolidating their power.¹¹ The Iberians set an egregious standard in their overseas ventures that the British, among others, were all too happy to duplicate. Various forms of exploitation reigned so widely and penetrated so deeply that it would, in fact, be difficult to find many settings that approximated the traditional patterns and practices inspiring Berry’s critique. Servile relations dominated continental Europe until the late eighteenth century and unraveled only gradually thereafter; they had even more extreme counterparts in much of the New World.¹² Yet, within the interstices of the Old Regime and more prominently on the British Isles, there emerged a small-scale, relatively independent household economy (productive formation, as it were) that was transplanted in America. New England, the Middle Atlantic, and the Southern backcountry witnessed the proliferation of rural settlements characterized by a wide distribution of landownership, semisubsistence agriculture, and local exchanges of goods and labor. These yeomen farmers felt, and responded to, the lure of markets (when accessible) in coastal towns and the larger Atlantic world, but attended to family sustenance before shipping their “surplus” produce. If population pressure disrupted their settlements and prompted movement westward, migrants normally sought to reproduce familiar arrangements. Their goal was not great wealth but a competence, not the main chance but independence—for themselves and their children.¹³

Along with urban craft production, based on a similar dynamic, this rural social formation fostered a democratic spirit with a cooperative ethos, resisted the full penetration of the marketplace, and shaped political alignments throughout the nineteenth century. Yeomen and artisans, who claimed a version of the revolutionary heritage associating freedom with control over productive resources, led the fight for political democratization while often counterposing a “moral economy” to the values of the market. They took their rights seriously,

11 See, in particular, Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1979), pp. 15–44 and passim.

12 Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 357–441; Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), part 1.

13 Rex Burns, *Success in America: The Yeoman Dream and the Industrial Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976); Michael Merrill, “Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 7 (winter 1977), pp. 42–71; James Henretta, “Families and Farms: Mentalité in Preindustrial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 35 (January 1978): 3–32.

participated directly in the political process, and saw themselves defending a republic that they had created.¹⁴

They and their heirs waged an impressive fight. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the divisive issues of the Jacksonian period, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age—land, labor, and money—involved more than the squabbles of divergent economic interests; they involved the ongoing clash of contending social visions.¹⁵ If the balance increasingly tipped in favor of a market society, the traditions and sensibilities rooted in the household economy sustained political opposition and informed a developing critique of American capitalism. Antimonopoly, the unifying thread of nineteenth-century popular radicalism, portrayed the concentrations of wealth and power and the social relations of the new industrial order as products of despotism and political corruption—as betrayals of the revolutionary republic. Looking to a more just and humane past, antimonopoly used that memory to advance political and economic alternatives. And it acquired force precisely because it tapped the collective experiences of small producers confronting social change. Not incidentally, Populism, the greatest manifestation of antimonopoly radicalism (and the greatest third-party movement in American history) found its strength in the countryside where the household formation proved most difficult to “unsettle.”¹⁶

14 David P. Szatmary, *Shay's Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Steven Hahn, “The Yeomanry of the Non-Plantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850–1860,” in Robert C. McMath, Jr., and Vernon Burton, eds., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, forthcoming); Sean Wilentz, “Class Conflict and the Rights of Man: Artisans and the Rise of Labor Radicalism in New York City” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1979). There were, without question, more than a handful of artisans who became (or sought to become) manufacturers and yeomen who eagerly entered the market, engaged in speculation, and looked to accumulation, but most of the historical literature treats the behavior of early Americans from a presentist perspective and thereby ignores a cultural logic quite distinct from our own. That logic, I believe, is of signal importance in the course of American history.

15 James R. Sharp, *The Jacksonians Versus the Banks: Politics in the States After the Panic of 1837* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Leon Fink, “Class Conflict in the Gilded Age: The Figure and the Phantom,” *Radical History Review* 3 (fall–winter 1975): 56–73.

16 On Populist radicalism see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Bruce Palmer, “Man Over Money”: *The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

The political defeat of antimonopoly, and populism in particular, paved the way for the full emergence of modern agriculture as it did for modern industry. Although some historians argue that the Populist program of cooperative credit and marketing ultimately won approval, twentieth-century farm legislation actually served to concentrate landownership and lay the foundations of agribusiness—at the expense of small family farmers who had filled the ranks of Populism. There was no irony. This legislation was shepherded by large landowners now free to press for their interests without fear of unleashing more radical currents. The Populist constituency was not only defeated but marginalized politically. In the South, marginalization was most heavy-handed, as poorer whites and blacks lost the franchise through poll taxes, literacy requirements, and other registration laws.¹⁷ Elsewhere, popular disfranchisement proceeded less overtly and less dramatically. Hand in hand with the rationalization of the economy, which gave managers, engineers, and other specialists growing authority over production, came the rationalization of politics, which narrowed political debate and gave bureaucrats and other nonelected officials growing authority over policy. In assuming the burdens of social welfare, the modern state has also sapped the vigor of community action, becoming simultaneously more powerful and less responsive. Voter turnout and other forms of popular political participation have been declining nationwide since the beginning of this century. Just as producers have been turned into consumers, political citizens have been turned into spectators—and rather unenthusiastic spectators at that.¹⁸

The diminution of political culture—or perhaps the depoliticization of American culture—makes the current crisis that Wendell Berry details all the more ominous. Berry believes that we can avoid impending disaster only by withdrawing confidence from specialists and corporate executives, promoting a more equitable distribution of productive property through taxation and low-interest loans, diversifying technology to suit local needs, encouraging local self-sufficiency (especially in food), breaking the hold of business on agricultural colleges and other educational institutions, addressing the issue of human scale, and replacing the relativism that offers us “no deeply believed reasons for doing anything” with an “absolute good” based on “health”—health in a total, not

17 J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

18 Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), pp. 71-90; Christopher Lasch, “Democracy and the ‘Crisis of Confidence,’” *democracy* 1, no. 1 (January 1981): 32-33. For a pioneering study of the transformation of political culture in the North see Michael McGerr, “The Decline of Popular Politics: Connecticut, 1876-1926” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, in progress).

strictly personal or hygienic, sense that would tie together the fates of individuals, communities, and nature. This is an imposing social and cultural agenda, one that would begin to confront the logic of dependency and destruction pervading our society. But it is also an imposing political agenda, and if the trends of the past eighty years have worked to divest us of the collective resources and self-discipline necessary to its pursuit, Berry provides little in the way of inspiration or direction. Indeed, his suspicion of political organization in general, albeit nurtured by the undemocratic structure such organizations tend to assume, is symptomatic of a retreat from politics that drags along even the most perceptive of social critics.

The task of challenging the logic of "modern society" and rebuilding our social order therefore must depend upon the revitalization of political culture. For it is the very self-activity of democratic citizens, implicitly acknowledging their place in a historical tradition and their mutual responsibilities, that embodies a rejection of the logic itself. That self-activity, along with its material bases, has been relegated to the "margins." Yet, as Berry suggests in conclusion, it is from the margins that change can, and will have to, come. There the attitudes, values, and ways of life capable of replenishing American society still survive, however besieged or ignored. There, too, survive the traditions of organization that have long invigorated popular movements. They survive among people like the Georgia family farmers who, in saluting Tom Watson on a wintry Atlanta day, can see themselves as the inheritors of previous struggles and battered ideals.