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Abstract

Agrarianism is a political philosophy and way of life known and practiced among peoples of diverse nationalities and religions. While having ancient, medieval, and early-modern roots, agrarian politics blossomed most dramatically in America, during both its colonial and republican periods. Notable spokesmen for American agrarianism include Thomas Jefferson, William Jennings Bryan, and Robert La Follette. It has been in steady decline for the past century as cosmopolitan and centralizing forces have displaced tradition and smallness of scale. Still, there have been natural voices lamenting losses in the face of "progress": Distributists and Southern Agrarians, the Counterculture and the Green Party, Wendell Berry and Crunchy Cons.

Keywords

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Comments

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Agrarian Politics and the American Tradition¹

JEFF TAYLOR

Agrarianism is a political philosophy and way of life known and practiced among peoples of diverse nationalities and religions. While having ancient, medieval, and early-modern roots, agrarian politics blossomed most dramatically in America, during both its colonial and republican periods. Notable spokesmen for American agrarianism include Thomas Jefferson, William Jennings Bryan, and Robert La Follette. It has been in steady decline for the past century as cosmopolitan and centralizing forces have displaced tradition and smallness of scale. Still, there have been natural voices lamenting losses in the face of “progress”: Distributists and Southern Agrarians, the Counterculture and the Green Party, Wendell Berry and Crunchy Cons.

The motto of Front Porch Republic is “Place. Limits. Liberty.” While none of the three necessitates an agrarian context, each is a natural fit for rural life. Values such as community, self-government, and individual freedom are foundational to political decentralization. American decentralism has long been linked to agrarianism because widely-dispersed power includes a healthy dose of attachment to the land and to nature as a whole. Of course, it has made room for the benefits of urban life as well in the context of neighborhood rather than metropolis.

Geography matters. A sense of place has practical and political implications. There is less population density and more individual liberty in the country than in a city. Metropolitan life packs people closer together,

1. Portions adapted from *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism*, by Jeff Taylor (Lexington Books, 2013). Used by arrangement with the publisher.

yet they are less likely to know one another than are rural residents. There are fewer formal constraints and a greater sense of personal responsibility on farms and in small towns. Paradoxically, freedom is maximized in such an environment, yet a sense of community also flourishes. Urban areas include their fair share of decentralists, and big-city anonymity provides liberty of a sort, but agrarianism remains foundational to the dispersal of power and independence from the state.

Early American Agrarians

The agrarian political culture of the United States has had many antecedents.

Benjamin Franklin became familiar with the thought of Physiocracy in the 1760s while in England. The physiocrats' "preference for agriculture over manufacturing and commerce accorded with his deepest convictions." Like Jefferson, Franklin championed the western frontiersmen of his colony, and, like Jefferson, Franklin was unusual among the founding fathers as an advocate of agrarian democracy.² Jefferson esteemed the physiocrat Turgot so highly that he placed a bust of the economist in the entrance hall of Monticello. Turgot's insistence on free enterprise and government frugality anticipated Jefferson's own national administration. However, Jefferson did not embrace the physiocrats' belief in political absolutism. For Jefferson, decentralization was linked to liberty and democracy. His vision was of a land populated by self-governing individuals. In the 1810s, his proposed system of ward-republics was an effort to decentralize and democratize the American republic as much as possible.

Of course, Thomas Jefferson's political philosophy was agrarian or farm-centered. His most famous tribute to farmers is in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782): "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth." Jefferson's desire to have more land in the West for farmers was one of the reasons he agreed to the Louisiana Purchase

2. Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Literature: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927, 1930), Vol. 1, 172.

despite constitutional scruples. Jefferson's much-quoted words concerning the urban masses suggest a pronounced anti-urban bias: "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."³

While Jefferson's preference for farming is clear, his hostility toward urban workers and opposition to manufacturing should not be exaggerated. *Notes on Virginia* was written relatively early in his political career. During his three campaigns for president, Jefferson received considerable support from the laboring class in the eastern cities. He began to look favorably upon the idea of American factories even before the War of 1812.

One final point must be made concerning Jefferson's agrarianism. While he was a relatively wealthy Virginia farmer himself, Jefferson was a champion not only of the planters (large farmers) but also of the yeomen (small farmers). In his draft of the Virginia constitution of 1776, Jefferson attempted to create a more equitable distribution of land in the state through abolition of primogeniture (the practice of bequeathing all land to one's eldest son). According to Jefferson, "The small landholders are the most precious part of a state."⁴

Democrats vs. Aristocrats

Andrew Jackson of Tennessee was self-consciously in the Jeffersonian tradition. He was an agrarian and a populist. While, like Jefferson, he was a plantation owner, Jackson saw himself as the political voice of the common people, especially small farmers. Born in a log cabin, in the border area of the Carolinas, Jackson represented the nation's West—a growing region of small farmers and small businessmen. Jackson's first vice-president, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, is famous as a spokesman for the Old South, but he was not a Jeffersonian and did not exemplify the best of the agrarian tradition in American politics. Calhoun and his aristocratic successors, the leaders of the Confederate States of America, were highly selective in their agrarianism. They represented a majority of the large, slaveowning farmers in the Old South. Plantation culture was not synonymous with southern agrarianism.

3. Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 1944), 280.

4. *Ibid.*, 389–90.

During the Gilded Age, Henry George of California and New York was the most influential American agrarian. Author of *Progress and Poverty* (1879), journalist, politician, and economic theorist, George inspired an emphasis on land diffusion known as Georgism or the Single Tax movement. Targeting large, absentee landowners, George's system was designed to bring about wide distribution of land-use by abolishing private ownership of land and levying a single stiff tax on the rent of those with the most land (which would also lighten the tax burden on average members of society). James Weaver of Iowa was another important figure in agrarian politics during the era after the Civil War. A former Union general and Republican congressman, he was the presidential nominee of the Greenback-Labor Party in 1880 and the People's (Populist) Party in 1892. As the Populist candidate, he carried four states, ran second in eight states, and received over one million votes nationally. Building on a foundation of the Grange, Single Taxers, Greenbackers, the Farmers' Alliance, and labor union socialists, the Populist Party attempted to craft a transcendent populist coalition: North and South, white and black, rural and urban. It had some success as a third party in the South, Midwest, and West until it merged in 1896 with the anti-monopoly, pro-silver Jeffersonian revival within the Democratic Party. That revival was led by William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska.

A Century Ago

Bryan symbolized the culmination of dissatisfaction with the plutocratic and increasingly imperial status quo maintained by leaders of both major parties, who divided citizens through an emphasis on secondary wedge issues. Bryan's personal importance comes from his status as a three-time Democratic presidential nominee (1896, 1900, and 1908) and as leader of the national Democratic Party from 1896 to 1912. He went on to serve as U.S. Secretary of State under Wilson, eventually resigning in protest of the president's pro-war designs. Bryan, known as "the Great Commoner," retained influence within the party as a beloved figure for millions.

Late nineteenth-century agrarianism found a strong voice in Bryan. The aforementioned James Weaver supported all of Bryan's presidential campaigns, and most Populist leaders followed suit. A year before his death, Henry George backed Bryan for president in 1896. Bryan was deeply influenced by Russian agrarian Leo Tolstoy, especially in the area of foreign policy. Bryan was, first and foremost, an eloquent voice of the

fifty-eight percent of the people of the United States who lived in the country and in villages having a population of less than one-thousand. An heir and enlarger of the agrarian revolt of the Gilded Age, Bryan was a friend of farmers.

Bryan believed that farm life was superior to city life for a number of reasons: it was a more independent way of living, it required less capital to begin work, the entire family could assist in work, it was more healthful, habits of industry and application were easily acquired, it cultivated hospitality and generosity, it increased parental influence, it emphasized the true basis of rewards, and it produced informed and independent voters. He later added three more reasons: contact with nature encourages belief in God, dependence on Mother Earth means the farmer is neither a parasite nor a pilferer, and the work schedule shields the young from those who profit from commercialized nighttime vices.⁵

Because of his commitment to rural life, Bryan looked to the non-eastern regions of the nation for the bulk of his political support. It was difficult for Bryan to look kindly upon the East. The East was not only urban-based; it was home of America's economic elite (Wall Street) and intellectual elite (the Ivy League). In his Cross of Gold speech at the 1896 convention, he proclaimed, "You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." In contrast to Grover Cleveland's three campaigns, Bryan's carried no eastern state in its three runs for the White House. Like the Populists, Bryan was primarily a candidate of the farms and towns of rural America, but he did have some backing in the cities and did make overtures to organized labor. Still, Bryan's willingness to virtually write off an entire section of the country, and his inability to move much beyond his base, illustrates a potential weakness of agrarian politics—or at least a weakness of this particular practitioner.

Bryan's Jeffersonian counterpart in the Republican Party was Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin. La Follette and his allies were responsible for many significant reforms and resistances during the Progressive Era.

5. William Jennings Bryan, *William Jennings Bryan: Selections*, ed. Ray Ginger (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 75–78; Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915–1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, c1965, 1987), 227–28.

After serving five years as an innovative governor of Wisconsin, La Follette went to Washington. Senator La Follette was a two-time national candidate for the GOP presidential nomination (1908 and 1912). He might well have run as a third-party candidate in 1912, but his support that year was largely co-opted by ex-President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1924, he finally bolted the Republican Party and received nearly 5 million votes as a third-party candidate for president. He is considered one of the historic giants of the Senate even though he was usually on the losing side during his nearly-twenty years in the chamber.

La Follette grew up on a farm in Wisconsin. His political philosophy was "profoundly influenced by the Granger and agrarian uprisings he had witnessed during his youth." La Follette was also influenced by the traditions of the midwestern wing of the Republican Party. From its founding in the 1850s, "there were tensions between two major components of the party: the aspiring industrialists of the urban Northeast, and the small farmers and traders of the West."⁶ The urban eastern wing of the GOP was largely descended from the Hamiltonian wing of the Federalist Party, by way of Cotton Whigs and Anti-Masons. The agrarian midwestern wing was largely descended from the Adams wing of the Federalist Party and Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party, by way of Conscience Whigs and Free Soil Democrats. Midwestern Republicans were considerably more Jeffersonian in their thinking than were their eastern counterparts. Eastern financial and industrial interests dominated both the party and the nation under Presidents Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and McKinley.

Political scientist Nicol Rae has made an important contribution to the understanding of history by clearly identifying two dissident streams within the Republican Party during the Progressive Era: eastern progressives and western progressives. Theodore Roosevelt exemplified the former; Robert La Follette exemplified the latter.⁷ La Follette and most of his supporters were agrarian in orientation. They were certainly closer to Jefferson in their thinking than were Roosevelt, George Perkins, Frank Munsey, Henry Stimson, Charles Evans Hughes, Herbert Croly, Walter

6. Robert S. Maxwell, *La Follette and the Rise of the Progressives in Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1956), 12; Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of the Liberal Republicans: From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 15, 43-44.

Lippmann, and others identified with the eastern progressive wing of the party.

According to La Follette, "Nearness to nature, nearness to God, a truer philosophy, a keener human sympathy, higher ideals, greater individuality, will ever be stamped upon the life and character of the country home."⁸ While they had an agrarian base of support, La Follette and the western progressives built bridges to city dwellers and urban laborers. La Follette's close association with the University of Wisconsin indicates that his political program was not confined to agrarian democracy. In 1924 his presidential campaign was relatively weak in the East. His popular vote percentages in all eleven eastern states were below his national percentage. Nonetheless, he did better than his national average in many of the nation's largest cities.

Although he tried to win the votes of city dwellers, La Follette never abandoned his agrarian base. He supported and was supported by the Nonpartisan League (NPL). His 1924 campaign speeches "were particularly vibrant when discussing the plight of farmers." When he was working on behalf of citizens who lived in rural areas, he was working on behalf of small, family farmers. La Follette was an opponent of what later became known as "agribusiness." He attributed the rise of the NPL in the Midwest partly to the influence of agribusiness. In 1924, he told an audience in Kansas City, "The railroads of the country are interlocked with the packers, with the millers, with the commission men, with the grain pits. Together they form an economic system, ruled from Wall Street."⁹

La Follette's allies in the U.S. Senate shared his perspective. Referring to this bloc in the 1920s, Nicol Rae writes, "Although they had adopted the Progressive label, the generally agrarian outlook of the Senate radicals bore little relation to the paternalist, urban, upper middle-class progressivism of [Theodore] Roosevelt and Herbert Croly."¹⁰ La Follette Republicans William Kenyon of Iowa, Arthur Capper of Kansas, Peter Norbeck of South Dakota, and Charles McNary of Oregon were leading members of the senatorial Farm Bloc in the early 1920s. In the 1930s, the agrarian orientation of this pro-La Follette bloc contributed to tensions that arose between its members and the urban-oriented Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. Even when the New Deal addressed agricul-

8. Robert M. La Follette, *The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette*, comp. Ellen Torelle (Madison: Robert M. La Follette Co., 1920), 282.

9. *Ibid.*, 288.

10. Rae, 23.

tural concerns, implementation of the programs was open to criticism. For example, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) disproportionately benefited large farmers and food processors, to the disadvantage of small farmers and sharecroppers.

The agrarian argument that the economic and political abuses of the monopolistic robber barons could be mostly curbed at the state and local level, and by conscientious application of federal antitrust laws, was rejected by President Woodrow Wilson in favor of federal regulation that often served to undercut more honest and progressive state attempts. As a result of grassroots discontent manifested in reform movements, labor unions, socialism, third parties, Bryan Democrats, and La Follette Republicans, the bipartisan Center moved toward corporate liberalism during the Progressive Era. Pressure from below resulted in a repackaging of policy from above. Corporate liberalism rejected both free enterprise and socialistic reform. Sophisticated, international-oriented businessmen and financiers created a partnership between big government and big business in an effort to neutralize opposition. FDR made this arrangement seemingly permanent by choosing to follow in the footsteps of Wilson and the first Roosevelt.

A less-domestic source of agrarian, decentralist thought arising during the Progressive Era was Distributism. Inspired by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which addressed the plight of the working class, distributists were Catholics in Britain who presented an alternative to both capitalism and socialism. The most important exponents were Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton. Although often addressing the modern plight of the proletariat, distributists were grounded in traditional agrarian values. The movement would influence Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and the Catholic Workers, who began their mission to the down-and-out in America's large cities in the early 1930s.

Around this time, the Southern Agrarian movement was brought to limited public attention through release of the book *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). A group of intellectuals and writers associated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, the Twelve Southerners were not necessarily waxing nostalgic for the Lost Cause in the form of the planter aristocracy or the CSA. Instead, at least some were reaching further back to a less-tainted source: the independent yeomanry of Jefferson and Jackson. This is not to say that none of the Southern Agrarians were unsympathetic to the leaders of the Confederacy or that all were partial to racial equality. There was a common love of the land and its nurture, and of southern

culture in general, but by the 1950s, at least one—Robert Penn Warren—publicly supported the Civil Rights Movement as a new manifestation of the old struggle against special privilege, while others were opposed. Herbert Agar became a friend of Chesterton's and helped to promote Distributism. Richard Weaver, a later Southern Agrarian, and Russell Kirk, a native of Michigan who received his MA at Duke University in North Carolina, were both admirers of John Randolph of Roanoke. Randolph was a cousin, supporter, and irritant of Jefferson—one of the *Tertium Quids* who were often more Jeffersonian than Jefferson during his presidency. Weaver and Kirk became fathers of modern American conservatism.

Agrarian Politics Today

Is agrarianism a real option today or is it simply a manifestation of nostalgia? Agriculture as a vocation and way of life was dealt a significant blow as early as 1917 when the U.S. entered World War I. The war helped to plant the seeds of destruction for family farming through the proliferation of modernization, expertization, agribusiness, and government domination. Subsequent decades did not arrest this trend. Between 1958 and 1967 alone, employment on farms—as a percentage of overall American employment—fell from 8.5 percent to 4.8 percent. The great champions of country folk had disappeared by this time. There were farm-state politicians in Washington who constantly pressed for more farm subsidies, but their primary interests lay elsewhere. Agricultural talk was more about reelection campaigns, corporate welfare, American Farm Bureau favors, and USDA hand-outs than about the farmers themselves.

Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota can serve as a case study of what went wrong. As a fellow Midwestern liberal and rabble rouser, Humphrey is often mistaken as a populist in the vein of Bryan. He was not. Early in his career, when he was a Wendell Willkie Republican, Humphrey jumped into state politics and helped shove the genuine populists and agrarians aside through the merger of the Minnesota Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties. He became mayor of Minneapolis and co-founder of Americans for Democratic Action. His base of political support, both statewide and nationally, was primarily urban. He was a thoroughgoing Wall Street Democrat by the late 1960s—which, in the

eyes of Bryan, would have made him thoroughly "unavailable" for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Some members of the U.S. Counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s were more consistently Jeffersonian in their approach. The exotic "lifestyle" trappings of the hippies seem a long way from the powdered wig of Jefferson, but there were important similarities under the surface, including decentralism and agrarianism. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy were published in the United States in new paperback editions in the mid 1960s. Salient themes in these books were the difference one person can make, attachment to one's home and its ways of life, and the dangerous nature of power. Rural values and ancient folkways were promoted as alternatives to the modern urban-commercial-industrial-scientific world. Describing hobbits, the publisher told readers, "They love peace and quiet and good tilled earth. They dislike machines, but they are handy with tools."¹¹

The Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings* influenced the Counterculture that, in turn, contributed to a new level of popularity for the books. Members of the Counterculture argued that the federal government had long been working in concert with corporations to destroy freedom, community, thrift, naturalism, and other traditional American values. By the early 1970s, many of those same people were agrarians who advocated going "back to nature," getting "back to the land." Far from arguing the impossibility and irrelevance of social change without government direction, they went out and created their own rural communes.

Humphrey's response during this period was much different. He remained a champion of agribusiness. From the days of the Grange and Nonpartisan League, the millers, bankers, and railroads headquartered in Minneapolis had been infamous for their exploitation of family farmers. Despite their illiberal reputations, these forces developed a close relationship with Humphrey. From the start of his career to its close he relied on support from Pillsbury, General Mills, Peavey, Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad, Cargill, American Milk Producers Inc., and similar companies. Humphrey's close friend and financial patron, Dwayne Andreas of Archer Daniels Midland, personified agribusiness. There ought to be more options than either Hippies or Humphrey, and there are, but even semi-respectable voices on behalf of small farmers are hard to find in Washington today.

11. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or, There and Back Again*, Rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine, 1937, 1966, 1973), 1.

Rooted in the West German Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. Green Party began in the 1980s as a political offshoot of the American Counterculture. Borrowing their Ten Key Values and slogan "We are neither Left nor Right; we are in Front" from their German counterparts, American Greens had the potential of creating a broad populist coalition that might have recreated the popular appeal of the People's Party or the Bryan and La Follette insurgencies. In practice, they have been almost entirely Left and have been unable to rise above their loyalty to identity politics, their commitment to abortion rights, and their dislike of traditional Christianity's appeal to conservative populists. Conversely, their progressive ideological purity on democracy and peace has alienated the mass of more compromising liberals, who are willing to settle for the Democratic Party. While obviously supportive of nature, in the sense of ecology, the Green Party is not very agrarian. It has some support among hippie farmers but almost none among more traditional ones. In this way, it has not been successfully Jeffersonian.

During the G.W. Bush years, a countercultural variety of conservatism came to public notice with the publications of Rod Dreher's *Crunchy Cons* and Bill Kauffman's *Look Homeward, America* (both in 2006). While it was wide in scope, rooted in influences ranging from Burke to Bryan, agrarianism was one component of the new (or revived) movement. Among other things, it promoted local attachments, community-based economics, organic food, and a small-is-beautiful ethic. The writer Wendell Berry—long a favorite of "granola" progressives associated with Jerry Brown, Ralph Nader, and the Green Party on the Left—was also a favorite of this group on the Right. In both its life and politics, it could be described as Jeffersonian. Point number six of the Crunchy-Con Manifesto was "A good rule of thumb: Small and Local and Old and Particular are to be preferred over Big and Global and New and Abstract."¹²

Contemporary conditions are not encouraging. The horrors of factory farming, foremost for the animals but secondarily for human neighbors, continue largely unabated. The brave new world of Frankenfoods, engineered through an unholy alliance of the worst of commerce and the worst of science, offers GMOs, non-germinating seeds, monopolization of planting, cloning, patenting of life forms, and general hubris. It is one of the many ways in which the false religion of scientism has hurt society.

12. Rod Dreher, *Crunchy Cons: How Countercultural Conservatives Plan to Save America (or at least the Republican Party)* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006), 2.

The cult has fostered the neglect of history, philosophy, and theology as valid—and vital—methods of epistemology.

On the campaign trail, William Jennings Bryan made an important distinction between the God-made man and the man-made man, the human being vs. the corporation. As wonderful as many modern inventions are, and as helpful in many ways as industrialization has been, sometimes man-made products still rank as poor substitutes for the real thing. There is a difference between infant formula and breast milk, between air conditioning and a cool breeze. There is something to be said for convenience, but as we become ever more addicted to the artificial and superficial, we are losing touch with important parts of our culture and our reality.

Who speaks for agrarians today? For soil and plants and animals and breezes, both cool and warm? For farming rather than agribusiness? If we don't have a Jefferson, Bryan, or La Follette, at least we have a few Countercultural Greens, a few Crunchy Cons, a few Catholic Distributists, a few Contrarians in seats of political power. Wendell Berry still lives in Kentucky. Russell Feingold is back in Wisconsin, down but perhaps not out. Agrarian politics is a tough sell in a land where prisoners behind bars outnumber farmers on tractors, but things looked gloomy during the Gilded Age as well. Yes, that period gave rise to the Progressive Era with considerable harm done, but it also gave us some political victories that can still inspire. For some of us, moments enjoyed and insights learned on traditional farms during our youth can be passed on to the next generation. Even if Washington fails us, we can find hope in other places.