

Edward S. Shapiro

Who Owns America?: A Forgotten American Classic

Who Owns America?: A New Declaration of Independence, edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, was one of the most significant conservative books published in the United States during the 1930s. Indeed, one is hard pressed to think of a more important conservative volume during this decade, save perhaps for Walter Lippmann's *The Good Society*. Although *Who Owns America?* is relatively unknown today except among scholars of American history and conservative thought, the book's message of demographic, political, and economic decentralization and the widespread ownership of property continues to resonate among Americans opposed to the growth of corporate farming, the decay of the small town, and the expansion of centralized political and economic authority.

The crisis of American capitalism during the 1930s presented the greatest challenge to the American intellectual community since the Civil War. Virtually all intellectuals believed the Great Depression signaled the end of the political, economic, and social system the country had known prior to 1929, and that radical reform was inevitable and desirable. The only question concerned the direction of such change. Most

intellectuals, along with the nation's leading magazines of political opinion, particularly the *New Republic* and the *Nation*, favored various left-wing programs emphasizing economic egalitarianism, social and economic planning, and political centralization. These thinkers maintained that economic centralized planning, either under private or government auspices, flowed ineluctably from the nature of modern technology. The internal combustion engine, the modern factory, and the telephone and telegraph had, they argued, permanently transformed the decentralized nineteenth-century society of small towns, farms, and small shopkeepers and manufacturers into the centralized society of cities and smokestack industries of the twentieth century. The issue was not whether economic centralization could be reversed; it was whether power in an economically centralized society would remain in the

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hands of bankers and industrialists or be transferred to the people's representatives in Washington.

One group of intellectuals, however, responded to the economic collapse by championing economic and political decentralization and the widespread distribution of property. Only such a program, they argued, provided an authentically American response to the Great Depression. The depression, they said, had discredited the economic barons who had ruled the old order, but, according to these thinkers, socialists and liberals were too cautious, since they accepted the inevitability of finance capitalism and giant corporations and merely wished to transfer control over these economic leviathans from private to public hands. The advocates of a "third way," however, believed the depression demonstrated not the necessity of centralized economic planning, but the failure of large-scale industrialization and the need to restore the widespread ownership of property. The contributors to *Who Owns America?* agreed with the Marxists regarding the imperialistic character of big business, the accentuation of the business cycle under large-scale industrialism, and the tendency of government in a society dominated by big business to degenerate into a plutocracy. But they rejected such core Marxist beliefs as the materialist interpretation of history and the inevitability of economic concentration. The writers of *Who Owns America?* also spurned the idea that political collectivism and a dictatorship of the proletariat were necessary to destroy the power of the economic oligarchy which owned and governed America.

The contributors were variously described as distributists, decentralists, and agrarians, and *Who Owns America?* was the most important statement of their thinking. Although the twenty-one contributors to this

volume were a diverse lot, they agreed with the words of Herbert Agar, in the book's introduction, that "monopoly capitalism is evil and self-destructive, and that it is possible, while preserving private ownership, to build a true democracy in which men would be better off both morally and physically, more likely to attain that inner peace which is the mark of a good life."

Most historians of the 1930s have ignored this book as well as decentralist thought in general. Thus the most recent treatment of the decade, David Kennedy's *Freedom from Want: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999), fails to even mention Agar, Tate, and *Who Owns America?*, and there is no reference in the index to *Freedom from Want* to "decentralization." Kennedy's lacuna is understandable, since the paradigm most popular among historians of the politics of the 1930s—the most important political decade after the Civil War—is the conflict between private economic interests and the "people." In this reading, the New Deal spoke for the masses, while its opponents represented the "classes." There is little place in such a historiography for individuals who opposed the growth of big business and high finance and yet also feared the centralization of political authority in Washington. The decentralists did not believe that American political discourse was so impoverished that the only alternatives facing the country were rule by the plutocrats of New York and Pittsburgh or control by Washington bureaucrats. Indeed, they argued, their program of demographic, economic, and political decentralization was the one plan compatible with American political traditions and with the imperatives of modern technology.

The decentralists sought to reverse the trend toward large-scale industrialization, mass merchandising, and farm dispossession which, they argued, were transform-

ing a population of property-owning small manufacturers, merchants, and farmers into servile white-collar employees, proletarians, and farm tenants. Without the widespread distribution of property there could be no real economic or political freedom, only a form of serfdom, a condition to which America was rapidly approaching. If this trend toward dispossession was not reversed, they said, it was likely that the economic collectivism of modern large-scale capitalism would be replaced by the political collectivism of socialism. But socialism, by dispossessing the dispossessors, simply carried the dispossession of modern capitalism to its logical conclusion and merely replaced one group of autocrats by another. Indeed, the radical cure was worse than the capitalist disease, since socialism and communism inevitably led to the elimination of private property, the sure loss of economic freedom, and enslavement to a centralized political bureaucracy.

Any political program which did not seek to reverse this drift toward dispossession was, they claimed, mere tinkering and did not speak to what really ailed America. The decentralists inveighed against all the panaceas offered by the American Left. "From my point of view," Tate wrote to literary critic Malcolm Cowley, "you and the other Marxists are not revolutionary enough: you want to keep capitalism with the capitalism left out." Marxists naturally welcomed large-scale capitalism since it attenuated the ownership of property. While the plutocrats wanted to shift control over property to themselves, the Marxists wanted to shift this control to government bureaucrats. Liberty would be sacrificed in either case. Only the restoration of the widespread ownership of property, Tate said, could "create a decent society in terms of American history." Decentralists also accused the New Deal of avoiding serious reform. Donald Davidson, one of the con-

tributors to the 1930 Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, accused the New Dealers of merely seeking "to repair our faltering economic system and to guarantee a modicum of comfort to the human casualties of our false way of life. But they are doing nothing to repair the false way of life. Rather they seem to want to crystallize it in all its falsity."¹

The origin of *Who Owns America?* dates back to the proposal of Davidson and several other Southern Agrarians that they publish a sequel to *I'll Take My Stand* which would be more programmatic and less focused on the literary and cultural elements of Agrarianism. Such a book would answer the widespread criticism of the Agrarians as impractical romantics seeking to restore in the South an imaginary agrarian golden age. A sequel would also lay out a political program around which the Agrarians and their supporters could rally. In October 1932 Davidson suggested that the volume should appear at the latest in 1933 or 1934. It should be "a simpler, more compact book than the first.... The book should make full use of the present new trends toward the farm and small town; of regionalism in art and economics; of what is best in the Humanist and other anti-liberal movements. We should be careful to present ourselves as the advance-guard of the new dispensation, not—as our critics tiresomely say—'reactionaries.' We ought to have definitions, instances, illustrations—all much more concrete than in the first book."²

Tate agreed, and during the winter of 1933-34 both he and Davidson approached publishers about bringing out the proposed volume. Harper and Brothers had brought out *I'll Take My Stand*, and it was the logical publisher for any sequel. Tate wrote the firm in November 1933 that plans for a second symposium, which would be less

oriented toward the South and more concrete in aim and program, were taking shape.

The general purpose of the book will be to define what at present we are calling a genuine Conservative Revolution: we are in the midst of a revolutionary process in this country, but to what extent is it defined in the mind of the Administration? Is it the familiar American procedure of tinkering with the parts, and letting American society drift, or does the outlook include a specific notion of the kind of society America should have? That is the question the book will try to answer. We oppose to the notion of "planned economy" the notion of "planned society." We cannot see that anybody in power or likely to be in power has a conception of a great American society: there is only the attempt to bring up incomes a little, and to be all things to all men. We shall, in the various essays, canvass the historical background for the possibility of a "planned society," and try to find a possible direction for it in the present state of affairs.

Tate mentioned John Crowe Ransom, Frank L. Owsley, Donald Davidson, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, T. S. Eliot, and Herbert Agar as potential contributors to the proposed volume. Agar's essay, "Crisis Legislation vs. the Planned Society," would focus on "the general question discussed in the book. The general thesis is that industrial capitalism is capable only of crisis legislation; abstract profit has destroyed concrete society. Dehumanization of economics."³

Harper did not offer Tate a contract. In the meantime, Davidson had been turned down by both the Macmillan Company and the University of North Carolina Press. Davidson had been particularly eager to receive a contract from Chapel Hill, since it was the most distinguished academic press in the South and the University was home to the most important opponents of Agrarianism. Because of the troubled economic state of the publishing industry resulting from the Depression, publishers were extremely reluctant to offer contracts with-

out seeing a manuscript. And without a contract, potential contributors to the sequel were reluctant to write their essays. "No publisher is in sight for the symposium," he lamented to Fletcher in October, 1934, "and nothing is being done about it, or very likely will be done." Into this vacuum stepped Agar.⁴

Agar was a columnist for the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and the winner of the 1934 Pulitzer Prize in History for *The People's Choice: From Washington to Harding: A Study in Democracy*. This history of the American presidency, written while Agar was the London correspondent for the *Courier-Journal* and the literary editor of the *English Review*, reflected its author's involvement in G. K. Chesterton's and Hilaire Belloc's English distributist movement, which argued for the widespread distribution of productive property. For a time Agar had even worked on *G. K.'s Weekly*, and he was Chesterton's leading American disciple. *The People's Choice* described the decline of the American presidency resulting from the transformation of the United States from a propertied democracy to a plutocracy. American democracy, Agar said, had degenerated into a "democracy of massed city populations, ignorant foreign labor, graft, and 'machine politics'—the democracy, in other words, that was really plutocracy." A true democracy, one that was safe against both communist and capitalist exploitation, had to be "founded on the basis of landed interest." In America, however, Jefferson's agrarian values had been overwhelmed by a Hamiltonian passion for riches. The defeat of the agrarian South in the Civil War removed the last remaining barrier to the complete triumph of large scale capitalism. And so a nation of property owners had been transformed into a country of wage earners and farm tenants.⁵

Tate was deeply impressed by *The People's Choice*. He reviewed it in Seward Collins's magazine, *American Review*, where he called it "the most remarkable popular history of the United States" and drew attention to Agar's interpretation of the Civil War as a struggle between agrarianism and a capitalist oligarchy. In 1933 Tate wrote to Agar, welcoming him into the ranks of the like-minded Southern Agrarians, inviting him to contribute to a second Agrarian symposium, and declaring that the only alternative to Marxism was a conservative revolution revolving around the restoration of property. "We have, I think only one dogma, against the pseudo-metaphysical dogma of capitalist-communist philosophy," Tate said, "that men can still make the kind of society morally that they want, and that machine-technology has not changed the political nature of man." Agar in response said that he planned to return in 1934 to the United States where he hoped to take part in a political movement that would spread the distributist message. Agar also wished to establish an agrarian-decentralist weekly national magazine similar in format to the left-wing *New Republic* and *Nation*.⁶

Upon returning to America in 1934, Agar met with the Agrarians to see how they could work toward the restoration of a propertied society. Agar met with the Agrarians again in 1935 and wrote about them favorably. In *Land of the Free* he praised them for remaining true to American values, for rejecting the deracinated materialism of the metropolis, and for drawing attention to the spiritual wasteland of modern industrialism. The Agrarians, he wrote, were the only American intellectuals "who dared bet on America's future."⁷

The United States, Agar believed, stood at a political crossroads in the mid-1930s. New Deal liberalism was unacceptable since it accepted the basic outlines of finance

capitalism and modern industrialism and merely wished to ameliorate their more egregious failings. The New Deal's attempt to retain democracy while doing nothing to restore property ownership resulted in mere crisis legislation, which did not go to the heart of what ailed America. Communism and fascism were also unacceptable, according to Agar, because both rejected democracy and supported economic centralization. Only an anti-plutocratic conservatism, which defended property ownership, agrarianism, and regionalism, could beat back the servile state. Agar believed that millions of Americans supported the traditional values of economic individualism, democracy, and the widespread distribution of property and would support a political alternative to the economic collectivism of Wall Street and the political collectivism of Washington. He desperately wanted to be part of such a movement, perhaps even its voice.

Agar's most important contribution to this political cause was editing *Who Owns America?* Through his newspaper work and his friendship with Barry Bingham, the owner of the *Courier-Journal*, Agar had contacts in the publishing world that he and Tate used to good effect in convincing Houghton Mifflin, Agar's own publisher, to bring out *Who Owns America?*

Some of the Agrarians were suspicious of Agar and his political objectives, however. Donald Davidson and Frank L. Owsley, the militant of the Southern Agrarians, feared that the distinctive message of the Agrarians would be obscured, or at least modulated, in a book containing a smorgasbord. Davidson also resented the fact that he, the most active of the Agrarians in spreading the agrarian gospel, had been pushed aside to make way for Agar, an interloper and a native New Yorker to boot. Tate wrote Davidson in September 1935 denying that he and Agar had been presumptuous in

drawing up an outline and a list of potential contributors to the sequel without asking for the input of the other Agrarians. "If Agar and I hadn't got the outline together," he told Davidson, "it would not have been got together at all. As God is your witness, you know that that is so. We've vaguely consulted off and on for five years, and I am damned to hell if we have accomplished anything as a group. You know that that is so too." The time had come for the Agrarians "to put up or shut up. We can't go on writing out pleasant little laments for our own consumption. We've got to get into action or admit that we are licked. The whole agrarian movement has become a reproach." "Here is a book that we can gather around," Tate concluded. Agar was "a gift from the Gods. He is a born public figure; He is intelligent; and He is with us to the hilt. He is just what we needed."

Tate also sought to reassure Davidson that the suggestion that he discuss regionalism in the symposium was not meant to marginalize him and Southern Agrarians. "It astonishes me that you see your part in the book as a minor one," Tate said. "Isn't regionalism a vital thing in the whole program? And as for sectionalism, I assure you that Agar is as much a Southern sectionalist as any of us. There are more ways than one of skinning a cat. Our purpose is to be heard, and we can't be heard now if our program is set forth as primarily sectional. . . . Our choice lies between a temporary disguise for our ultimate objective, in which case we can get attention, and writing avowedly sectional articles to be read chiefly by ourselves. It is my impression that this has been our conduct since 1931. If you don't think your subject is important, what subject, pray tell me, is? It is so important that if you don't write it up, the book will be wrecked."⁸

Tate's most important contribution to *Who Owns America?* was convincing

Davidson of Agar's good intentions and securing an essay from Davidson for the book. Davidson's "That This Nation May Endure—The Need for Political Regionalism" would prove to be one of the strongest pieces in the volume, and without it the impact of *Who Owns America?* would have been greatly diminished. According to Tate, Agar said that Davidson had "laid down the program that we shall be working upon the rest of our lives. And I agree with him."⁹

Davidson, however, was never completely reconciled. In 1943 he published an essay in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, which claimed the Agar-Tate volume had supplanted a planned sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*. If Davidson viewed any book as such a sequel, it was probably his own *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (1938) and not *Who Owns America?*, since only twelve of its twenty-one contributors were southerners and only three of its essays focused on the South. When Tate read Davidson's *Saturday Review* piece, Tate denied that *Who Owns America?* had displaced any Agrarian sequel. He told Davidson that the choice had been between the Agar-Tate symposium or nothing. "Don," Tate wrote Davidson, "you have a gift for persecution and martyrdom." Davidson responded that if the Agrarians had never become involved with Agar they "would have brought out another symposium and perhaps would have done other things still more important."¹⁰

While Tate worked on Davidson, Agar sought to mollify Owsley. Agar explained that the Agar-Tate book would not preempt a second Agrarian manifesto, because no publisher had as yet expressed any interest in publishing such a volume. Furthermore, the Agrarians would forfeit a golden opportunity to influence the Roosevelt Administration if, in the name of ideological purity and out of personal pique, they re-

fused to contribute to the Agar-Tate project. “If we do not get the book out in time to influence the New Deal, before it settles to its second-term policies, our chance for political influence will be gone for a long time,” he told Owsley. “I feel this is a moment when the few of us who have the right ideas about our misdirected country ought to do all in our power to encourage our friends in high places—of whom there are at the moment more than have been here for a long time.” Agar informed Owsley that Houghton Mifflin demanded that the book appear in the spring of 1936. Otherwise it would have no influence on the party platforms and choice of candidates of the political parties during this crucial presidential year.¹¹

Who Owns America? was published on April 28, 1936, several months before the Republican and Democratic national conventions. There is no evidence that the book had any influence on American politics, although it was reviewed by the major newspapers and magazines and was attacked in the left-wing media. Seward Collins, the publisher of the *American Review*, called it “the most significant book produced by the depression. It contains more sanity and penetration, more sense of American realities and American history, more grasp of economic fundamentals, more enlightened moral passion, more insight into what is happening and...into what will happen than the whole monstrous spate of depression books put together.”¹²

Most reviewers deemed the contributors to *Who Owns America?* to be well-intentioned but questioned whether their recommendations were practical. Crane Brinton, the eminent Harvard historian, shared the dream of an America freed from the horrors of finance capitalism and the attenuation of property ownership, but he doubted that there was much that could be

done about them. It was too late in the game to reverse the decline of family farming. And since the American people did not appear to share the distaste of Agar and his friends for large corporations, Brinton maintained it was unrealistic to anticipate a frontal assault on these economic Goliaths. Dan Troop Smith, an economist at the Harvard Business School, also claimed the argument made by *Who Owns America?* was neither convincing nor feasible. Stringfellow Barr, the prominent man of letters, agreed. There was no evidence that many Americans were attracted to the program espoused in *Who Owns America?*; nor should they be. “I doubt,” Barr said, “whether the American dream of purely political, and hence incompletely defined, liberty would have been so readily surrendered for finance-capitalism if it had afforded deeper satisfaction.”¹³

While Barr was a liberal, his description of the errors of *Who Owns America?* was not significantly different from that of communists. The communist journal *Fight Against War and Fascism* called the decentralist manifesto “an eccentric caravan” and “an excursion into cloud-cuckooland.” The journal particularly objected to the book’s defense of petty capitalism and its failure to realize that the solution to America’s economic ills lay, not in reversing the process of monopolization, but in abolishing private property.¹⁴

John Corbin’s front-page review in the *New York Times Book Review* of *Who Owns America?* was more sympathetic, however. This “very inspiring and provocative symposium” had tapped into a deep reservoir of sentiment for a bygone era in which property ownership was more dispersed, corporate farming unknown, and giant corporations had not yet made their presence felt. “Harkening to the lilt of its cadences, even the most hard-hearted Hamiltonian must have moments in which he hopes that

the dream may come true. For a freshly modern conception of liberty inspires the song, a call to the intimate and spiritual joy that comes, and perhaps comes only, from owning a little patch of the good earth, or a share of the similarly good small factory, and from administering them with hand and brain in joyously rural collaboration." Corbin was an agnostic, however, on the main question of whether Americans would be willing to do those things necessary to rejuvenate the widespread distribution of productive property.¹⁵

The most vigorous defense of *Who Owns America?* was an editorial in the Roman Catholic weekly *Commonweal*, then edited by Michael Williams, a supporter of economic decentralization. This stemmed from the fact that the major arguments of the volume were compatible with papal teachings on property, industrial development, and social justice. The magazine expressed hope that the publication of "this vitally important book" might spark "a really great movement to make America free not merely in desire, or in vague dreams, or in dim remembrance of times past, but in actuality, here and now." It predicted that the first political leader to come out for a conservative revolution to restore property ownership would find Americans flocking to his standard. "And it would not be his personal standard: it would be the standard of traditional American liberty—that real liberty which cannot exist materially speaking, in any nation, unless the determining mass of the nation is constituted by individuals and families and free groups possessed of true property in land and in houses and in tangible things—not merely jobs, and some paperholdings of shares in enterprises in the direction of which they have no part. For that mode of life tends toward servility, and regimentation, and degradation of human values as surely, if more slowly, and less directly, and less

openly, than Communism or Fascism."¹⁶

The depression years saw little political activity in defense of economic and political decentralization and the widespread distribution of property envisioned by Agar, Tate, and the contributors to *Who Owns America?* The problems of the country were simply too immediate during the 1930s to allow for thinking in terms of fundamental change.

The coming of World War II dealt another blow to any prospects for a conservative revolution. The first priority now was to produce the huge numbers of guns, planes, and ships necessary to defeat the enemy, and this need precluded any fundamental, disruptive attack on America's corporate structure. Nor was the war a good time to think in terms of political decentralization. People moved to the great war-making centers; war orders poured into the large corporations; and decision-making was increasingly centered in Washington. Even Agar turned his attentions elsewhere. During the late 1930s his writings increasingly stressed the need to aid England and to enter the war against Nazi Germany. After *Who Owns America?* Agar wrote books on the plight of Europe's Jews and on the coming of the American Civil War but not on the need for political and economic decentralization. After 1936 Tate also wrote little on political and social issues, preferring to focus his energies on literature.

During the post-war years, Americans were in no mood for the radical thinking required to restore the widespread distribution of property. The flow of dishwashers, station wagons, and power lawnmowers to American consumers made them reluctant to tinker with the corporate structure supplying these creature comforts. The decentralist-distributist-agrarian magazine *Free America* noted in its winter 1945 issue

that “the American people have not suddenly become converts to the credo that appears at the *Free America* masthead; the editors do not delude themselves by thinking that it is likely to happen before the millennium.” Within a year or so, *Free America* would cease publication, a victim, it believed, of its own irrelevance.¹⁷

The urgency of the question posed by *Who Owns America?* has not changed since 1936, however, nor has the answer. The political events of the past two decades have demonstrated the relationship between political freedom and prosperity on the one hand and the widespread distribution of property and economic and political decentralization on the other. The British economist P. T. Bauer has shown that these relationships were particularly important for the so-called Third World. Critics during the 1930s derided the contributors to *Who Owns America?* as romantics, visionaries, and utopians. In fact, the collectivists, with their faith for a better world through industrial giantism and economic and political planning, were the true utopians. In view of the contemporary political mood, it would be foolhardy to write off economic and political decentralization as an exercise in nostalgia.

Notes

1. Tate quoted in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Avon Books, 1961, 1965), pp. 352-353, 458; Donald Davidson, “I’ll Take My Stand: A History,” *American Review*, 5 (September, 1935), 320-21. For collectivist intellectuals, see Stuart Kidd, “Collectivist Intellectuals and the Ideal of National Economic Planning,” in Stephen W. Baskerville and Ralph Willett, eds., *Nothing Else to Fear: New Perspectives on America in the Thirties* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1985), 15-35. 2. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence*

of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 276. 3. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 409-11. 4. Davidson to John Gould Fletcher, June 5, 1934 and October 7, 1934, Fletcher Papers (University of Arkansas). 5. Hebert Agar, *The People’s Choice: From Washington to Harding: A Study in Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), pp. 51-55, 199-200. 6. Tate, “Where Are the People?” *American Review*, 2 (December, 1933), 231-36; Tate to Agar, September 9, 1933, Tate Papers (Princeton University). John Gould Fletcher was also impressed by *The People’s Choice*. “It is the best study of the American Presidency I have ever read, and is utterly damning to the Republicans and the big business interests.” Fletcher to Henry Bergen, May 12, 1934, Bergen Papers, in possession of Eugene Haun, Ann Arbor, Michigan. 7. Agar, *Land of the Free*, pp. 133-34. 8. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 292-95. For evidence that Tate himself had some doubts about Agar, see Thomas Daniel Young and Elizabeth Sarcone, eds., *The Lytle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), p. 93, and Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, p. 300. 9. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, p. 295. 10. Donald Davidson, “The ‘Mystery’ of the Agrarians: Facts and Illusions about Some Southern Writers,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 26 (January 24, 1943), 6-7; Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 328-30. For a work implicitly sympathetic to the Davidson point of view, see Louis S. Rubin, *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 253-55. 11. Agar to Tate, September 29, 1935, Tate Papers. 12. Seward Collins, “Three Important Books,” *American Review*, 7 (October, 1936), 601-604. 13. Crane Brinton, “Who Owns America?” *Southern Review*, 2 (Summer, 1936), 15-21; Dan Troop Smith, “Economic Structure: Recent Literature of Diagnosis and Remedy,” *Harvard Business Review*, 15 (Autumn, 1936), 131; Stringfellow Barr, review of *Who Owns America?* in *New York Herald-Tribune Books*, May 10, 1936, 5. See also Barr, “American Dreams,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 12 (July, 1936), 477-80. 14. Leslie Reade, “America, America!” *Fight Against War and Fascism*, 4 (November, 1936), 25. 15. John Corbin, “A Share for All in America,” *New York Times Book Review*, (May 10, 1936), 1, 13. 16. “To Make America Free,” *Commonweal*, 24 (May 8, 1936), 29-30. 17. “Editorial,” *Free America*, 9 (winter 1945), 2.

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The crisis of American capitalism during the 1930s presented the greatest challenge to the American intellectual community since the Civil War. Virtually all intellectuals believed the Great Depression signaled the end of the political, economic, and social system the country had known prior to 1929, and that radical reform was inevitable and desirable. The only question concerned the direction of such change. Most

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The contributors were variously described as distributists, decentralists, and agrarians, and *Who Owns America?* was the most important statement of their thinking. Although the twenty-one contributors to this

volume were a diverse lot, they agreed with the words of Herbert Agar, in the book's introduction, that "monopoly capitalism is evil and self-destructive, and that it is possible, while preserving private ownership, to build a true democracy in which men would be better off both morally and physically, more likely to attain that inner peace which is the mark of a good life."

Most historians of the 1930s have ignored this book as well as decentralist thought in general. Thus the most recent treatment of the decade, David Kennedy's *Freedom from Want: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999), fails to even mention Agar, Tate, and *Who Owns America?*, and there is no reference in the index to *Freedom from Want* to "decentralization." Kennedy's lacuna is understandable, since the paradigm most popular among historians of the politics of the 1930s—the most important political decade after the Civil War—is the conflict between private economic interests and the "people." In this reading, the New Deal spoke for the masses, while its opponents represented the "classes." There is little place in such a historiography for individuals who opposed the growth of big business and high finance and yet also feared the centralization of political authority in Washington. The decentralists did not believe that American political discourse was so impoverished that the only alternatives facing the country were rule by the plutocrats of New York and Pittsburgh or control by Washington bureaucrats. Indeed, they argued, their program of demographic, economic, and political decentralization was the one plan compatible with American political traditions and with the imperatives of modern technology.

The decentralists sought to reverse the trend toward large-scale industrialization, mass merchandising, and farm dispossession which, they argued, were transform-

ing a population of property-owning small manufacturers, merchants, and farmers into servile white-collar employees, proletarians, and farm tenants. Without the widespread distribution of property there could be no real economic or political freedom, only a form of serfdom, a condition to which America was rapidly approaching. If this trend toward dispossession was not reversed, they said, it was likely that the economic collectivism of modern large-scale capitalism would be replaced by the political collectivism of socialism. But socialism, by dispossessing the dispossessors, simply carried the dispossession of modern capitalism to its logical conclusion and merely replaced one group of autocrats by another. Indeed, the radical cure was worse than the capitalist disease, since socialism and communism inevitably led to the elimination of private property, the sure loss of economic freedom, and enslavement to a centralized political bureaucracy.

Any political program which did not seek to reverse this drift toward dispossession was, they claimed, mere tinkering and did not speak to what really ailed America. The decentralists inveighed against all the panaceas offered by the American Left. "From my point of view," Tate wrote to literary critic Malcolm Cowley, "you and the other Marxists are not revolutionary enough: you want to keep capitalism with the capitalism left out." Marxists naturally welcomed large-scale capitalism since it attenuated the ownership of property. While the plutocrats wanted to shift control over property to themselves, the Marxists wanted to shift this control to government bureaucrats. Liberty would be sacrificed in either case. Only the restoration of the widespread ownership of property, Tate said, could "create a decent society in terms of American history." Decentralists also accused the New Deal of avoiding serious reform. Donald Davidson, one of the con-

tributors to the 1930 Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, accused the New Dealers of merely seeking "to repair our faltering economic system and to guarantee a modicum of comfort to the human casualties of our false way of life. But they are doing nothing to repair the false way of life. Rather they seem to want to crystallize it in all its falsity."¹

The origin of *Who Owns America?* dates back to the proposal of Davidson and several other Southern Agrarians that they publish a sequel to *I'll Take My Stand* which would be more programmatic and less focused on the literary and cultural elements of Agrarianism. Such a book would answer the widespread criticism of the Agrarians as impractical romantics seeking to restore in the South an imaginary agrarian golden age. A sequel would also lay out a political program around which the Agrarians and their supporters could rally. In October 1932 Davidson suggested that the volume should appear at the latest in 1933 or 1934. It should be "a simpler, more compact book than the first.... The book should make full use of the present new trends toward the farm and small town; of regionalism in art and economics; of what is best in the Humanist and other anti-liberal movements. We should be careful to present ourselves as the advance-guard of the new dispensation, not—as our critics tiresomely say—'reactionaries.' We ought to have definitions, instances, illustrations—all much more concrete than in the first book."²

Tate agreed, and during the winter of 1933-34 both he and Davidson approached publishers about bringing out the proposed volume. Harper and Brothers had brought out *I'll Take My Stand*, and it was the logical publisher for any sequel. Tate wrote the firm in November 1933 that plans for a second symposium, which would be less

oriented toward the South and more concrete in aim and program, were taking shape.

The general purpose of the book will be to define what at present we are calling a genuine Conservative Revolution: we are in the midst of a revolutionary process in this country, but to what extent is it defined in the mind of the Administration? Is it the familiar American procedure of tinkering with the parts, and letting American society drift, or does the outlook include a specific notion of the kind of society America should have? That is the question the book will try to answer. We oppose to the notion of "planned economy" the notion of "planned society." We cannot see that anybody in power or likely to be in power has a conception of a great American society: there is only the attempt to bring up incomes a little, and to be all things to all men. We shall, in the various essays, canvass the historical background for the possibility of a "planned society," and try to find a possible direction for it in the present state of affairs.

Tate mentioned John Crowe Ransom, Frank L. Owsley, Donald Davidson, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, T. S. Eliot, and Herbert Agar as potential contributors to the proposed volume. Agar's essay, "Crisis Legislation vs. the Planned Society," would focus on "the general question discussed in the book. The general thesis is that industrial capitalism is capable only of crisis legislation; abstract profit has destroyed concrete society. Dehumanization of economics."³

Harper did not offer Tate a contract. In the meantime, Davidson had been turned down by both the Macmillan Company and the University of North Carolina Press. Davidson had been particularly eager to receive a contract from Chapel Hill, since it was the most distinguished academic press in the South and the University was home to the most important opponents of Agrarianism. Because of the troubled economic state of the publishing industry resulting from the Depression, publishers were extremely reluctant to offer contracts with-

out seeing a manuscript. And without a contract, potential contributors to the sequel were reluctant to write their essays. "No publisher is in sight for the symposium," he lamented to Fletcher in October, 1934, "and nothing is being done about it, or very likely will be done." Into this vacuum stepped Agar.⁴

Agar was a columnist for the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and the winner of the 1934 Pulitzer Prize in History for *The People's Choice: From Washington to Harding: A Study in Democracy*. This history of the American presidency, written while Agar was the London correspondent for the *Courier-Journal* and the literary editor of the *English Review*, reflected its author's involvement in G. K. Chesterton's and Hilaire Belloc's English distributist movement, which argued for the widespread distribution of productive property. For a time Agar had even worked on *G. K.'s Weekly*, and he was Chesterton's leading American disciple. *The People's Choice* described the decline of the American presidency resulting from the transformation of the United States from a propertied democracy to a plutocracy. American democracy, Agar said, had degenerated into a "democracy of massed city populations, ignorant foreign labor, graft, and 'machine politics'—the democracy, in other words, that was really plutocracy." A true democracy, one that was safe against both communist and capitalist exploitation, had to be "founded on the basis of landed interest." In America, however, Jefferson's agrarian values had been overwhelmed by a Hamiltonian passion for riches. The defeat of the agrarian South in the Civil War removed the last remaining barrier to the complete triumph of large scale capitalism. And so a nation of property owners had been transformed into a country of wage earners and farm tenants.⁵

Tate was deeply impressed by *The People's Choice*. He reviewed it in Seward Collins's magazine, *American Review*, where he called it "the most remarkable popular history of the United States" and drew attention to Agar's interpretation of the Civil War as a struggle between agrarianism and a capitalist oligarchy. In 1933 Tate wrote to Agar, welcoming him into the ranks of the like-minded Southern Agrarians, inviting him to contribute to a second Agrarian symposium, and declaring that the only alternative to Marxism was a conservative revolution revolving around the restoration of property. "We have, I think only one dogma, against the pseudo-metaphysical dogma of capitalist-communist philosophy," Tate said, "that men can still make the kind of society morally that they want, and that machine-technology has not changed the political nature of man." Agar in response said that he planned to return in 1934 to the United States where he hoped to take part in a political movement that would spread the distributist message. Agar also wished to establish an agrarian-decentralist weekly national magazine similar in format to the left-wing *New Republic* and *Nation*.⁶

Upon returning to America in 1934, Agar met with the Agrarians to see how they could work toward the restoration of a propertied society. Agar met with the Agrarians again in 1935 and wrote about them favorably. In *Land of the Free* he praised them for remaining true to American values, for rejecting the deracinated materialism of the metropolis, and for drawing attention to the spiritual wasteland of modern industrialism. The Agrarians, he wrote, were the only American intellectuals "who dared bet on America's future."⁷

The United States, Agar believed, stood at a political crossroads in the mid-1930s. New Deal liberalism was unacceptable since it accepted the basic outlines of finance

capitalism and modern industrialism and merely wished to ameliorate their more egregious failings. The New Deal's attempt to retain democracy while doing nothing to restore property ownership resulted in mere crisis legislation, which did not go to the heart of what ailed America. Communism and fascism were also unacceptable, according to Agar, because both rejected democracy and supported economic centralization. Only an anti-plutocratic conservatism, which defended property ownership, agrarianism, and regionalism, could beat back the servile state. Agar believed that millions of Americans supported the traditional values of economic individualism, democracy, and the widespread distribution of property and would support a political alternative to the economic collectivism of Wall Street and the political collectivism of Washington. He desperately wanted to be part of such a movement, perhaps even its voice.

Agar's most important contribution to this political cause was editing *Who Owns America?* Through his newspaper work and his friendship with Barry Bingham, the owner of the *Courier-Journal*, Agar had contacts in the publishing world that he and Tate used to good effect in convincing Houghton Mifflin, Agar's own publisher, to bring out *Who Owns America?*

Some of the Agrarians were suspicious of Agar and his political objectives, however. Donald Davidson and Frank L. Owsley, the militant of the Southern Agrarians, feared that the distinctive message of the Agrarians would be obscured, or at least modulated, in a book containing a smorgasbord. Davidson also resented the fact that he, the most active of the Agrarians in spreading the agrarian gospel, had been pushed aside to make way for Agar, an interloper and a native New Yorker to boot. Tate wrote Davidson in September 1935 denying that he and Agar had been presumptuous in

drawing up an outline and a list of potential contributors to the sequel without asking for the input of the other Agrarians. "If Agar and I hadn't got the outline together," he told Davidson, "it would not have been got together at all. As God is your witness, you know that that is so. We've vaguely consulted off and on for five years, and I am damned to hell if we have accomplished anything as a group. You know that that is so too." The time had come for the Agrarians "to put up or shut up. We can't go on writing out pleasant little laments for our own consumption. We've got to get into action or admit that we are licked. The whole agrarian movement has become a reproach." "Here is a book that we can gather around," Tate concluded. Agar was "a gift from the Gods. He is a born public figure; He is intelligent; and He is with us to the hilt. He is just what we needed."

Tate also sought to reassure Davidson that the suggestion that he discuss regionalism in the symposium was not meant to marginalize him and Southern Agrarians. "It astonishes me that you see your part in the book as a minor one," Tate said. "Isn't regionalism a vital thing in the whole program? And as for sectionalism, I assure you that Agar is as much a Southern sectionalist as any of us. There are more ways than one of skinning a cat. Our purpose is to be heard, and we can't be heard now if our program is set forth as primarily sectional. . . . Our choice lies between a temporary disguise for our ultimate objective, in which case we can get attention, and writing avowedly sectional articles to be read chiefly by ourselves. It is my impression that this has been our conduct since 1931. If you don't think your subject is important, what subject, pray tell me, is? It is so important that if you don't write it up, the book will be wrecked."⁸

Tate's most important contribution to *Who Owns America?* was convincing

Davidson of Agar's good intentions and securing an essay from Davidson for the book. Davidson's "That This Nation May Endure—The Need for Political Regionalism" would prove to be one of the strongest pieces in the volume, and without it the impact of *Who Owns America?* would have been greatly diminished. According to Tate, Agar said that Davidson had "laid down the program that we shall be working upon the rest of our lives. And I agree with him."⁹

Davidson, however, was never completely reconciled. In 1943 he published an essay in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, which claimed the Agar-Tate volume had supplanted a planned sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*. If Davidson viewed any book as such a sequel, it was probably his own *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (1938) and not *Who Owns America?*, since only twelve of its twenty-one contributors were southerners and only three of its essays focused on the South. When Tate read Davidson's *Saturday Review* piece, Tate denied that *Who Owns America?* had displaced any Agrarian sequel. He told Davidson that the choice had been between the Agar-Tate symposium or nothing. "Don," Tate wrote Davidson, "you have a gift for persecution and martyrdom." Davidson responded that if the Agrarians had never become involved with Agar they "would have brought out another symposium and perhaps would have done other things still more important."¹⁰

While Tate worked on Davidson, Agar sought to mollify Owsley. Agar explained that the Agar-Tate book would not preempt a second Agrarian manifesto, because no publisher had as yet expressed any interest in publishing such a volume. Furthermore, the Agrarians would forfeit a golden opportunity to influence the Roosevelt Administration if, in the name of ideological purity and out of personal pique, they re-

fused to contribute to the Agar-Tate project. “If we do not get the book out in time to influence the New Deal, before it settles to its second-term policies, our chance for political influence will be gone for a long time,” he told Owsley. “I feel this is a moment when the few of us who have the right ideas about our misdirected country ought to do all in our power to encourage our friends in high places—of whom there are at the moment more than have been here for a long time.” Agar informed Owsley that Houghton Mifflin demanded that the book appear in the spring of 1936. Otherwise it would have no influence on the party platforms and choice of candidates of the political parties during this crucial presidential year.¹¹

Who Owns America? was published on April 28, 1936, several months before the Republican and Democratic national conventions. There is no evidence that the book had any influence on American politics, although it was reviewed by the major newspapers and magazines and was attacked in the left-wing media. Seward Collins, the publisher of the *American Review*, called it “the most significant book produced by the depression. It contains more sanity and penetration, more sense of American realities and American history, more grasp of economic fundamentals, more enlightened moral passion, more insight into what is happening and...into what will happen than the whole monstrous spate of depression books put together.”¹²

Most reviewers deemed the contributors to *Who Owns America?* to be well-intentioned but questioned whether their recommendations were practical. Crane Brinton, the eminent Harvard historian, shared the dream of an America freed from the horrors of finance capitalism and the attenuation of property ownership, but he doubted that there was much that could be

done about them. It was too late in the game to reverse the decline of family farming. And since the American people did not appear to share the distaste of Agar and his friends for large corporations, Brinton maintained it was unrealistic to anticipate a frontal assault on these economic Goliaths. Dan Troop Smith, an economist at the Harvard Business School, also claimed the argument made by *Who Owns America?* was neither convincing nor feasible. Stringfellow Barr, the prominent man of letters, agreed. There was no evidence that many Americans were attracted to the program espoused in *Who Owns America?*; nor should they be. “I doubt,” Barr said, “whether the American dream of purely political, and hence incompletely defined, liberty would have been so readily surrendered for finance-capitalism if it had afforded deeper satisfaction.”¹³

While Barr was a liberal, his description of the errors of *Who Owns America?* was not significantly different from that of communists. The communist journal *Fight Against War and Fascism* called the decentralist manifesto “an eccentric caravan” and “an excursion into cloud-cuckooland.” The journal particularly objected to the book’s defense of petty capitalism and its failure to realize that the solution to America’s economic ills lay, not in reversing the process of monopolization, but in abolishing private property.¹⁴

John Corbin’s front-page review in the *New York Times Book Review* of *Who Owns America?* was more sympathetic, however. This “very inspiring and provocative symposium” had tapped into a deep reservoir of sentiment for a bygone era in which property ownership was more dispersed, corporate farming unknown, and giant corporations had not yet made their presence felt. “Harkening to the lilt of its cadences, even the most hard-hearted Hamiltonian must have moments in which he hopes that

the dream may come true. For a freshly modern conception of liberty inspires the song, a call to the intimate and spiritual joy that comes, and perhaps comes only, from owning a little patch of the good earth, or a share of the similarly good small factory, and from administering them with hand and brain in joyously rural collaboration." Corbin was an agnostic, however, on the main question of whether Americans would be willing to do those things necessary to rejuvenate the widespread distribution of productive property.¹⁵

The most vigorous defense of *Who Owns America?* was an editorial in the Roman Catholic weekly *Commonweal*, then edited by Michael Williams, a supporter of economic decentralization. This stemmed from the fact that the major arguments of the volume were compatible with papal teachings on property, industrial development, and social justice. The magazine expressed hope that the publication of "this vitally important book" might spark "a really great movement to make America free not merely in desire, or in vague dreams, or in dim remembrance of times past, but in actuality, here and now." It predicted that the first political leader to come out for a conservative revolution to restore property ownership would find Americans flocking to his standard. "And it would not be his personal standard: it would be the standard of traditional American liberty—that real liberty which cannot exist materially speaking, in any nation, unless the determining mass of the nation is constituted by individuals and families and free groups possessed of true property in land and in houses and in tangible things—not merely jobs, and some paperholdings of shares in enterprises in the direction of which they have no part. For that mode of life tends toward servility, and regimentation, and degradation of human values as surely, if more slowly, and less directly, and less

openly, than Communism or Fascism."¹⁶

The depression years saw little political activity in defense of economic and political decentralization and the widespread distribution of property envisioned by Agar, Tate, and the contributors to *Who Owns America?* The problems of the country were simply too immediate during the 1930s to allow for thinking in terms of fundamental change.

The coming of World War II dealt another blow to any prospects for a conservative revolution. The first priority now was to produce the huge numbers of guns, planes, and ships necessary to defeat the enemy, and this need precluded any fundamental, disruptive attack on America's corporate structure. Nor was the war a good time to think in terms of political decentralization. People moved to the great war-making centers; war orders poured into the large corporations; and decision-making was increasingly centered in Washington. Even Agar turned his attentions elsewhere. During the late 1930s his writings increasingly stressed the need to aid England and to enter the war against Nazi Germany. After *Who Owns America?* Agar wrote books on the plight of Europe's Jews and on the coming of the American Civil War but not on the need for political and economic decentralization. After 1936 Tate also wrote little on political and social issues, preferring to focus his energies on literature.

During the post-war years, Americans were in no mood for the radical thinking required to restore the widespread distribution of property. The flow of dishwashers, station wagons, and power lawnmowers to American consumers made them reluctant to tinker with the corporate structure supplying these creature comforts. The decentralist-distributist-agrarian magazine *Free America* noted in its winter 1945 issue

that “the American people have not suddenly become converts to the credo that appears at the *Free America* masthead; the editors do not delude themselves by thinking that it is likely to happen before the millennium.” Within a year or so, *Free America* would cease publication, a victim, it believed, of its own irrelevance.¹⁷

The urgency of the question posed by *Who Owns America?* has not changed since 1936, however, nor has the answer. The political events of the past two decades have demonstrated the relationship between political freedom and prosperity on the one hand and the widespread distribution of property and economic and political decentralization on the other. The British economist P. T. Bauer has shown that these relationships were particularly important for the so-called Third World. Critics during the 1930s derided the contributors to *Who Owns America?* as romantics, visionaries, and utopians. In fact, the collectivists, with their faith for a better world through industrial giantism and economic and political planning, were the true utopians. In view of the contemporary political mood, it would be foolhardy to write off economic and political decentralization as an exercise in nostalgia.

Notes

1. Tate quoted in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Avon Books, 1961, 1965), pp. 352-353, 458; Donald Davidson, “I’ll Take My Stand: A History,” *American Review*, 5 (September, 1935), 320-21. For collectivist intellectuals, see Stuart Kidd, “Collectivist Intellectuals and the Ideal of National Economic Planning,” in Stephen W. Baskerville and Ralph Willett, eds., *Nothing Else to Fear: New Perspectives on America in the Thirties* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1985), 15-35. 2. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence*

of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 276. 3. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 409-11. 4. Davidson to John Gould Fletcher, June 5, 1934 and October 7, 1934, Fletcher Papers (University of Arkansas). 5. Hebert Agar, *The People’s Choice: From Washington to Harding: A Study in Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), pp. 51-55, 199-200. 6. Tate, “Where Are the People?” *American Review*, 2 (December, 1933), 231-36; Tate to Agar, September 9, 1933, Tate Papers (Princeton University). John Gould Fletcher was also impressed by *The People’s Choice*. “It is the best study of the American Presidency I have ever read, and is utterly damning to the Republicans and the big business interests.” Fletcher to Henry Bergen, May 12, 1934, Bergen Papers, in possession of Eugene Haun, Ann Arbor, Michigan. 7. Agar, *Land of the Free*, pp. 133-34. 8. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 292-95. For evidence that Tate himself had some doubts about Agar, see Thomas Daniel Young and Elizabeth Sarcone, eds., *The Lytle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), p. 93, and Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, p. 300. 9. Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, p. 295. 10. Donald Davidson, “The ‘Mystery’ of the Agrarians: Facts and Illusions about Some Southern Writers,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 26 (January 24, 1943), 6-7; Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, pp. 328-30. For a work implicitly sympathetic to the Davidson point of view, see Louis S. Rubin, *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), pp. 253-55. 11. Agar to Tate, September 29, 1935, Tate Papers. 12. Seward Collins, “Three Important Books,” *American Review*, 7 (October, 1936), 601-604. 13. Crane Brinton, “Who Owns America?” *Southern Review*, 2 (Summer, 1936), 15-21; Dan Troop Smith, “Economic Structure: Recent Literature of Diagnosis and Remedy,” *Harvard Business Review*, 15 (Autumn, 1936), 131; Stringfellow Barr, review of *Who Owns America?* in *New York Herald-Tribune Books*, May 10, 1936, 5. See also Barr, “American Dreams,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 12 (July, 1936), 477-80. 14. Leslie Reade, “America, America!” *Fight Against War and Fascism*, 4 (November, 1936), 25. 15. John Corbin, “A Share for All in America,” *New York Times Book Review*, (May 10, 1936), 1, 13. 16. “To Make America Free,” *Commonweal*, 24 (May 8, 1936), 29-30. 17. “Editorial,” *Free America*, 9 (winter 1945), 2.