

Allan Carlson

Agrarianism Reborn: On the Curious Return of the Small Family Farm

In 1941 the *Prairie Farmer*, America's oldest farm periodical, celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. The centennial cover features a drawing of the iconic twentieth-century "new" farmer: tall, young, and slender. Bulky overalls have given way to tailored city clothes; the straw hat to a fedora. In the artist's words, he is "a strong, virile, keen, friendly, forward-looking citizen standing in a field of gold."¹ Importantly, there are no horses or mules in that golden field. Instead, a tractor tills the ground. "Modern machinery has straightened the farmer's back," the artist happily reports. More boldly, an ad on the inside cover features a slender farm wife in stylish garb beaming over four happy children, with her husband on a tractor in the background. It declares that "[e]very new MM [Minneapolis-Moline] machine put into action on your farm brings you closer to FREEDOM, and closer to the young folks for whom you are farming."² At that moment, American farmers and their families still numbered about 29 million souls. The average farm was 160 acres in size.

The *Prairie Farmer's* cover for September 2007 features a photo of the occupational descendent of this archetypal industrial farmer. The twenty-first-century farmer is fairly old, paunchy from

lack of exercise, standing by his only son, and working 1,700 acres in corn. Indeed, driven by ethanol subsidies, "much of the countryside has been getting ready for bigger and bigger corn crops."³ All the same, American farmers and their families now number fewer than 2.5 million souls, 91 percent below the 1941 figure, while the average farmer approaches 65 years of age. Industrial agricultural has achieved its real end: not freedom and an abundance of children, but efficiency through the substitution of machines for people.

And yet, at this very apogee of the mega-farm, something new—and yet very old—may be stirring. Industrialized farming appears to be "pregnant": not with some newly bioengineered chimera nor with the latest super-machine, but with *agrarianism*, a humanistic approach to agriculture that would re-attach people

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to the soil. The farming future may not lie with the consolidators, speculators, and agribusinesses. Rather, it may lie with the resurrection of a family-centered agriculture. On the surface, this would seem to be among the least likely of twenty-first-century possibilities. All the same, as the land-use expert Eric Freyfogle enthuses, “agrarianism is again on the rise” and “agrarian ways and virtues are resurging in American culture.”⁴ Oddly enough, there is evidence to back up these claims.

The Household Restored

What is agrarianism? The poet, novelist, essayist, and farmer Wendell Berry—America’s leading agrarian voice—describes this worldview as the countervailing idea to industrialism. The industrial economy, he writes, constitutes the culture of “the one-night stand. ‘I had a good time,’ says the industrial lover, ‘but don’t ask me my last name.’”⁵ Agrarianism rests, in contrast, on a culture defined by marriage, a long-term covenant of mutual care. Brian Donahue underscores that it requires “that those who farm do so to fulfill their basic goal of a healthy family life on the land.”⁶ Lynn Miller, publisher and editor of *Small Farmer’s Journal*, says that agrarianism rests on two principles: “First, provide for the family [from the farm] and second, always be looking for ways to help family, friends, and neighbors.”⁷

The key to building healthy agrarian households, Berry maintains, is recovering the tasks of both *husbandry* and *housewifery*. Husbandry is “the work of a domestic man, a man who has accepted a bondage to the household.” The husbanding mind is “both careful and humble,” ready “to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve.” Under industrial agriculture, however, soil husbandry was displaced by a narrow “soil science”; animal husbandry, involving “the

sympathy by which we recognize ourselves as fellow creatures of the animals,” gave way to “animal science” and “the animal factory which . . . is a vision of Hell.” Even “the high and essential art of housewifery” surrendered at the universities to a “family and consumer science” that has blotted out the home.⁸ Agrarianism means reinvigorating the household as “a center of economic productivity,”⁹ restoring women and men to their natural and necessary tasks.

While sharing many traits, agrarianism differs from environmentalism in an important way. Particularly among “deep ecologists,” human beings are seen as the problem, the source of environmental degradation, a “cancer” on the planet. This view might be summarized as “the fewer humans, the better.” In contrast, agrarians are buoyant humanists, welcoming children and the close settlement of human beings on the land. As two sympathetic writers summarize, “Agrarians . . . assert that a flourishing life standardly incorporates . . . interdependence with neighbors in a geographically limited, relatively self-sufficient, intergenerationally stable community . . . and a measure of personal self-sufficiency through physical labor, preferably on one’s own property.”¹⁰

The Crisis of Industrial Agriculture

Contemporary agrarian writers underscore the weaknesses of industrialized farming. Foremost of these is the mounting inability of factory farms even to compete in a free market. Ohio’s Gene Logsdon notes that in 1999, about *half* of the income that American farmers received came from the government, not from farming. Put another way, “hardly any farmer in the Midwest is making a living from farming,” relying instead on state subsidies, inheritances, other investments, and off-farm jobs to make ends meet.¹¹

Meanwhile, farm operations grow ever more complex. “Rollover” deals for massive machines disguise real ownership. “Custom sprayers apply all the fertilizers and pesticides. Hired ‘scouts’ watch for disease or insect infestations. Rented semi-trucks haul away the grain.” Animal factories pump hogs and cattle full of hormones and antibiotics, leaving creatures that could not survive outdoors. Meanwhile, the “farmer” sits in an office before his computer, hunting for new tax loopholes and hedging on the Chicago Board of Trade.¹² Logsdon concludes that “this drift toward the total consolidation of power will collapse, because historically it has always collapsed. We are following unerringly in the footsteps of the old Roman Empire.” More hopefully, on the ruins of agribusiness he sees emerging a fresh “landscape of garden farms.”¹³

Economist John Ikerd focuses on confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) as the symbol of what is wrong in American agriculture. Promoted as economic development, these massive structures hold thousands of hogs, cattle, and other creatures in small stalls; animals never get to touch real earth or smell fresh grass. “A CAFO is not a farm,” Ikerd contends, “it is a factory. . . . [A]ll farms smell, but CAFOs stink.” They also bring no improvements to their communities: usually relying on cheap immigrant labor, they bring no jobs, and their unsightliness and odor drive off other economic opportunities. Ikerd notes that “corporations have no families, no communities, and increasingly no single nationality. Eventually, corporately controlled agriculture operations will be forced to leave rural communities in the U.S. and Canada.”¹⁴ Seeking cheaper labor, they will go to places like Brazil where, after another generation, he predicts, they will probably die out.¹⁵

Wendell Berry acknowledges the intox-

icating power of industrial agriculture. He recalls how, as a sixteen year old, he mowed a field with his father’s new Farmall-A tractor. Watching a nearby team of mules, he writes, “I remember how fiercely I resented their slowness.” Indeed, he says that if you kept the context “narrow enough” and the accounting period “short enough,” the industrial promises of higher productivity and the saving of labor made some sense. However, for the long run, the tractor also symbolized the shift from a farm economy largely resting on free solar power to one dependent on fossil fuels and a long supply line. “We had entered an era of limitlessness, or the illusion thereof, and this in itself is a sort of wonder.” However, Berry insists that this state of affairs cannot last: “the tirelessness of tractors brought a new depth of weariness into human experience, at a cost to health and family life that has not been fully accounted.” As the prices of fossil fuels soar, as the costs of farm machinery become prohibitive, and as the machine-driven depopulation of the land nears its end, a deeper accounting grows necessary and the reality of limits returns. Agrarians insist that a new agriculture, resting on respect for these limits, is the only alternative.¹⁶

There are other signs of change at the macro-level, quietly and often indirectly summoning a new agrarianism. Lynn Miller suggests that the great rush to employ biofuels will produce a “windfall” for oil crop farmers around the globe, “happy days for genetic engineering,” and a consequent “accelerated environmental degradation and climate change.” However, as more industrialized farm land is diverted to corn, soybeans, switchgrass, and oilseed, the demand for locally grown meat, vegetables, and feed will soar: “prices for all locally available farm commodities will go up, up, up.” At the same time, the newly affluent Chinese “have discovered they

have a taste for dairy products” just as “diet fashion” in North America has also shifted toward milk. This is generating new markets for small dairy operations. Indeed, as Miller writes, “a small independent family farm of limited but well-managed acreage could pull in an excess of 100,000 dollars per year in milk sales alone.”¹⁷

In similar manner, diet fashion in North America is pushing toward the “‘chic’ organic equation.” The demand for organics is actually doubling every three or four years. True, the predictable consolidation of retailers and producers is already occurring (e.g., Whole Foods just bought out its chief rival). And yet, the small farmer is also reaping at least a temporary windfall: \$10 and more for a gallon of organic raw milk; \$5.50/lb. for pasture-raised chickens; 50 cents an egg; and \$5/lb. for organic vegetables. “Now all of a sudden many small independent organic farms are looking at profitable returns of several thousand dollars per acre.” Moreover, the clamorous diffusion of knowledge on the world wide web creates new opportunities there for small farmers to make sales. Only partly with tongue in cheek, Miller declares that “there has never been a better time to be a farmer.”¹⁸

A New Populism

Agrarian renewal can also be seen from the bottom up, as an expression of a new populism. Lynn Miller’s *Small Farmer’s Journal*, now in its thirty-first year, serves about 20,000 subscribers and is also being distributed nationally through Borders bookstores. *SFJ* is a pleasing mix of practical articles on poultry raising, barn building, bee keeping, and true horsepower, along with farm recipes, a kids’ page, and reprints of rare and useful extension bureau booklets on pre-industrial farm techniques. Most enjoyable, though, are each

issue’s letters section which contains dozens of testimonials about building a new agrarian order, and—more surprisingly—the advertising section which showcases an array of mostly family-held businesses serving the new agrarians. Other sympathetic agrarian publications include *Touch the Soil*, *Farm and Life Newsletter*, *Countryside*, *Heavy Horse World* (from Britain), and *Back Home*.

Another bottom-up development has been the rapid spread of farmers’ markets across the land. In 1994, there were 1,755 operating markets; in 2007, 4,385, an increase of 150 percent. This form of direct marketing cuts out the notorious “middleman” in the food distribution process and encourages local production. About 20,000 American farmers now report selling their produce exclusively in this way.¹⁹

A second form of direct marketing by farmers to consumers has emerged as well: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). This method of linking producers to consumers and of insuring food quality appears to have had its origin in Germany, Switzerland, and Japan during the 1960s. The idea came to America in 1984, when Jan Vander Tuin of Switzerland teamed up with Robyn Van En of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to create Indian Hill Farm. A CSA rests on an agreement between a farmer and a group of shareholders, who pay the cultivator a pre-negotiated fee in the late winter, in exchange for receipt of a box of produce every week from June thru October. Under this shared “risk and reward” agreement, consumers eat what the farmer has successfully grown. CSAs differ from subscription farming in that the shareholders are guaranteed no particular quantity or type of food. Rather, they invest in the whole farm and receive what is seasonally ripe. CSAs are also a “lifestyle” choice. Most feature organic or “biodynamic” produce, utilize heirloom varieties

ies, employ apprentice and volunteer labor, hold work days and harvest festivals, and provide gift boxes of produce to needy households.

In the United States and Canada, the cost of a typical CSA share ranges from \$350 to \$500; the size of CSAs vary from five to nearly 1,000 shareholders. The system provides the farmer with up-front capital and eliminates his marketing and weather risks. He can focus instead on the nurture of his crops and soil. Because distribution costs are low (boxes of produce usually go to a few distribution points), CSA produce is competitively priced. Recent estimates suggest that between 1,300 and 3,000 CSAs now exist in North America. The largest is Angelic Organics in Boone County, Illinois, which is featured in the new documentary film, "The Real Dirt on Farmer John."²⁰

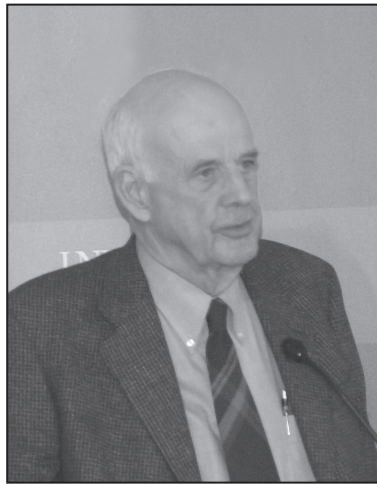
Another novel, bottom-up development is the emergence of grass farming as a viable form of agriculture. The movement is closely associated with geneticist Wes Jackson, who in 1976 founded the Land Institute in Salinas, Kansas. Perhaps the ultimate reactionary, Jackson believes that mankind has "been farming the wrong way for about 10,000 years." The Neolithic mistake came "when they started digging up the fields and baring the soil." Jackson sees the soil as ultimately a *non*-renewable resource, which should never feel a plow. He labels the earth "an ecological mosaic. We're only beginning to recognize the powers inherent in local adaptation." His is an agriculture based on perennial

grasses, legumes, and sunflowers, together with grazing animals free of corn- and soybean-based feed. This is a "natural systems agriculture" that takes full advantage of the sun and seeks "a paradise of permanent pastures." Implementing this system in Ohio, Logsdon found after two years an astonishing vitality in his soil: "I began to understand why gatherings of graziers are so full of excitement compared to the sullen

visages of farmers at grain conferences. We know that we are on to something revolutionary and hopeful."²¹

The new agrarianism is also in harmony with the new urbanism, a sort of populist rebellion against the drabness and sterile designs of suburbia. Most notably, the new urbanists "share the agrarian's disdain for contemporary patterns of land use, taking inspiration instead from

traditional modes." Put another way, both movements seek "renewal of traditions of human settlement that emerged over millennia." New urbanists note that "human settlements have traditionally been oriented toward the pedestrian," and that "the neighborhood is the fundamental unit of human settlement." They define a true neighborhood temporally: a walk from the center of a neighborhood to its edge should take only five minutes. With keen insight, new urbanists Benjamin Northrup and Bent Braxvoort Lipscomb also note that a rural village "is essentially a single, free standing neighborhood in the country." Any good neighborhood, be it part of a city or be it rural, must have certain traits: an obvious center; places symbolizing com-



Wendell Berry

munity identity; a mixture of commercial, residential, and civic uses; residences facing the street with obvious entrances; and a clear boundary with the countryside. New urbanists also wax enthusiastic over the preservation of family farms in close proximity to nonfarming households.²²

Meanwhile, out in Exurbia, Gene Logsdon welcomes a group he calls the “countrysiders.” These are new refugees from the stress of urban and suburban life. They are the professionals and the telecommuters seeking “to bring back to rural America the life and money that consolidated banking sucked out over two centuries of predatory consolidation,” a development then legitimized by consolidated schools. In a strong paragraph, he summarizes the aspirations of these new agrarians:

We are rebelling against the economics of power. We want some income from the land but also some from nonfarm sources. . . . We want homes where our children can know meaningful work and learn something useful as they grow up. We want an alternative to chemicalized, hormonized, vaccinzied, antibiotic-treated, irradiated factory food. We would like to establish home-based businesses . . . so that we do not have to put our children in day care centers. . . .

These one foot in the country, one foot in the city “countrysiders” are working, Logsdon says, “to join the best of urban life with the best in rural life in a new and admirable agrarianism.”²³

An Intellectual Infrastructure

If ideas drive culture, and culture in turn drives politics, then the new agrarianism can also claim an impressive cadre of idea people, writers and scholars making the case. When Wendell Berry found his agrarian voice in the 1960s, he could identify allies only in the past: figures such as Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University,

author of *The Holy Earth* (1916) and founder of the Country Life Movement; or The Twelve Southerners affiliated with Vanderbilt University who coauthored *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. However, by the 1970s a new community of writers began to gather around Berry. Early friends included Wes Jackson, Gene Logsdon, Hayden Caruth, poet Eric Trethewey, and the Ohio Amish farmer, editor, and author David Kline. A younger generation of writers and scholars has also rallied behind the agrarian banner. Seventeen doctoral dissertations alone have been written on Berry's work. In 2007, the University Press of Kentucky issued a fine *festschrift* entitled *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters and containing twenty-eight essays: they identify a new agrarian community of writers. Other works with a compatible message include Victor David Hanson's *Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Civilization* (1995).

Berry notes that two failures have haunted the agrarian movement: the lack of a reliable accounting of industrialism's true effects, and the absence of a compelling agrarian economics.²⁴ Those gaps are being filled by figures such as John Ikerd, now emeritus professor of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri. He began his career “as a conservative, bottom-line, free-market economist.” However, his faith in the invisible hand was shaken by the farm crisis of the early 1980s, when even “good farmers” who did everything they were told by the experts went broke. He eventually concluded that this was not the inevitable fate of agriculture, but rather the symptom of a distinctive type of farming, one “driven by specialization, standardization, and consolidation—an industrial agriculture driven by the economic bottom line.”²⁵

Ikerd continues to admire the classical economists—Adam Smith, David Ri-

cardo, and Thomas Malthus—for having given as high a priority to “the social and ethical dimensions of life” as they gave to the economic. Smith, he says, also understood that *land* (and other natural resources) “constitutes ‘by far’ the greatest, the most important, and most durable part of the wealth of every extensive country.” However, Ikerd breaks company with the neoclassical economists of the early twentieth century who, claiming to be pure scientists, “abandoned the social and ethical foundations” of their predecessors.²⁶

Ikerd goes on to explain why unfettered agro-capitalism will fail. He attributes this result to nothing less than the Second Law of Thermodynamics, or the Law of Entropy: the tendency of all closed systems to move toward the ultimate dissolution of matter and energy. Life on earth, he writes, is only sustainable because of the daily flow of new solar energy into the system, which offsets entropy. For its part, industrialized capitalism “is a very efficient system of energy extraction,” but its incentives provide scant encouragement to the use of solar power. In short, according to Ikerd, industrial capitalism left to itself accelerates resource entropy.

Ikerd insists, moreover, that the same system also accelerates *social* entropy. It weakens family and other personal bonds because maximum efficiency demands that people deal with each other impartially, impersonally. He argues that globalizing economies

. . . gain their efficient advantage by using people to do work, while doing nothing to restore the social capital needed to sustain positive personal relationships within society. There is no economic incentive . . . to invest in families, communities, or society for the benefit of future generations. And it is typically more profitable to find new people to exploit than to invest in education and training programs.

As the stocks of both material and social capital are depleted, Ikerd argues, the economy as a whole degenerates.

The result is the steady elimination of all boundaries, a motion toward sameness and uniformity. Ikerd observes that globalization works toward dissolving all political and cultural boundaries, trending toward the creation of one world state and one global culture. It has the same effect on farming: “Tremendous gains in productivity and economic efficiency have been achieved by removing boundaries in agriculture to facilitate industrial production methods.” For example, industrial farmers eagerly remove fences in order to introduce larger machines and to grow monocrops. The turn to animal factories is part of the same process. In short, “[r]ural landscapes have tended toward inert uniformity, without form, pattern, hierarchy, or differentiation.”

From Ikerd’s perspective, the only way to counter resource entropy is to return agriculture to a reliance on the sun, not on fossil fuels and other extracted minerals. The only way to counter social entropy is to use culture and law to protect families, neighborhoods, and communities from intrusion by the one-sided incentives of globalizing capitalism.²⁷ And in fact, these might be called the central agrarian projects.

Troubles and Dilemmas

Still, the new agrarianism is not without its problems. To begin with, the current revival has its weird elements. Most of them cluster around the concept of “biodynamic” farming. This approach to agriculture counts Rudolf Steiner as its architect. Best known to Americans as the creator of Waldorf schools, Steiner (1861–1925) was an Austrian polymath; his collected works number 350 volumes. He called his overall

approach to life Anthroposophy. It stressed the unity of the spiritual and the sensory, the nature of the human being as body-soul-spirit, and his beliefs in reincarnation and the reality of the spirit world.

Near the end of his life, Steiner gave eight lectures to farmers near Breslau. They were published in 1924 as *Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture*. He maintained that a “farm is healthy only as much as it becomes an organism in itself—an individualized, diverse ecosystem guided by the farmer, standing in living interaction with the larger ecological, social, economic, and spiritual realities of which it is part.”²⁸ Biodynamics can be distinguished from typical organic farming by practices designed “to achieve balance between the physical and higher non-physical realms; to acknowledge the influence of cosmic and terrestrial forces; and to enrich the farm, its products, and its inhabitants with life energy.”²⁹ Central to biodynamic farming are nine “preparations” designed by Steiner to spur on composting or to be sprayed directly onto the soil or growing plants. For example, BD500 is made from cow manure fermented in a cow horn that has been buried in the soil during the autumn and winter. Other preparations employ yarrow and chamomile blossoms, stinging nettle, oak bark, and dandelions, all designed to enhance the “etheric” life forces on the farm. Biodynamic farmers also commonly plant, tend, and harvest their crops according to the sidereal lunar calendar.³⁰

Going this far, biodynamic farming at worst does no harm. At best, these preparations do probably improve composting and overall soil health, and the whole approach encourages close attention by the farmer to the vitality of his farm. All the same, some biodynamic farmers have moved into simply magical practices. “Dowsing” or “water witching” to locate

water sources sometimes appears on the biodynamic agenda. “Radionic” devices are also popular in the movement. They use a cup with knobs and dials, to which is added a sample of someone’s blood, saliva, or urine. In addition, a number of biodynamic farms employ the “Cosmic Pipe.” It is said to “broadcast” through the soil the two “etheric forces” identified by Steiner: a downward flow focused on moisture and fertility; and an upward flow associated with dryness and ripening. These six-to-eight foot tall cosmic conduits are constructed from PVC pipes and internally feature coils, reagent wells, and (of course) special crystals that concentrate the energy stream.³¹ Some biodynamic farmers do worry that under these influences, “[w]e appear either pompous or kooky.”³²

A more serious problem is that the new agrarians’ admirable humanism and their embrace of a well-settled landscape are occasionally qualified by a yearning for population control. In a recent essay, for example, Gene Logsdon favorably quotes a woman objecting to a new housing development: “Why can’t there be places where people by mutual consent are willing to limit family size and spending to stop growth? If this is a free country, why can’t we foster a few no-growth communities?” Later in the piece, Logsdon personally complains that “[n]o discussion has taken place of slowing down population growth.”³³

A related problem is the argument that “[r]ealistically, few American families can return to the land as the primary center of the family economy.” This assertion, articulated here by Eric Freyfogle, also contends that the new agrarianism no longer “calls for widespread, equitable division of land.” Few new agrarians, Freyfogle says, urge land reforms that would divide large farms into small family homesteads or seek a new homestead act to encourage family settlement on public lands. He

maintains that new agrarians “recognize that good farming requires highly specialized talents and is hardly an activity that the uninitiated can take up full-time with any prospect of success.”³⁴

In fact, some prominent agrarians do argue for a resettlement of the rural landscape (while admittedly often being short on specifics). Brian Donohue insists that “the task before agrarians is to make more agrarians.” He even offers a vision of redistributed land: “Wouldn’t it be nice if all of that eerily unsettled rural countryside were instead dense with diversified one-hundred-acre farmsteads, with their grain and hay rotations, livestock, and pastures embedded in a landscape of protected forest, wetland, and prairie?”³⁵ Wendell Berry agrees that “we need a farm population large, alert, and skilled enough, not just to make the land produce, but to take the best possible care of it as well.”³⁶ Elsewhere, he adds that the longevity, coherence, and stability of human occupation “require that the land should be divided among many owners and users.”³⁷

I have myself (somewhat seriously) proposed a scheme of my own, which would divert existing federal crops subsidies for agribusinesses of \$20 billion per annum into a fund supporting over one million new family farms. Recipients of settlement grants and loan guarantees would agree to maintain a family garden, practice simple animal husbandry, and open their farms to visiting school children. I conclude, “under my fantasy, we taxpayers would at least get what we thought we were paying for all along: a well-settled countryside of happy families and rosy-cheeked children.”³⁸

Creating a “Commons”?

The still larger problem here concerns land tenure. Donahue actually agrees with Freyfogle that a “golden age” of yeo-

man farming never existed in America. The former argues that American agriculture in the nineteenth century was “driven mainly by rapid extraction of natural capital [e.g., soil fertility] to supply distant markets.” This was as true of the “Free Soil” Midwest as it was of the cotton-exporting South. He quotes Henry David Thoreau’s mid-nineteenth-century denunciation of American farming: “by avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit . . . of regarding the soil as property . . . the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer lives the meanest of lives.”³⁹

This problem is an old one and has frequently vexed agrarian dreamers. Simply put, a free market in agricultural land shows the same tendency of all free markets toward consolidation. Over time, small family farms tend to disappear into larger holdings through death, inheritance issues, speculation, financial stress, property taxes, and a host of other pressures. Over a half century ago, Eastern European agrarians tackled the same question. In order to insure that “the land belong to those who till it,” they concluded that the “value of land should not be determined by its market price.” Instead, human labor should set “the standard of value.”⁴⁰ They implemented laws limiting farm size and land consolidation, an experiment quashed by forced communization after World War II.

Some of America’s new agrarians want to try again. Donahue openly breaks with the Jeffersonian tradition, arguing that a “widely dispersed private ownership of land by independent yeoman farmers” cannot be sustained. Indeed, he concludes that a “stable agrarian countryside cannot be founded solely on private farmers competing against one another to sell their produce for the lowest price.”⁴¹

His favored solution is the creation of local and regional Land Trusts that would

buy up the development rights to agricultural land. Farming families would still own “farming rights” to their land but would be prohibited from turning it to other uses. Corporations would also be prohibited from owning farmland. Forest lands would be owned outright by the trusts, forming a Commons. He recommends imposition of a 1 to 2 percent tax on all real estate transactions to create these community trusts. Bonds to purchase development rights quickly could then be issued, guaranteed against the special tax.⁴² Susan Witt of the E. F. Schumacher Society proposes an alternative where nonprofit community land trusts would hold full title to crop land, which would then be returned to young farmers on ninety-nine-year leases. The latter would stipulate that the land must be farmed using organic procedures and that the farmer could pass the lease on to his heirs.⁴³ These schemes feed into a larger vision of a post-suburban American landscape, with “each township with its village of one or two thousand people concentrated onto a square mile or so, supporting the surrounding farms.” Such villages scattered about the Heartland would “have an agrarian sensibility, agrarian values, and above all, agrarian engagement.”⁴⁴

The dilemma is that the achievement of such a vision would require a very different mentality among Americans, a shift from the Jeffersonian dream (however problematic in practice) of freehold land to a more communitarian understanding of property. Donahue grasps the challenge here, explaining that “I am not demanding that corporate middle-managers surrender their backyards, shoulder their grub-hoes, and march to the common fields for reeducation.” Still, his vision of “towns in which private and common property rights flourish side by side” confronts formidable cultural barriers in America.⁴⁵

This may be the most problematic issue facing the new agrarians.

Old Dreams and New Prospects

Despite these problems, the American countryside is now in the early stages of ferment. Old dreams and old ways, mixed with new tools, techniques, and opportunities, have given fresh life to the agrarian spirit. A way of life preserved through the twentieth century by sectarian religious groups such as the Old Order Amish has found new energy and new recruits in the opening years of the third Millennium. The prospects for building a well-settled landscape of productive homes rich with the laughter of children seem more promising than has been the case for decades.

1. “Our Cover Page,” *Prairie Farmer* 113 (January 11, 1941), 3.
2. “Machinery Will Make Your Farm a Land of Freedom,” *Prairie Farmer* 113 (January 11, 1941), inside front cover. Caps in original.
3. Cherry Brieser Stout, “Get Ready for a Bin Buster,” *Prairie Farmer* 179 (September 2007), cover, 6.
4. Eric T. Freyfogle, ed., *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2001), xiii–xiv.
5. Wendell Berry, “The Whole Horse,” in Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism*, 64.
6. Brian Donahue, “The Resettling of America,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Louisville, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 49.
7. Lynn Miller, “Inside the Circle,” *Small Farmer’s Journal* 31 (Summer 2007), 4.
8. Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 96–100.
9. Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism*, xxxvii.
10. Benjamin E. Northrud and Benjamin J. Brukvoort Lipscomb, “Country and City,” in

- Wirzba, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 200.
11. Gene Logsdon, "What Comes Around," in Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism*, 82.
 12. Gene Logsdon, *Living at Nature's Pace: Farming and the American Dream* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2000), 209–14.
 13. Gene Logsdon, "All Flesh is Grass: A Hopeful Look at the Future of Agrarianism," in Wirzba, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 155.
 14. John Ikerd, "Reclaiming Rural America from Corporate America," a lecture for the Clean Water Network, Washington, D.C., February 25, 2007; at web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/papers/wash%20DC%20Reclaim.htm.
 15. Noted in Logsdon, "All Flesh Is Grass," 166.
 16. Berry, *The Way of Ignorance*, 93–96.
 17. Miller, "Inside the Circle," 5.
 18. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
 19. "Farmers Market Facts," at: www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/facts.htm; and www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/FMstudystats.htm.
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