

# An Alternative Conservative

*Jeremy Beer*

**The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry**, edited and introduced by Norman Wirzba, *Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002. 352 pp.*

THE PUBLICATION OF *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Berry's *Unsettling of America*, a cultural defense of small-scale farming that is justly regarded as an agrarian and conservationist classic. Since 1977, Berry has been a prolific novelist, poet, and essayist—as well as a full-time farmer—and he has won a surprisingly broad following.

The extent of Berry's mainstream acceptance can be ascribed to his willingness to criticize big business, environmental depredation, and (especially earlier in his career) organized religion. But in fact, Berry's is a voice profoundly at variance with prevailing prejudices. If he is a critic of globalization and an economy dominated by multinational corporations, he is also a withering critic of big government and distant bureaucracy. If he is an environmentalist, he is also a humanist—one who argues eloquently against artificial contraception. If he is a

critic of institutional Christianity, it is precisely because the Christianity he has most intimately known is heretical in its stark separation of body and soul. In short, Berry is much more subversive, and much more conservative, than some of his public seems to realize.

The foundation of Berry's critique is his unyieldingly anti-individualist and anti-liberationist conception of freedom. He mocks the therapeutic view that each of us is called to reach his "full potential as an individual." His social and political philosophy rests on an explicit rejection of the modern idea—and ideal—that freedom consists in maximum personal liberation from external constraints, including the constraints of community, tradition, and nature. That "one has the right to be freed from any objectionable condition by any means" is to Berry a dangerous doctrine. Individual autonomy, the goal to which it points, is impossible: "there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence." Far from being autonomous, the self is a social creation. "[W]e are *not* the authors of ourselves.... Each of us has had many authors, and each of us is engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship."

But as Berry realizes, the doctrine of the autonomous self is in the ascendant, and not only among "certain liberationist intellectuals" and other elites. Americans

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by and large, Berry believes, construe freedom as a "license to pursue any legal self-interest at large and at will...." This conception of freedom is instilled and reinforced by the schools, the entertainment industry, and the spokesmen for our corporate economy, all of which instruct Americans "to free themselves of all restrictions, restraints, and scruples."

As Berry is at pains to show, our attempts to liberate ourselves from the particularities of place and tradition have not had the expected effect of increasing the sum total of our happiness. Personal liberation, for example, lies at the root of the modern "identity crisis." That such a crisis exists should not surprise us, for the self is inextricably tied to its participation in self-transcending relationships and institutions like "marriage, family, household, friendship, neighborhood, community," relationships and institutions notably in decline. That these institutions are the mediators of genuine freedom is demonstrated by the fact that their disintegration has led to a decline in the number of meaningful choices available to individuals. Berry relentlessly and imaginatively makes the case that, though we have more than ever the power to choose our own paths, we are also more than ever the subjects of distant bureaucracies and anonymous corporations. The consumer choices available to us are trivial compared to the more robust freedom found in the political power and economic security once conferred on us by our social bondedness.

The costs of our individualistic quest for autonomy have been profound, and Berry's list is not so different from those of other cultural conservatives:

divorce, venereal disease, murder, rape, debt, bankruptcy, pornography, teenage pregnancy, fatherless children, motherless children, child suicide, public child-care, retirement homes, nursing homes, toxic waste, soil loss, ...pollution, government secrecy, government lying, government

crime, civil violence, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, abortion as "birth control," the explosion of garbage, hopeless poverty, unemployment, unearned wealth.

And for Berry—again, like most cultural conservatives—a primary source of that disintegration has been the destruction of communal freedom through the centralization of state power. In order to protect and serve its constitutive communities, he claims, the state must account for and respect local differences—otherwise it will necessarily destroy those communities which are intrinsically local and inhere precisely in their particularities. Genuine community freedom would include the right to decide what will and will not be taught in a community's schools. Unfortunately, our public schools, precisely because they are not really under community control, often attempt "to improve the community by shocking or offending it." Consequently, it is "possible that the future of community life in this country may depend on private schools and home schooling."

Unlike most cultural conservatives, however, Berry faces squarely the contradiction between community freedom and the modern economic practices and technological imperatives that undermine that freedom. "[C]ommunity integrity, and the decentralization of power and economy that it implies, is antithetical to the ambitions of the corporations." Echoing earlier agrarian thinkers, Berry insists that "[p]olitical democracy rest[s] upon the indispensable foundation of economic democracy." As such, "The destruction of the community begins when its economy is made—not *dependent* (for no community has ever been entirely independent)—but *subject* to a larger external economy." Economic subjection endangers community integrity because a community must be "so far as possible the cause of its own changes; it must change in response to its own changing needs

and local circumstances, not in response to motives, powers, or fashions coming from elsewhere."

Berry does not hesitate to call himself a Luddite, in "the true and appropriate sense." "I am not 'against technology' so much as I am for community," he writes. "When the choice is between the health of a community and technological innovation, I choose the health of the community. I would unhesitatingly destroy a machine before I would allow the machine to destroy my community."

Another aspect of Berry's oeuvre that makes him unique among the many thinkers who have attempted to come to grips with contemporary social disintegration is that, to Aristotle's dictum that man is inherently a political animal, Berry adds the observation that he is also a fundamentally ecological one. That is, just as man—and more precisely, the good of man—cannot be adequately understood in isolation from political community, neither can he be adequately understood apart from his relations with the nonhuman natural world. Political and social theorists, therefore, cannot afford to ignore the question of ecology, or man's interaction with his natural environment. Achieving our freedom depends on our ecological no less than our political arrangements. "[M]an's only real freedom is to know and faithfully occupy his place...in the order of creation."

There is not space here to discuss in detail the ways in which Berry ties our attitudes toward creation (a word much preferred by Berry to "that idiotic term, 'the environment'") to our treatment of each other. It would not be fair simply to characterize Berry as a romantic or a follower of Rousseau. But it is true that, for Berry, the advent of civilization appears to be a deeply ambiguous development. He spends little time singing the praises of the rule of law, constitutional government, philosophy, art, music, and certainly not leisure: aristocracy holds no

attraction for him.

If Berry's view of nature owes something to Rousseau, it owes at least as much to his belief in the Incarnation and his understanding of its implications. "I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world," he writes. "I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God." The world in which we live, then, is not just so much raw material, which humans are at liberty to use and transform as they will. Cautious piety, not brazen confidence, is the proper posture of man. Nature is not divine, but the divine suffuses nature:

[W]e must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.

Religion nonetheless presents something of a problem for Berry's thought. Although he supports communal authority, he has been severely critical of the type of religion—fundamentalist Protestantism—that wields that authority in his neck of the woods (Port Royal, Kentucky). Berry's nonconformist religious views, one can suspect, would undermine the integrity of his community if adopted by a sufficient number of his neighbors. Perhaps it is in part because of this realization that Berry has gradually muted his criticism of dogma and other elements of traditional Christianity, to the point where it is not now unusual for him to defend religion, and Christianity specifically, against its environmentalist and multiculturalist critics.

If the essence of liberalism lies in its

advocacy of the liberation of the individual from all constraints, then Berry must be regarded as a consistent and original anti-liberal thinker. In fact, his is one of the most systematically anti-liberal bodies of writing to have appeared in the last half of the twentieth century. Berry is attempting to reawaken in his countrymen consciousness of an alternative tradition to their predominant devotion to innovation, material and economic growth, and liberationist dreams.

Berry is emphatic that such a tradition does exist in American history. This "subordinate" tradition of settlement, care, humility, and respect for limits has typically found expression in the idea that the widespread ownership of property and small-scale production should be encouraged. The small producer, craftsman, artisan, and farmer are "bound to [the land] by economic interest, by the investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition." Such binding relations preserve the conditions of the good life. Hence, Berry argues, the program of genuine conservatives must

be "composed of many small efforts to preserve or establish local economies."

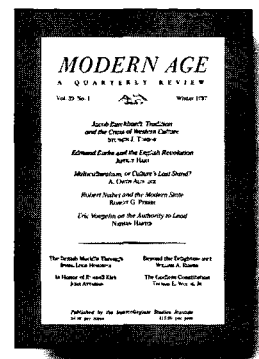
We must not allow our view of the practicality of this goal to obscure Berry's analysis that the multinational corporation rather than the totalitarian state stands today as the most powerful agent of social upheaval. If Berry is correct, then perhaps we must construct an alternative account of cultural conservatism, one that positions Adam Smith rather than Karl Marx as modernity's most important revolutionary theorist. This was Christopher Lasch's argument in *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), an argument that in the post-Cold War era resonates more deeply with each passing year. For Lasch, it was the belief in progress that defined the modern era, and it was the political economy of Adam Smith, with its promise that ever-increasing prosperity was now within humanity's grasp, that provided that belief with a truly plausible basis.

Lasch, like Berry, thought that our prospects for continued prosperity were dim because the ecological toll could not be sustained indefinitely. Whether or not

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that view is correct, surely we are now moving into an era when the twin ideologies of economic progress and liberationist freedom must be viewed as skeptically as we have learned to view the ideology of political progress. It is to such a chastened cultural conservatism that Wendell Berry calls us.

### ***A Neglected Political Thinker***

GRAHAM MCALEER

#### **The Life and Thought of Aurel Kolnai,**

by Francis Dunlop, *Aldershot:*

*Ashgate, 2002. 351pp.*

THERE ARE CONSERVATIVES, and then there are conservatives. To separate the truly profound ones from the mere dabblers, we might employ what I call the Thorne Standard. Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1867) describes the genuine article, the Thornes of Ullathorne, a nineteenth-century gentry family who are unable to reconcile themselves to the Norman conquest of 1066. By even such an exacting measure, Aurel Thomas Kolnai (1900-1973) passes with flying colors. Indeed, here is a twentieth-century thinker who understands America as a nation suffering still from the original sin of rebellion against King George III!

It can be no surprise that a thinker who holds such views is not very well known. He is not nearly as famous as many of the people he met and engaged, at length, in philosophical conversation: Husserl, Levinas, Maritain, Popper, Freud, and von Mises, to name a few. Nevertheless, and against all odds, there is evidence of new

interest in Kolnai, three decades after his death. Collections of his essays have been appearing in recent years, and Open Court is shortly to publish in book form a long Kolnai essay, which had impressed Husserl, on the phenomenology of disgust. The publication of Francis Dunlop's *The Life and Thought of Aurel Kolnai* will also do much to advance Kolnai's growing reputation.

Dunlop's real contribution here lies in his effort to discuss Kolnai's books and articles along with the private letters he was writing simultaneously. This might not seem much of an accomplishment, but Kolnai wrote in five languages (including his native Hungarian); much of his work appears in obscure places or remained unpublished at his death; and, of course, Dunlop had to hunt down all the various correspondence.

Some of these letters are of enormous theoretical value and deserve to be published in an edited format. For example, one missive sent to a number of Spanish intellectuals, Kolnai's "Carta-Memoria," is a blueprint for a constitution and is as fascinating as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's suggestions for a mixed regime in *Rebuilding Russia* (1991). I would have liked to see this letter printed in full in an appendix. Readers who are introduced to Kolnai's profound reservations about democracy immediately want to know what his alternative might be, and the "Carta-Memoria" is quite an alternative. He proposes a mixed regime that includes the Crown, a "National Institute" dependent on the Crown and charged with the task of elevating public taste, and an "active citizenry," about one sixth of the population, elected for life, who vote for candidates to parliament.

Dunlop has two thoughtful pages on this "compenetration" constitution of Kolnai's. And here is another great value to this biography. The few scholars who work on Kolnai are divided in their judgments of how sympathetic he was to de-

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