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THE AGRARIAN STANDARD

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The Unsettling of America was published twenty-five years ago; it is still in print and is still being read. As its author, I am tempted to be glad of this, and yet, if I believe what I said in that book, and I still do, then I should be anything but glad. The book would have had a far happier fate if it could have been disproved or made obsolete years ago.

It remains true because the conditions it describes and opposes, the abuses of farmland and farming people, have persisted and become worse over the last twenty-five years. In 2002 we have less than half the number of farmers in the United States that we had in 1977. Our farm communities are far worse off now than they were then. Our soil erosion rates continue to be unsustainably high. We continue to pollute our soils and streams with agricultural poisons. We continue to lose farmland to urban development of the most wasteful sort. The large agribusiness corporations that were mainly national in 1977 are now global, and are replacing the world's agricultural diversity, which was useful primarily to farmers and local consumers, with bioengineered and patented monocultures that are merely profitable to corporations. The purpose of this new global economy, as Vandana Shiva has rightly said, is to replace "food democracy" with a worldwide "food dictatorship."¹

To be an agrarian writer in such a time is an odd experience. One keeps writing essays and speeches that one would prefer not to write, that one wishes would prove unnecessary, that one hopes nobody will have

any need for in twenty-five years. My life as an agrarian writer has certainly involved me in such confusions, but I have never doubted for a minute the importance of the hope I have tried to serve: the hope that we might become a healthy people in a healthy land.

We agrarians are involved in a hard, long, momentous contest, in which we are so far, and by a considerable margin, the losers. What we have undertaken to defend is the complex accomplishment of knowledge, cultural memory, skill, self-mastery, good sense, and fundamental decency—the high and indispensable art—for which we probably can find no better name than “good farming.” I mean farming as defined by agrarianism as opposed to farming as defined by industrialism: farming as the proper use and care of an immeasurable gift.

I believe that this contest between industrialism and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world.

The way of industrialism is the way of the machine. To the industrial mind, a machine is not merely an instrument for doing work or amusing ourselves or making war; it is an explanation of the world and of life. The machine's entirely comprehensible articulation of parts defines the acceptable meanings of our experience, and it prescribes the kinds of meanings the industrial scientists and scholars expect to discover. These meanings have to do with nomenclature, classification, and rather short lineages of causation. Because industrialism cannot understand living things except as machines, and can grant them no value that is not utilitarian, it conceives of farming and forestry as forms of mining; it cannot use the land without abusing it.

Industrialism prescribes an economy that is placeless and displacing. It does not distinguish one place from another. It applies its methods and technologies indiscriminately in the American East and the American West, in the United States and in India. It thus continues the economy of colonialism. The shift of colonial power from European monarchy to global corporation is perhaps the dominant theme of modern history. All

along—from the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the New World, to the domestic colonialism of American industries, to the colonization of the entire rural world by global corporations—it has been the same story of the gathering of an exploitive economic power into the hands of a few people who are alien to the places and the people they exploit. Such an economy is bound to destroy locally adapted agrarian economies everywhere it goes, simply because it is too ignorant not to do so. And it has succeeded precisely to the extent that it has been able to inculcate the same ignorance in workers and consumers. A part of the function of industrial education is to preserve and protect this ignorance.

To the corporate and political and academic servants of global industrialism, the small family farm and the small farming community are not known, not imaginable, and therefore unthinkable, except as damaging stereotypes. The people of “the cutting edge” in science, business, education, and politics have no patience with the local love, local loyalty, and local knowledge that make people truly native to their places and therefore good caretakers of their places. This is why one of the primary principles of industrialism has always been to get the worker away from home. From the beginning it has been destructive of home employment and home economies. The office or the factory or the institution is the place for work. The economic function of the household has been increasingly the consumption of purchased goods. Under industrialism, the farm too has become increasingly consumptive, and farms fail as the costs of consumption overpower the income from production.

The idea of people working at home, as family members, as neighbors, as natives and citizens of their places, is as repugnant to the industrial mind as the idea of self-employment. The industrial mind is an organizational mind, and I think this mind is deeply disturbed and threatened by the existence of people who have no boss. This may be why people with such minds, as they approach the top of the political hierarchy, so readily sell themselves to “special interests.” They cannot bear to be unbossed. They cannot stand the lonely work of making up their own minds.

The industrial contempt for anything small, rural, or natural translates into contempt for uncentralized economic systems, any sort of local

self-sufficiency in food or other necessities. The industrial "solution" for such systems is to increase the scale of work and trade. It is to bring Big Ideas, Big Money, and Big Technology into small rural communities, economies, and ecosystems—the brought-in industry and the experts being invariably alien to and contemptuous of the places to which they are brought in. There is never any question of propriety, of adapting the thought or the purpose or the technology to the place.

The result is that problems correctable on a small scale are replaced by large-scale problems for which there are no large-scale corrections. Meanwhile, the large-scale enterprise has reduced or destroyed the possibility of small-scale corrections. This exactly describes our present agriculture. Forcing all agricultural localities to conform to economic conditions imposed from afar by a few large corporations has caused problems of the largest possible scale, such as soil loss, genetic impoverishment, and groundwater pollution, which are correctable only by an agriculture of locally adapted, solar-powered, diversified small farms—a correction that, after a half century of industrial agriculture, will be difficult to achieve.

The industrial economy thus is inherently violent. It impoverishes one place in order to be extravagant in another, true to its colonialist ambition. A part of the "externalized" cost of this is war after war.

Industrialism begins with technological invention. But agrarianism begins with givens: land, plants, animals, weather, hunger, and the birthright knowledge of agriculture. Industrialists are always ready to ignore, sell, or destroy the past in order to gain the entirely unprecedented wealth, comfort, and happiness supposedly to be found in the future. Agrarian farmers know that their very identity depends on their willingness to receive gratefully, use responsibly, and hand down intact an inheritance, both natural and cultural, from the past. Agrarians understand themselves as the users and caretakers of some things they did not make, and of some things that they cannot make.

I said a while ago that to agrarianism farming is the proper use and care of an immeasurable gift. The shortest way to understand this, I suppose, is the religious way. Among the commonplaces of the Bible, for

example, are the admonitions that the world was made and approved by God, that it belongs to Him, and that its good things come to us from Him as gifts. Beyond those ideas is the idea that the whole Creation exists only by participating in the life of God, sharing in His being, breathing His breath. "The world," Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "is charged with the grandeur of God."² Such thoughts seem strange to us now, and what has estranged us from them is our economy. The industrial economy could not have been derived from such thoughts any more than it could have been derived from the Golden Rule.

If we believed that the existence of the world is rooted in mystery and in sanctity, then we would have a different economy. It would still be an economy of use, necessarily, but it would be an economy also of return. The economy would have to accommodate the need to be worthy of the gifts we receive and use, and this would involve a return of propitiation, praise, gratitude, responsibility, good use, good care, and a proper regard for the unborn. What is most conspicuously absent from the industrial economy and industrial culture is this idea of return. Industrial humans relate themselves to the world and its creatures by fairly direct acts of violence. Mostly we take without asking, use without respect or gratitude, and give nothing in return. Our economy's most voluminous product is waste—valuable materials irrecoverably misplaced, or randomly discharged as poisons.

To perceive the world and our life in it as gifts originating in sanctity is to see our human economy as a continuing moral crisis. Our life of need and work forces us inescapably to use in time things belonging to eternity, and to assign finite values to things already recognized as infinitely valuable. This is a fearful predicament. It calls for prudence, humility, good work, propriety of scale. It calls for the complex responsibilities of caretaking and giving-back that we mean by "stewardship." To all of this the idea of the immeasurable value of the resource is central.

We can get to the same idea by a way a little more economic and practical, and this is by following through our literature the ancient theme of the small farmer or husbandman who leads an abundant life on a scrap of

land often described as cast-off or poor. This figure makes his first literary appearance, so far as I know, in Virgil's Fourth Georgic:

I saw a man,
An old Cilician, who occupied
An acre or two of land that no one wanted,
A patch not worth the ploughing, unrewarding
For flocks, unfit for vineyards; he however
By planting here and there among the scrub
Cabbages or white lilies and verbena
And flimsy poppies, fancied himself a king
In wealth, and coming home late in the evening
Loaded his board with unbought delicacies.³

Virgil's old squatter, I am sure, is a literary outcropping of an agrarian theme that has been carried from earliest times until now mostly in family or folk tradition, not in writing, though other such people can be found in books. Wherever found, they don't vary by much from Virgil's prototype. They don't have or require a lot of land, and the land they have is often marginal. They practice subsistence agriculture, which has been much derided by agricultural economists and other learned people of the industrial age, and they always associate frugality with abundance.

In my various travels, I have seen a number of small homesteads like that of Virgil's old farmer, situated on "land that no one wanted" and yet abundantly productive of food, pleasure, and other goods. And especially in my younger days, I was used to hearing farmers of a certain kind say, "They may run me out, but they won't starve me out" or "I may get shot, but I'm not going to starve." Even now, if they cared, I think agricultural economists could find small farmers who have prospered, not by "getting big," but by practicing the ancient rules of thrift and subsistence, by accepting the limits of their small farms, and by knowing well the value of having a little land.

How do we come at the value of a little land? We do so, following this strand of agrarian thought, by reference to the value of *no* land. Agrarians value land because somewhere back in the history of their con-

sciousness is the memory of being landless. This memory is implicit, in Virgil's poem, in the old farmer's happy acceptance of "an acre or two of land that no one wanted." If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life. If we remember this, we know that all economies begin to lie as soon as they assign a fixed value to land. People who have been landless know that the land is invaluable; it is worth everything. Pre-agricultural humans, of course, knew this too. And so, evidently, do the animals. It is a fearful thing to be without a "territory." Whatever the market may say, the worth of the land is what it always was: It is worth what food, clothing, shelter, and freedom are worth; it is worth what life is worth. This perception moved the settlers from the Old World into the New. Most of our American ancestors came here because they knew what it was to be landless; to be landless was to be threatened by want and also by enslavement. Coming here, they bore the ancestral memory of serfdom. Under feudalism, the few who owned the land owned also, by an inescapable political logic, the people who worked the land.

Thomas Jefferson, who knew all these things, obviously was thinking of them when he wrote in 1785 that "it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of a state. . . ."⁴ He was saying, two years before the adoption of our constitution, that a democratic state and democratic liberties depend upon democratic ownership of the land. He was already anticipating and fearing the division of our people into settlers, the people who wanted "a little portion of land" as a home, and, virtually opposite to those, the consolidators and exploiters of the land and the land's wealth, who would not be restrained by what Jefferson called "the natural affection of the human mind."⁵ He wrote as he did in 1785 because he feared exactly the political theory that we now have: the idea that government exists to guarantee the right of the most wealthy to own or control the land without limit.

In any consideration of agrarianism, this issue of limitation is critical. Agrarian farmers see, accept, and live within their limits. They understand and agree to the proposition that there is "this much and no more." Everything that happens on an agrarian farm is determined or condi-

tioned by the understanding that there is only so much land, so much water in the cistern, so much hay in the barn, so much corn in the crib, so much firewood in the shed, so much food in the cellar or freezer, so much strength in the back and arms—and no more. This is the understanding that induces thrift, family coherence, neighborliness, local economies. Within accepted limits, these virtues become necessities. The agrarian sense of abundance comes from the experienced possibility of frugality and renewal within limits.

This is exactly opposite to the industrial idea that abundance comes from the violation of limits by personal mobility, extractive machinery, long-distance transport, and scientific or technological breakthroughs. If we use up the good possibilities in this place, we will import goods from some other place, or we will go to some other place. If nature releases her wealth too slowly, we will take it by force. If we make the world too toxic for honeybees, some compound brain, Monsanto perhaps, will invent tiny robots that will fly about, pollinating flowers and making honey.

To be landless in an industrial society obviously is not at all times to be jobless and homeless. But the ability of the industrial economy to provide jobs and homes depends on prosperity, and on a very shaky kind of prosperity too. It depends on “growth” of the wrong things, such as roads and dumps and poisons—on what Edward Abbey called “the ideology of the cancer cell”—and on greed with purchasing power. In the absence of growth, greed, and affluence, the dependents of an industrial economy too easily suffer the consequences of having no land: joblessness, homelessness, and want. This is not a theory. We have seen it happen.

I don't think that being landed necessarily means owning land. It does mean being connected to a home landscape from which one may live by the interactions of a local economy and without the routine intervention of governments, corporations, or charities.

In our time it is useless and probably wrong to suppose that a great many urban people ought to go out into the countryside and become homesteaders or farmers. But it is not useless or wrong to suppose that urban people have agricultural responsibilities that they should try to meet. And in fact this is happening. The agrarian population among us is

growing, and by no means is it made up merely of some farmers and some country people. It includes urban gardeners, urban consumers who are buying food from local farmers, organizers of local food economies, consumers who have grown doubtful of the healthfulness, the trustworthiness, and the dependability of the corporate food system—people, in other words, who understand what it means to be landless.

Apologists for industrial agriculture rely on two arguments. In one of them, they say that the industrialization of agriculture, and its dominance by corporations, has been “inevitable.” It has come about and it continues by the agency of economic and technological determinism. There has been simply nothing that anybody could do about it.

The other argument is that industrial agriculture has come about by choice, inspired by compassion and generosity. Seeing the shadow of mass starvation looming over the world, the food conglomerates, the machinery companies, the chemical companies, the seed companies, and the other suppliers of “purchased inputs,” have done all that they have done in order to solve “the problem of hunger” and to “feed the world.”

We need to notice, first, that these two arguments, often used and perhaps believed by the same people, exactly contradict each other. Second, though supposedly it has been imposed upon the world by economic and technological forces beyond human control, industrial agriculture has been pretty consistently devastating to nature, to farmers, and to rural communities, at the same time that it has been highly profitable to the agribusiness corporations, which have submitted not quite reluctantly to its “inevitability.” And, third, tearful over human suffering as they always have been, the agribusiness corporations have maintained a religious faith in the profitability of their charity. They have instructed the world that it is better for people to buy food from the corporate global economy than to raise it for themselves. What is the proper solution to hunger? Not food from the local landscape, but industrial development. After decades of such innovative thought, hunger is still a worldwide calamity.

The primary question for the corporations, and so necessarily for us, is not how the world will be fed, but who will control the land, and

therefore the wealth, of the world. If the world's people accept the industrial premises that favor bigness, centralization, and (for a few people) high profitability, then the corporations will control all of the world's land and all of its wealth. If, on the contrary, the world's people might again see the advantages of local economies, in which people live, so far as they are able to do so, from their home landscapes, and work patiently toward that end, eliminating waste and the cruelties of landlessness and homelessness, then I think they might reasonably hope to solve "the problem of hunger," and several other problems as well.

But do the people of the world, allured by TV, supermarkets, and big cars, or by dreams thereof, *want* to live from their home landscapes? *Could* they do so, if they wanted to? Those are hard questions, not readily answerable by anybody. Throughout the industrial decades, people have become increasingly and more numerously ignorant of the issues of land use, of food, clothing, and shelter. What would they do, and what *could* they do, if they were forced by war or some other calamity to live from their home landscapes?

It is a fact, well attested but little noticed, that our extensive, mobile, highly centralized system of industrial agriculture is extremely vulnerable to acts of terrorism. It will be hard to protect an agriculture of genetically impoverished monocultures that is entirely dependent on cheap petroleum and long-distance transportation. We know too that the great corporations, which grow and act so far beyond the restraint of "the natural affections of the human mind," are vulnerable to the natural depravities of the human mind, such as greed, arrogance, and fraud.

The agricultural industrialists like to say that their agrarian opponents are merely sentimental defenders of ways of farming that are hopelessly old-fashioned, justly dying out. Or they say that their opponents are the victims, as Richard Lewontin put it, of "a false nostalgia for a way of life that never existed."⁶ But these are not criticisms. They are insults.

For agrarians, the correct response is to stand confidently on our fundamental premise, which is both democratic and ecological: The land is a gift of immeasurable value. If it is a gift, then it is a gift to all the living in all time. To withhold it from some is finally to destroy it for all. For a few powerful people to own or control it all, or decide its fate, is wrong.

From that premise we go directly to the question that begins the

agrarian agenda and is the discipline of all agrarian practice: What is the best way to use land? Agrarians know that this question necessarily has many answers, not just one. We are not asking what is the best way to farm everywhere in the world, or everywhere in the United States, or everywhere in Kentucky or Iowa. We are asking what is the best way to farm in each one of the world's numberless places, as defined by topography, soil type, climate, ecology, history, culture, and local need. And we know that the standard cannot be determined only by market demand or productivity or profitability or technological capability, or by any other single measure, however important it may be. The agrarian standard, inescapably, is local adaptation, which requires bringing local nature, local people, local economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was published in the twentieth-anniversary issue of *Orion* 21, no. 3 (summer 2002).

1. Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest* (South End Press, 2000), 117.
2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur."
3. Virgil, *The Georgics*, trans. L.P. Wilkinson (Penguin Books, 1982), 128.
4. Letter to Rev. James Madison, Oct. 28, 1785.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Richard Lewontin, "Genes in the Food!" *The New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2001, p. 84.