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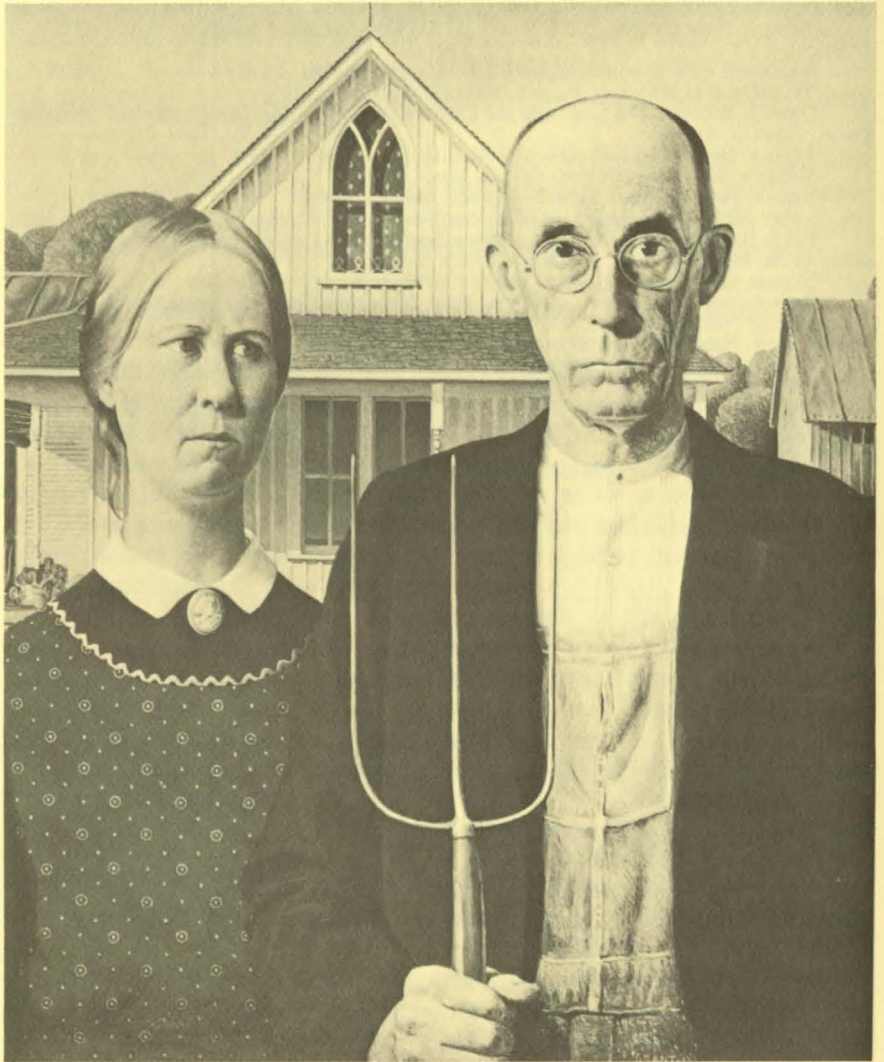
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THE CITY AND COUNTRY IN THE AMERICAN TRADITION

James W. Ceaser

Does the Constitution govern? It in no way detracts from the dignity or power of a written document like the Constitution to recognize, as our own Founders did, that the Constitution can only "govern" if the people's belief and habits support and sustain the kind of regime the Constitution was designed to establish. A government, in the Founders' terms, must be in accord with the "genius" of the people.

In this sense, it might be said that, as much as anything else, it is beliefs and habits which govern, and that the great object of American statesmanship must be to ensure that these are in harmony with the regime.

It is on this level — a level sometimes referred to as "political culture" — that Americans have traditionally experienced difficulties. While there has long been a consensus on the fundamental tenets of our form of government, there has been much disagreement and dispute about exactly which beliefs and habits support a regime of liberty.

Turn on the television today and you see a spate of commercials celebrating the tone and texture of American life, with the product — whether it be Pepsi, Coke, Chrysler or Chevrolet — somehow identified with the "pride" or "heart-beat" of America. These ads flash a collage of favorable "America" portraits, shifting rapidly from shots depicting the cultural heterogeneity of urban life played out before towering skyscrapers to country scenes displaying the wholesome virtue and simplicity of the farm and small town. The ads weave a harmonious whole between the city and the country. But are these two so easily blended in the world beyond the television screen, and what mix of the two "cultures" they represent supplies the best support for the regime?

From the time of the Founding, there has been an ongoing debate over the political culture that best supports the Constitution and promotes the aims of republican government. This debate is often presented — usually with too much neatness — as a series of restatements of an unchanging conflict or contradiction between two elements of the American tradition, variously labeled as "urban" and "rural," "liberal" and "republican," "federalist" and "anti-federalist." It is with a treatment of this conflict, accordingly, that an analysis of American political culture should properly begin, and there is no more vivid point of departure than a reconsideration of Grant Wood's painting "American Gothic." But an encounter with Wood's painting, as we shall see, points to the need to look beyond a static analysis of two distinct blocks. Not only has each undergone an important internal evolution, but any future political culture that can sustain the Constitution will have to draw on aspects of both.

* * * *

Wood's "American Gothic" is probably the most well known of all twentieth-century American paintings. The title of the painting tells us that Wood was not just an artist who was American, but an *American* artist, self-con-

sciously striving to express or reveal a primary truth about the American experience.²

On the surface, the painting depicts and seems to celebrate the real or true America — the simplicity and virtue of agrarian life. It recalls an older and original (a “gothic”) spirit that so many once considered to be the core of the American tradition. To look at Wood’s picture is to see a fusion of agrarianism and puritanism; it is almost to hear the echoes of William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech at the Democratic party convention of 1896:

Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.³

Wood’s painting contains all the elements and symbols of the American agrarian tradition. We see an elderly couple standing solemnly in front of a neat wooden farmhouse, which itself is reminiscent of the thousands of tiny churches that dot America’s rural landscape. The couple has made this farm its own by hard, honest work. Their farm is their property, their home is their castle. They have lived without luxury or indulgence. (The simple cameo on the woman’s collar calls attention to the absence of any other adornment in the picture.) While one can well imagine the couple having a nice little nest egg stashed away in the local bank, we can be certain that their money was always used with good sense and sobriety.

The image of agrarian life that Wood depicts leads us to think of the words of the “originator” of the American agrarian ideal, Thomas Jefferson. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson drew his own picture of the American country, creating the “ideology” of American agrarianism:

The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as do sores to the strength of the human body. . . Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.

Wood’s painting was completed in 1930, just a few years before the Democratic party (founded by Thomas Jefferson) made its fateful change under Franklin Roosevelt from “acreage to population,” *i.e.*, from the country to the city. This change was necessary, if only because of great demographic shifts that had been taking place in the nation. By 1930 — in fact by some time earlier — America had become more urban than rural. As a “picture” of America, therefore, Wood’s painting had already been passed by. Indeed, Wood’s subjects seem almost to be aware of this as they stare with hostility at something that threatens to disturb and overwhelm their way of life. Could that something be the “city” with its vision of a different kind of America?

What is not included in the painting — but what our farmer couple may be seeing — is therefore as revealing about America as what is in it. Above all, we are struck by the absence of any technology or machinery — expressions of the nonrural or “urban” side of the American tradition. We see nothing directly of the “modernist” element of America, the side that has conquered nature not by the pitchfork and the family farm, but by the application of technology and complex human organization, fueled by the movement of money (capital). In short, we have nothing of Walt Whitman’s proud “Locomotive in Winter”:

Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow,
the winter-day declining . . .
Thy black cylindrical body, golden brass and silvery steel . . .
Fierce-throated beauty! . . .
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding . . .

Nor do we see any sign of the pluralism of American life — its mixture of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups (and including as well those who do not believe at all). Again, to a large extent, this pluralism has been a product of the non-rural side of the American experience. Cities, if they have not always been friendly to newcomers and immigrants, have absorbed millions of people into American life, not usually for reasons of generosity but out of need for the manpower to work the factories. Nothing in Wood’s gothic America includes the open, rough-and-tumble land of opportunity that is celebrated on America’s Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Wood’s painting, one suspects, is far more than a piece of nostalgia. Barely hidden beneath its surface celebration of agrarian simplicity and virtue, we glimpse a menacing undertone of gothic hostility to the modern, pluralistic and sometimes secular character of American urban society. Does not our sober gentlemen farmer clutch his pitchfork — the devil’s tool — a bit too eagerly? We are perhaps reminded of the closed character of Sinclair Lewis’s *Mainstreet*, a town whose spirit is clearly more country than city. In fact, if one considers a dominant characteristic of America to be its openness to the new and modern, then the very title of Wood’s painting, “American Gothic,” bespeaks a fusion of two spirits not in complete harmony: what is American cannot be entirely gothic, and what is gothic cannot be entirely American. The painting, as many have observed, is not lacking in ambiguity.

* * *

The United States has presented (at least) two faces to the world, two faces so different that those who see one have often been oblivious to the other. On the one hand, there is the face of simple virtue — let us call it (temporarily) the agrarian face. According to this image, man lives in harmony with nature, which he has “tamed” but not “conquered.” Society is composed of orderly communities, built up for the most part from a base of

largely self-sufficient family farms. The communities are of human size and proportion, avoiding within them extremes of wealth and poverty.

The other face of America is characterized by a dynamic and sometimes brutal assault on nature — Whitman's "fierce-throated beauty." This side of the American spirit relies on the freeing of the individual's restless energies and passions, particularly the energies and passions of the bold and the adventuresome. Let us call this face (again temporarily) urbanism. In this image we see the possibility of constant movement and transformation, led by individuals who may change communities, indeed reject community altogether. The human extremes of virtue and corruption, of wealth and misery, seem more evident here than in the narrower circle of an agrarian order. This is the face of the "modern" America of dynamic transformative capitalism.⁵

These two faces can be called the country and the city, or the agrarian and urban. But geography is a secondary, not a primary characteristic. The primary characteristic is a principle of societal integration that does not always fit perfectly with the concrete physical manifestation of country and city. Not all cities are truly "urban," and not all rural communities truly "agrarian." Moreover, by abstracting from the concrete physical reality, one can account for the third "face" of America: The frontier or the West. Although the West was often allied politically with the agrarian component of the American experience, in fact its spirit has been closer to the city than the country.

The analytic concept on which this discussion is based is the idea of "integration." By this I mean nothing more than the sum total of principles, beliefs and institutional mechanisms that hold a society together and enable it to "work" — that is, the elements that constitute the glue of any society and that keep it from falling apart or disintegrating. The two principles of country and city have served as the two main building blocks of American political development, excluding slavery. Between these two principles there has been a history of conflict, dialogue, and synthesis.

* * * *

Perhaps the most widely cited work at the time of America's founding was Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*.⁶ This complex work explores, among other things, different principles of integration. Americans of the time who relied on Montesquieu drew two different lessons about the principle of integration that was appropriate for the United States: the model of the small republic and the model of the large commercial republic. Each of these principles was modified as a model for American society in light of certain aspects of the American experience, but the underlying differences between the two principles of integration clearly helped shape part of the debate over the Constitution between the anti-federalists and the federalists.

The picture Montesquieu drew of the small republic was taken from the classical city state. For Montesquieu the most important factor that ac-

counts for the health or well-being of a republic is not its political institutions, but the character or mores of the people. Without certain mores, a republic could not exist or endure. In particular, a people had to possess the quality of "virtue," meaning that they had to prefer the city's interest to their own interest and be willing to sacrifice their particular interest to the greater well-being of the city. The opposite of virtue is corruption, meaning a preference for one's own particular interest over and above that of the city's. In Rousseau's terminology, the citizens had to prefer *la volonté gènèrale* to *la volonté particulière*.

The logic of this position is simple enough. Democracy means rule by the people (the majority). But if the people are corrupt, democracy is nothing more than a majority using the instrument of law to take unjustly what it wants. It is rule by faction. Such a system might be preferable to oligarchy (a minority taking what it wants) or tyranny (a single person taking what he wants), but it can hardly be considered a desirable or legitimate system.

To foster and maintain virtue in a republic, as Montesquieu shows, is no easy task. In fact, it requires rather special conditions and very tight social controls; the city must be a "school" to form and mold a certain kind of human being. This demands, first, that the regime be small, *i.e.*, not the size of a modern nation-state, but the size of a city-state. Only where the city is of manageable size can the citizens come to love their fellow citizens as brothers and subordinate their own interest to the whole. Second, the city must be relatively homogeneous; it cannot survive different religious groups or extremes of wealth and poverty, for these differences create conflicts, establish primary groups other than the city, and lead to a loss of virtue. Third, the city must be careful not to allow the introduction of unlimited commerce, for commerce stimulates the individual's desire for personal luxury and for his own well-being rather than the city's. Finally, the city cannot permit a free circulation of ideas, for certain ideas turn citizens away from the practice of their duties and promote corruption.

All of these conditions and social controls make for what today would be considered a "closed" society. Yet this kind of society was precisely the one that in the classical view promoted liberty, because it created the kind of people that could defend and rule itself, thus escaping the scourge of tyranny. From a liberal perspective, however, this kind of liberty or freedom for the city as a whole entails a suppression of the liberty or freedom of the individual. It is a classical, not a modern, conception of liberty.

The other principle of integration in Montesquieu that interested the colonists was based on the modern commercial society. This principle derived from Locke and later received further development by Adam Smith. According to the logic of this approach, it was neither possible nor desirable for the individual in modern society to possess the kind of virtue characteristic of the small republic. Rather, society should recognize the individual's sense of his own rights, his own property, and his own interests. In such a society, with individuals pursuing their own interests, there would naturally be an accumulation of individual wealth and a circulation of ideas. Since less is demanded of the citizens by the state, society could be larger and more

heterogeneous. Citizens need not be “brothers.” Moreover, a larger state promotes wealth and power, attributes needed to assure an adequate national defense.

One may well ask, however, how a society like this, composed (from the classical republican perspective) of “corrupt” individuals, can keep from disintegrating or avoid being ruled by an authoritarian form of government strong enough to keep the various and hostile interests of society in check. The answer Montesquieu gave was that a society comprised of self-interested individuals in a commercial setting was not nearly as fragile as many supposed. There was a natural order that permitted the economy to prosper, and the recognition of growing prosperity by the citizenry would serve as a powerful bond of integration. Moreover, with the proper laws and institutions, this society could avoid an authoritarian form of government. Interest could be balanced against interest in a way that would prevent the oppression of one part of society by another, and political institutions under a representative system in a large nation would have a certain amount of independent discretion and freedom of action. In this system political institutions and constitutional forms are as important for securing a stable and healthy regime as the character or mores of the people. Character and mores are not unimportant, but a nation of virtuous individuals is no longer needed. Instead, along with a certain concern for the well-being of the nation, citizens of a commercial society had to be orderly, and disciplined, law-abiding, and “tolerant” in the sense of avoiding religious fanaticism that seeks to impose one true faith or way of life on all others.

These two principles of integration were reflected in the debate between the anti-federalists and the federalists. The anti-federalists, as Herbert Storing has shown, were strongly influenced by the “small republic” argument. Many of them held that civil society had to be understood more as an instrument for molding character than regulating conduct. In Storing’s characterization of this strand of anti-federalist thought,

only a small republic can enjoy a voluntary attachment of the people to the government and a voluntary obedience to the laws. Only a small republic can form the kind of citizens who will maintain republican government.⁷

By contrast, the federalists favored a large, commercial republic that gave power to representatives of the people and that divided and balanced political power in an attempt both to permit a democratic voice in running the affairs of the nation and to prevent government tyranny. This system relied on certain characteristics and mores on the part of the citizenry, but it would not require a classical conception of citizen virtue. As James Madison said in *Federalist 10*, “we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control” for the problem of majority oppression.⁸ Carefully constructed institutions, relying in part on self-interested motives, could serve as a substitute for strict small republican virtue.

While the federalists “won” the debate in the sense that the Constitution was adopted, America’s political culture has been formed by anti-federalist as

well as federalist concerns. In fact, intellectual reconstructions of the debate have often tended to exaggerate the differences between the two and overlook the extent to which certain anti-federalist notions of virtue were moving in a liberal direction, while federalist ideas of citizenship supported aspects of character formation that have little in common with certain modern conceptions of a minimalist state. Still, efforts to capture the nuanced positions of the two parties have not entirely erased the importance of the theoretical differences sketched above.

Along with what many consider to be the greater realism of the federalists — not to mention their superior organization — the anti-federalists' defeat has been attributed to a fatal contradiction in their argument. While the anti-federalists often supported the "small republic" model, they also claimed to be proponents of the modern principle of individual liberty. Because of their support for the principle of individual liberty, they were unable fully to defend the small republic position; and because of their support for the small republic position, they were unable to make their adherence to liberty believable or credible. They were caught in an unresolvable dilemma.

* * * *

The Democratic-Republican party founded by Thomas Jefferson was for a long time thought of as the successor of the anti-federalists. The truth of the matter, as we now know, is far more complicated; many anti-federalists subsequently joined the Federalist party, and many followers of the original federalist position joined the Democratic-Republican party. Still, the original view contains more than half the truth in that most anti-federalists sided with Jefferson, not Hamilton, in the great disputes of the Washington and Adams administrations. Nor is this surprising, as Jefferson's positions were much closer than Hamilton's to the major tenets of anti-federalism. Jefferson was suspicious of the power of the federal government, was a strong advocate of local institutions and local power, and an avid champion of popular government built on a base of a conscientious and virtuous citizenry. To quote again from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "it is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. . . Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God. . . whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."

The "agrarian ideology" of Jefferson can thus be seen as the heir of anti-federalism. Yet, if we read Jefferson carefully, it is clear that agrarianism is something quite different. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, the most eloquent statement of the modern principle of liberty, Jefferson hardly could have forgotten this principle when he elaborated his agrarian ideas.

In fact, agrarianism represents an attempt to render anti-federalism "modern," to reconstruct the small republican position and place it on the foundation of the principle of individual rights. The key to this transformation lies in the replacement of agrarian virtue for small republican virtue.

The word is the same, but the meaning has been altered. The "virtue" of Jefferson's agrarian citizen consists in his capacity to protect his individual rights, not in a subordination of the individual to the community. Nevertheless, in an indirect way, many of the qualities that Jefferson believed would enable the citizen to protect his individual rights resemble in certain respects the kind of virtue that was espoused by the anti-federalists.

The starting point for Jefferson's political thought is the modern principle of the protection of individual rights. But this leads Jefferson immediately to ask what it is that threatens rights and how they can be protected. Rights, he concludes, are threatened above all by the concentration of political power, which is more likely to occur in governmental institutions in large societies far away from the local level: "What has destroyed liberty and the rights of man in every government which has ever existed under the sun? The generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body. . ." ⁹

What serves to protect rights, accordingly, is a form of government that divides power and that keeps it as much as possible at the local level. But these institutional arrangements can only survive in a society in which the people possess a certain "virtue" — the virtue of the enlightened farmer. Enlightenment meant freedom from superstitious religious beliefs, which Jefferson considered a prime cause of political despotism; it meant education, especially education in politics and history, to demonstrate the dangers of concentrating political power in one man or institution; and it meant literacy, which enabled citizens to read newspapers and thus be more quickly aware of plots to overthrow a free regime: "Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe." ¹⁰

The enlightened individual should also be a farmer. Those who worked their own farms had a strong spirit of *independence*, and therefore had no need of powerful government. Jefferson wrote: "Dependence begets subservience and veniality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." ¹¹ The farmer gives over less power to government because he required less government. But where government is needed, farmers, being responsible and independent, will exercise as much power as possible at the local level in order to prevent the concentration of greater power at higher levels. The "secret" to preserving liberty, Jefferson stated, "will be found to be in man's making himself the depository of the powers respecting himself, so far as he is competent to them, and delegating only what is beyond his competence. . .to higher and higher orders of functionaries, so as to trust fewer and fewer powers in proportion as the trustees become more and more oligarchical." ¹² The Jeffersonian farmer is an active citizen in local politics in order to prevent power from being alienated to higher levels, which would pose a far greater threat to his liberty. The individual, private farmer becomes a public citizen for the sake of maintaining his individual rights. This is the foundation of agrarian "virtue," which at bottom, to use Tocqueville's terminology, is a form of "self-interest rightly understood."

Yet agrarianism for Jefferson was most important not for what it was, but for what it was *not*. Agrarianism defined itself in opposition to the city; agrarian life is positive or virtuous in large part because it avoids the problems and vices of the city. Urbanism, meaning also industrialism and capitalism, is inconsistent with a republican form of government because it destroys the human qualities of virtue needed to sustain it. Urbanism creates dependencies that result from complex economic arrangements; people lose the feeling of control over their own lives and destinies and thus are more likely to turn to government and put faith in despots. The differences in wealth that grow up in cities, the unhealthy form of labor in the factories, the absence of enlightenment among the urban masses, the development of extreme passions — all these make it impossible for city people to preserve a republican form of government: “It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserves a republic in vigor . . . The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body.”

Jefferson saw the city as a corrupting force that would destroy the simplicity and virtue of the American citizen. Yet the growth of cities almost seemed natural or inevitable unless certain steps were taken to “protect” the agrarian life. (Here is another sense, incidentally, in which agrarianism constantly defines itself in opposition to the city; the agrarian is continually on guard to limit the spread of the urban “disease.”) To protect the rural way of life, Jefferson sought every means compatible with a free government to limit or discourage the growth of industry. In addition, to help maintain American “virtue,” Jefferson was very reluctant to have American youth be educated in Europe, for fear this would make them prey to the corrupt and “refined” life of the city. The individual who goes abroad “acquired a fondness for European luxury and dissipation and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country.”¹³ Jefferson’s agrarian virtue accepts the modern principles of individual rights. Yet here, as in the case of anti-federalism, there remains a contradiction, albeit one that is less fundamental. The exercise of individual rights would seem in the end to promote a different kind of society than the agrarian order Jefferson wanted. Agrarian society, with its simplicity and virtue, is not the natural result, it would appear, of a society of individual rights; it required certain “artificial” means of protection against the natural growth of cities.¹⁴

Jefferson may well have been aware of this tension, but as a practical matter he knew steps could be taken to ensure the predominance of agrarianism in the United States for quite some time. One step, of course was to oppose plans for government *stimulus* of manufacturing advocated by Alexander Hamilton. (It must be remembered that Hamilton’s “capitalist” program — capitalist in the sense of encouraging the transformation of nature by industrialism — involved at the time an active use of government to supply incentives for development, while Jefferson’s agrarian vision was more often based on the natural working of the economy free of governmental policy; for those who equate “capitalism” with *laissez-faire*, Jefferson’s program at the time was arguably more capitalist.) A second step was to resist

open immigration, thus denying the manpower to run the factories; a third step was to increase the amount of land available to Americans, which explains why Jefferson acted almost unconstitutionally — by his own standards — when as president he purchased the Louisiana territory without the prior approval of Congress. A final step was to propagate a positive ideology of agrarianism and thus give the agrarian element greater power and influence in American politics.

Not all of the steps Jefferson recommended were followed, and not all that were had the effects he supposed. Still, the vast supply of land helped keep the agrarian element in political command for much of the ensuing era; and the agrarian ideology had a tremendous influence on American development that helped to promote the rural element, even if it never succeeded in preventing the development of the cities. When all is said and done, however, it remains that the contradiction between agrarianism and the natural development of a society of individual liberty was insurmountable. Inevitably, agrarianism would lose.

The response of agrarian leaders to the farmers' declining situation was often one of retreat or denial. Some took refuge in agrarian utopianism — that is, establishing true or pure communities that would be sanctuaries from the general life-style and path of development of the rest of society. The more usual response was to look with increasing hostility and suspicion to the city and, to a certain extent, to the idea of progress. If the "future" lay with the city rather than the country, then perhaps the golden age of America was in the past and not the future. It is in this respect that the agrarian movement in the United States, beginning as early as the time of Jackson, came to be suspicious of the enlightenment and, in some cases, to turn inwards to a religious fundamentalism that sometimes was openly hostile to modern society.¹⁵

William Jennings Bryan, three times the standard-bearer of the Democratic party, was in one sense the heir of Thomas Jefferson. But whereas Jefferson proclaimed his openness to science, Bryan took the side of those who opposed the teaching of Darwin in the public schools. Yet the dilemma Bryan faced was not entirely his own, but Jefferson's as well. Progress and enlightenment, contrary to what Jefferson promised, led to the ascendancy of the city and not to the triumph of the country. Jefferson left his followers with the hard decision of choosing between two Jeffersonian values — agrarianism and enlightenment — and Bryan made his choice to let the cities "burn."

The agrarian element in the American tradition thus became in one sense "closed" to progress, looking backward, not forward. And the defense of the cause of citizen virtue became entangled in some way with this anti-modernist position. But in being closed, it helped to maintain a firm belief in what became the traditional ideas of individual liberty and natural right. In alliance with the West, the agrarians kept alive certain values which, through the foundation of the city, almost came to be lost in the urban tradition. This would seem to confirm in part Jefferson's case for "virtue" and his worries about the corruption of the cities.

The opponents of the anti-federalist in the dispute over the Constitution were the federalists, who proposed principles for the integration of society that drew on the model of a large commercial society developed by Montesquieu. But as Jefferson modifies the anti-federalist position, so Hamilton modified the federalist position — perhaps not as radically, but significantly enough to drive some from the Federalist party into Jefferson's camp while at the same time laying the foundation for a broader appeal in the future.

The modification of Hamilton can be expressed in terms of a movement from commercial society to dynamic, industrial capitalism. A commercial society — at least as some envisioned it — was a society of merchants, shopkeepers and traders that would continually grow and develop, but moderately and on foundations of the sober and well-regulated passions of men of commerce. Hamilton, however, had a different view. In his *Report on Manufacturers (1791)* he sketched a model of capitalist development that was fueled by developing technology and guided by the exertions of bold entrepreneurs. Part of “the genius of the American people,” Hamilton contended, “is a peculiar aptitude in mechanic improvements.” An urban or manufacturing society was desirable because it “furnishes greater scope for the diversity of talents and dispositions” and stimulates the imagination and interest of certain “minds of the strongest and the most active powers.” These individuals are led to apply their energies to the task of conquering nature, using machines and human organizations to find new ways to promote progress. This project both stimulates and necessitates the human qualities of skill, daring, and intelligence that have come to be as American as Jefferson's sturdy yeoman:

the results of human exertion may be immensely increased by diversifying its objects. When all the different kinds of industry obtain in a community, each individual can find his proper element, and can call into activity the whole vigour of his nature. And the community is benefited by the services of its respective members. . . .¹⁶

It is difficult to find in America two works whose spirit is more different than Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and Hamilton's *Report on Manufacturers*. If Jefferson wanted a regime that would constrain and limit man's passions, Hamilton wanted one that would encourage and give an outlet for certain passions that could be put to the service of development. If Jefferson sought tranquility and quiet “virtue,” Hamilton looked to change, energy, and exertion.

Hamilton's plan for dynamic capitalism frightened large numbers into Jefferson's camp. Many who could support a sober and progressive commercialism could not back Hamilton's radical vision of social transformation. Sober commercialism had, after all, a notion of the orderly, “virtuous” man of commerce that was not altogether different from Jefferson's orderly and virtuous farmer, who was himself something of a man of commerce. This quiet and orderly

spirit — whether of the shopkeeper or the farmer — was different from the much bolder “spirit of enterprise” of which Hamilton spoke.

Yet despite losing political support in the short run to the Jeffersonian camp, Hamilton’s views helped to create the principles of integration of the modern or urban side of the American tradition, even when certain of his arguments could not be openly avowed. Hamilton was brutally frank in his explanation of the use of people for material gain — frank in a way that can hardly be discussed today in a wealthy America that has benefited from many of his policies.¹⁷ But it is also true that the society he depicts is one of constant and expanding possibility and opportunity. These possibilities and opportunities are open to anyone and are not the province of a preexisting elite.

One of the keys to understanding the Hamiltonian view of America is to see the difference between it and the model of a “bourgeois” society as that model is frequently understood in Europe. In the European view of the “bourgeois” society, it is assumed that there is relatively fixed sum of resources in society controlled by a relatively fixed class of owners, most of whom appear respectable and virtuous in public, but whose real respectability and virtue is constantly open to doubt. In part this attitude results from the limitations of opportunities and from the belief that every gain is a gain at the expense of someone else.

The directing idea of Hamilton’s theory — which is the theory that has furnished the principles of integration for the urban side of America — is quite different. The dynamic society depicted by Hamilton offers opportunities to those outside of the last generation of families to have achieved wealth. Moreover, there is a common project that ties together all this individual exertion and makes it something other than selfishness. The exertion is seen as part of a project that is continually conquering frontiers and bringing nature further and further under man’s control. This powerful belief or “myth” — that the golden age lies in the future, not in the past — is a central principle of integration of America, holding out the prospect to society as a whole of a better future. This is the populist and even poetic side to the Hamiltonian program, which is more consistent than the Jeffersonian agrarian “myth” in harmonizing enlightenment and progress.

Given the character of Hamilton’s principle of integration, it should be perfectly clear why the spirit of the frontier or the West in America was as much a product of the urban as the rural side. The “conquering” of the West, though it often opened the way to the sober agricultural communities envisioned by Jefferson, was itself the product of an individualist spirit tied to the great collective image of bringing a continent under man’s control. Its foundation, as stated by Frederick Turner, was “restless nervous energy. . . dominant individualism. . . and that buoyancy and exuberance that comes with freedom”¹⁸ The wild west was more akin in its spirit to the city than to the farm.

* * * *

Grant Wood’s “American Gothic” seemed to mark the end of an era. A declining farm population left agrarian spokesmen with little influence over the formation of American habits and consigned the “country” to the bleak

fate of nursing a brooding hostility toward the triumphant city. If the Constitution was to survive, it appeared that it would have to do so on the basis of the city's cosmopolitan principles.

Yet the record of the era of urban dominance suggests that the city cannot by itself serve as the foundation for a viable Constitutional political culture. Its incapacity has been demonstrated most conspicuously by the lack of will in sustaining its own principles. By the decade of the 1960s, the *area* of America least supportive politically of Hamilton's transformative economic order was the urban centers of the East, and the *group* least supportive was the cosmopolitan intellectuals. While urban spokesmen continued to celebrate the city's openness and heterogeneity, they abandoned a belief in economic transformation and moved closer to models of society based on the premises that we had entered an "era of limits" or zero growth and that political justice consisted chiefly in the redistribution of economic wealth.¹⁹

The main source for these models came from abroad, their roots lying in one strand or another of European social-democratic thought. The watchwords of this way of thinking have been "planning," "neo-corporatism," and the "state." Yet some critical of Hamilton's position also began a search for an American foundation for their views. They found one in resurrecting anti-federalist themes of republicanism, community and equality — themes which some even argue dominated the Founding. Those who emphasized these themes as the most worthy in the American tradition used them to diminish the legitimacy of transformative capitalism. Yet quite apart from the fact that a reliance on anti-federalist themes sits uneasily (to say the least) with the cosmopolitan openness which many of these same thinkers espouse, reading out of the American tradition one of its major principles makes the whole tradition (incorrectly) inconsistent with modern economic development.

With the attack on the original city principle coming from the city, it was left to those outside the city to rescue it. The idea of transformative capitalism was reintroduced into the cities in the 1980s from the West and from the country by a movement that claimed as well to be defending traditional "country" values. The growing acceptance today of at least the principle of entrepreneurial activity masks the extent to which only a few years ago support for this value as an engine of economic growth was widely considered backward or "gothic." On a deeper level, the fact that the city's principles were recovered from outside indicates the city's difficulty in holding fast to any principle or tradition. Since Hamilton's view became accepted as part of the general American tradition, one can paradoxically use Jefferson's own analysis to help explain the incapacity of the city to maintain itself. In Jefferson's view, the city is too quick to accept fads and intellectual "seductions" that leads its thinkers to abandon elementary principles: "When I look around me for security against these seductions, I find it in the widespread of our agricultural citizens, in their unsophisticated minds, their independence and their power. . . ." ²⁰ For Jefferson, the simple precept of the country was the ballast to the urban intellectual's sail.

It also appears that the city's principles, when carried to excess, are inadequate to the task of supporting a regime of self-government. Alarming

social problems of lawlessness, drug dependency, broken families and life-threatening diseases are connected with behavior characterized by an absence of discipline and self-restraint; this behavior, if it is not itself a pathological by-product of a principle of integration that stresses individualism and self-interest, is not easily amenable to strategies of correction deriving from this principle. Critics of transformative capitalism have long pointed to its blights and social problems in an effort to discredit the entire system; the causes of these problems, they have said, lay in the system of ownership and in the maldistribution of wealth, thus suggesting solutions in "progressive" policies of economic redistribution. But the lessons of social policy of the 1970s and the nature of some of the social problems that confront us today point to the conclusion that the absence of self-restraint in society is a problem that, in large measure, is distinct from the question of the distribution of wealth. The most important externalities of society, it is now clear, are not economic but "moral," related to character and "virtue."

To advocate a program that asks America to turn its back on economic transformation along the lines of quaint anti-federalist principles of integration is not just impossible; its advocacy risks discrediting the bolder aspects of human character needed in the project of dynamic change. Are we then to say that the only solution to the problem that attend the principles of modern integration lay in socialist programs? These programs, despite their claim to embrace modernism, have shown themselves in experiment after experiment to threaten these same human springs that promote change; and they are largely irrelevant to solving many of the social problems they purport to address.

For the United States, a more productive approach lies in a search to combine the two great principles of our tradition into workable syntheses or programs that adapt their specific content as times change. Such syntheses can never, of course, eliminate the conflict between the two principles. Nor should they try to do so. A viable interpretation of the American Constitution must rest on a recognition of the creative tensions between the two traditions. The elements of these two traditions, properly balanced, can provide a healthy "cultural" foundation for the Constitution. The "city" cannot survive without the "country," nor the modern without the gothic.

¹ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, Clinton Rossiter, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1961), p.240 (Federalist #39); see also Federalist #55.

² In formulating many of my ideas for this paper, I am indebted to insights about Grant Wood's "American Gothic" offered by art critics Michael Egan and Michael Miller, by my colleague Richard Arndt, and by the editors of this volume, William Lasser and William Connelly, Jr. For the argument of the paper I rely heavily on three books: Leo Marx's classic *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); John Kasson's *Civilizing the Machine* (New York: Penquin Books, 1976) and Alan Trachtenberg *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *History of American Presidential Elections* vol. 2, p. 1850.

⁴ Saul K. Padover, ed. *Thomas Jefferson on Democracy*, (New York: Signet Books, 1939), pp. 69-70 (from query 19 of *Notes on Virginia*).

⁵ I am using "capitalism" here to refer chiefly to an attitude in regard to the transformation of nature rather than to a specific role for the state. Capitalism in the sense I am using it relies principally on the activity of entrepreneurs, but it need not preclude certain kinds of governmental encouragement.

⁶ For the great influence of Montesquieu's thought on the argument over the ratification of the Constitution, see Donald Lutz, "The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century Political Thought," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78 (March, 1984), pp. 189-97.

⁷ Herbert Storing, *What the Anti-Federalist Were For* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.16.

⁸ *The Federalist Papers*, p.30 (Federalist No. 10)

⁹ Padover, p. 42.

¹⁰ Padover, p. 89.

¹¹ Padover, p. 70.

¹² Padover, p. 83.

¹³ Padover, p. 91.

¹⁴ See Harry V. Jaffa's "The Virtue of a Nation of Cities" in Robert Goldwin, ed. *A Nation of Cities* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966). It should be observed that while Jefferson opposed large-scale industrial development in urban areas, he was a serious advocate of the use of technology. He favored an arrangement in which technological advances would be developed and employed in a decentralized fashion in a "country" setting. (See Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, pp. 24-25.) While Jefferson's plan was incompatible with the necessary mode of industrial development in its first stages, it may well be more compatible with arrangements for technological advance in the future.

¹⁵ Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, pp. 183-190.

¹⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *The Basic Ideas of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Richard Morris (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), pp.277-281. For the distinction between commercialism and capitalism, I am relying on the discussion by Leo Marx in *The Machine and the Garden*, Chapter 4.

¹⁷ Hamilton's comments about the use of women and children as factory laborers seem particularly harsh, although it should be borne in mind that Jefferson, too, envisioned the use of such labor in the healthier environment of cottage industries in the country.

¹⁸ F. J. Turner, "The Frontier in American History," in Richard D. Hefner, ed., *A Documentary History of the United States* (New York: Mentor Books, 1952), p.191.

¹⁹ See the essays by Robert Dahl and Benjamin Barber in Robert Horwitz, ed., *Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1986) and Walter Dean Burnham, "The Constitution, Capitalism and the Need for Rationalized Regulation" in Robert Goldwin and William Schambra, eds., *How Capitalistic is the Constitution?* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1982).

²⁰ Padover, p. 85.