

**SOUTHERN AGRARIANISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY:**

A FRESH CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

By

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1930 twelve members of the academic community at Vanderbilt University published a book entitled "I'll Take My Stand." In it, these Twelve Southerners issued a call for fellow Southerners to reject the popular impulses toward industrialism and urbanization and to instead embrace an agrarian economic and political model. They strenuously argued that the virtues of community, close proximity to the soil, and manual labor provided a sense of purpose and a wholesome quality of life that was not only valuable but essential to man and not to be found in an industrial economy.

This book has been mischaracterized as an opposition to capitalism, a stern warning against collectivism, a lecture on the materialistic worship of the all-mighty dollar, an appeal to the South to maintain cultural isolation from the rest of the country, a call for the South to reject integration between whites and blacks, a neo-Confederate manifesto, and an absolutely absurd discourse on practical economics. How then, wonders Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in the book's 1977 introduction, do we explain its continued appeal three-quarters of a century after its initial publication?

The answer is to be found in the perspective one achieves by critically analyzing the losses and sacrifices incurred in the pursuit of an industrial economy. The Twelve Southerners discussed an ideal, pastoral South that may very well never have existed in order to give a clear opposite to the cultural and political landscape they saw then emerging as the "New South".

In so doing, they provided a stark contrast from which readers could honestly gauge where society ought to aspire, somewhere on a continuum between rustic and “modern.”

This was their true genius: they have written a classic piece that requires the reader to consider the full range of economic, political, and social offerings and to choose that which best promotes the interests of society, not merely with regards to economics or materialistic, hollow notions of progress. “I’ll Take My Stand” is a reminder that we ought not pursue a political, social, or economic “re-engineering” without first considering the consequences of our actions.

Parenthetically, this collection of essays would serve as a major influence on the philosophical masterpiece “Ideas Have Consequences” (1948) by Richard Weaver, who studied under contributor John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt. Weaver went on to become one of the most important American thinkers of the twentieth century and “Ideas Have Consequences” stands as one of the seminal intellectual achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Many modern thinkers tend to disregard the past (or reshape it) with both eyes fixed on the future in the continual pursuit of a forthcoming social, political, and economic utopia. Unfortunately, this type of thinking has its major limitation in that it disregards political and economic cycles as well as significant historical factors that can and will affect social conditions. The disregard for boom-and-bust cycles and the willful ignorance of previous authoritarian government

encroachments on personal liberty is considered by some as the root causes of our decadent American popular culture and widespread civic alienation and unrest. The modern tendency to ignore the past is an intellectual disease which threatens to blind many modern citizens from noticing those factors which directly affect our prosperity and our way of life.

The agrarian viewpoint is a counter to this intellectual forgetfulness.

Indeed, modernism is in essence a provincialism, since it declines to look beyond the horizon of the moment, just as the countryman may view with suspicion whatever lies beyond his country.<sup>1</sup>

The American south as a region with a distinct culture and way of life is the subject of this fascinating book. The authors quite simply asked -- do we as a society really benefit from destroying local communities, by abandoning tradition, by warring against nature, and by disrupting our cherished, simplistic ways of life? A proper respect for land and soil is a deep-rooted American idea – by discarding this idea, do we lose a part of our American heritage that is necessary for a proper ordering of our society? In our haste toward greater prosperity and convenience, have we abandoned notions of community and self-reliance that are necessary for a proper, functioning society? Their critique of modernity is as refreshing and as relevant in 2006 as it was in 1930. By writing on the important aspects of being human – community, family, nature, and values – the authors provided a stunning critique not only of previously unquestioned political and economic processes but they also force a thoughtful, contemplative look at the integrity of the human condition in general.

The appeal of agrarianism is not in its call for a return to a rustic, over-simplified life of toil and repetition – the appeal of agrarianism lies in its indictment of modernity and the unquestioned abandonment of values. Agrarianism, moreso than any other philosophical viewpoint, most vividly exposes modernity for all of its shortcomings by describing modernity’s antithesis. In so doing, we are not as drawn to agrarianism as we are repulsed by the trappings of industrialism and modernity.

### **AGRARIANISM**

Agrarianism is a social and political philosophy that recognizes the simple, yeoman farmer as the iconoclastic ideal citizen. Through cultivation of the soil, contact with nature, and in providing for the subsistence of himself and his family, the farmer achieves the moral and civic virtues of honor, self-reliance, self-identity, community, respect for authority, and harmony of life. This portrait of the agrarian is often sharply contrasted with the amoral, fractured, materialistic, and vain modern man who suffers from alienation, vice, and instability. Further, the subsistence farming of the agrarian is also sharply contrasted with the commercial, industrial farm which treats nature as something to be mastered and despised, rather than honored and respected. Thus, the agrarian is presented by his defenders as a model of virtue in relation to God, the earth, his community, and the economy.

It is important to note that in writing “I’ll Take My Stand” the Twelve Southerners

do not merely aim for Southerners alone to consider the sacrifices to be made and the losses to be incurred as they scramble toward modernity and industrialization. In fact, the book was written for anyone and everyone opposed to the reckless pursuit of an industrial society. They note in their introduction that:

“there are many other minority communities opposed to industrialism, and wanting a much simpler economy to live by. The communities and private persons sharing the agrarian tastes are to be found widely within the Union.”

Although discussions of agrarianism in modern times are increasingly rare, as Victor Davis Hanson points out in “Fields Without Dreams,” most emphasize the beauty and nobility of the agrarian craft. Hanson points out that there is another strain of agrarian thought – a

“much older, bleaker, and mostly unknown tradition – begun seven centuries earlier [than the Roman poet Virgil’s ode to agrarian virtues] by the Greek poet Hesiod. His “Works and Days” [is] a more melancholy, more angry account of the necessary pain and sacrifice needed to survive on the land... Hesiod’s soil is not kind, but unforgiving, and so must be mastered if it is not to master the farmer himself. [They are] locked in perpetual struggle with the ‘bribe-swallowers’ in town, the princes who profit from, but do not partake of, an agrarian community.

“With Hesiod’s world begins the entire notion of agrarianism that was soon to become the foundation of the Greek city-state, and later to be enshrined in the West as the exemplar of a democratic society: a culture of small, independent yeomen on the land, who make their own laws, fight their own battles, and create a community of tough, like-minded individuals. Whatever one thinks now of Western culture, he should at least recognize that its foundations – economic, social, political, and military – originated in the countryside...”<sup>2</sup>

It is thus critically important that as we consider the agrarian as a contrast against the modern man, we should look at the toil and hardship he endures as well as the virtues that he embodies. Indeed, the labor-intensive efforts of the agrarian are the necessary foundation for his moral and political development, not the other way around. By abandoning a nostalgic, over-simplified, highly embraceable view of the agrarian, we properly and honestly behold his faults as

well as his virtues. For us to properly contrast the agrarian to the modern, we must honestly behold the faults and virtues of the modern as well. Hanson reminds us that integrity requires a full accountability of each in order to achieve a fair and just comparison.

It is this honest comparison, and not a front-loaded, one-sided argument, that gives weight to the essays by the Twelve Southerners in "I'll Take My Stand."

### **BACKGROUND OF THE TWELVE SOUTHERNERS**

During the 1920s a group of men of letters at Vanderbilt University published a magazine of poetry and criticism called *The Fugitive*. Both faculty and students alike were invited to contribute to this publication which practiced and defended formal techniques of poetry against gaudy new forms of poetry then emerging. The *Fugitive Poets*, as they were called, were a literary clique dedicated to the elevation and publication of traditional poetry. They were also quite enthusiastic about demonstrating that Southerners were capable of actively participating in the highest scholarly and esoteric pursuits. At the time the South did not enjoy favorable status nationally or internationally as an intellectual climate.

According to critic J.A. Bryant, the group's goal as "the Fugitive poets" was simply "to demonstrate that a group of southerners could produce important work in the medium, devoid of sentimentality and carefully crafted," with special attention to the traditional prosodic techniques of meter, stanza, and rhyme. One member, John Crowe Ransom, had an enormous influence on an entire generation of poets and fellow academics, who subscribed to the doctrines he described in *The New Criticism* (1941), which restricted literary analysis to the text itself, rather than the cultural and historical context from which the text emerged.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the impetus for publishing *The Fugitive* then was an attempt to demonstrate that not only were there men of strong intellect in the South but that

these same men were also capable of being intellectual leaders, able to compete with literary and scholarly minds in New York, Chicago, Paris, and London. Their cause was not originally that of the agrarian – far from it. In fact, the Agrarians (also called the “Vanderbilt Agrarians”) were a splinter group of the Fugitives that eventually came to embrace the cause of an agrarian South that they witnessed being dehumanized by the forces of industrialization and urbanization.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE TWELVE SOUTHERNERS**

*(Biographical sketches of the Twelve Southerners who contributed to “I’ll Take My Stand” are taken in their entirety from the Vanderbilt University Library Special Collections and University Archives website.)*

Donald Davidson

Donald Davidson was a member of both the Fugitive and Agrarian groups at Vanderbilt University. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Vanderbilt University and remained at the University his entire professional career (1920 - 1968) teaching English. In addition to being a teacher, Davidson enjoyed an international reputation as a poet, essayist, novelist, and critic. His first book of poems, *The Outland Piper*, was published in 1924. From 1931-1967 he spent his summers teaching at Bread Loaf School of English in Ripton, Vermont. He served in the military during World War I May 1917- June 1919. In June of 1918 he married Theresa Sherrer, a legal scholar and artist.

He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, American Folklore Society, American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, South Atlantic Modern Language



Association, and the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government.

### John Gould Fletcher

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas to a prominent family, John Gould Fletcher entered Harvard University in 1903 to study law. Following the death of his father in 1906, Fletcher withdrew from Harvard to pursue a career as a poet. Supported by the money left to him by his father, he left for Europe and settled in London where he self-published five volumes of poetry in 1913. Influenced first by Ezra Pound and then by Amy Lowell, he became well-known as an Imagist poet with the publication of five additional volumes of poetry and was featured prominently in the annual *Some Imagist Poets* anthologies. Fletcher married Florence Emily "Daisy" Arbuthnot in 1916. Influenced by the poetry of William Blake and by Oriental art and religion, Fletcher's poetry took on religious undertones for his next three volumes of poetry. He also acquired a reputation as a literary journalist and befriended T. S. Eliot. Fletcher visited Nashville, Tennessee in 1927 as a lecturer and met John Crowe Ransom. He was invited to contribute an essay to the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* and became a strong supporter of the Agrarian movement. He returned to Little Rock in 1933. After his divorce from Florence Arbuthnot, he married Charlie May Simon. A life-long sufferer from depression, Fletcher drowned himself in 1950.

### Henry Blue Kline

Henry Blue Kline received his M.A. from Vanderbilt University in 1929. A student of John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson, Kline contributed an essay to the

Agrarian literary group's book *I'll Take My Stand*. Kline taught at the University of Tennessee from 1930 to 1933 and then held a succession of government posts with the Civil Works Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority. In 1944 Kline became a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newspaper where he wrote editorials on a variety of topics including fair trade laws, education, tariffs, and railroad problems. After leaving the newspaper in 1949, he accepted a position with the Atomic Energy Commission. He died in 1951.

#### Lyle Lanier

Lyle Hicks Lanier received his B.A. from Vanderbilt University in 1923. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from George Peabody College in 1924 and 1926, respectively. He taught psychology at Vanderbilt from 1929 to 1938. While at Vanderbilt, he joined the Agrarian literary group and contributed an essay to their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. He served as executive vice-president and provost at the University of Illinois. After his retirement from the University of Illinois in 1971, Lanier served as director of administrative affairs and educational statistics on the American Council of Education in Washington, D.C. He died on December 31, 1988.

#### Andrew Nelson Lytle

A member of the Agrarian literary group, Andrew Nelson Lytle was an author, educator, editor, and critic. He received his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University in 1925. After a foray into playwriting and acting, he moved into the field of biography and fiction. He contributed an essay to the ground-breaking

volume I'll Make My Stand, and was the only member of the Agrarian literary group to actually support himself by farming while he wrote his novels. He served as professor of history at the University of the South and also worked as editor of the Sewanee Review for twelve years.

#### Herman Clarence Nixon

Herman Clarence Nixon completed his academic work at Alabama Polytechnic Institute and the University of Chicago. He taught history at Vanderbilt University from 1925 to 1928. He left Vanderbilt for Tulane University where he taught from 1928 to 1938. He taught for a few years at the University of Missouri before returning to Vanderbilt as Lecturer in Political Science. While at Vanderbilt in the late 1920s, Nixon was asked by the Agrarian literary group to contribute an essay to the Agrarian manifesto I'll Take My Stand. Of all the Agrarians, Nixon was the most proactive in pursuing practical means for alleviating poverty in the South, serving on both the Social Science Research Council's Southern Regional Committee and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.

#### Frank Owsley

Frank Lawrence Owsley obtained his bachelor of science degree in 1912 from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute in Auburn, Alabama, graduating first in his class. He received his master of arts degree in history from University of Chicago in 1917. He served briefly in the armed forces during World War I, before returning to graduate work at the University of Chicago, receiving his Ph.D. in history in 1919. He joined the staff of Vanderbilt University in 1920. He was a

member of the Agrarian literary group at Vanderbilt and wrote the essay entitled "The Irrepressible Conflict" for *I'll Take My Stand: the South and the Agrarian Tradition* published by Harper Brothers of New York and London in 1930. A strong supporter of Agrarian principles, he wrote and lectured on Southern history and culture for most of his life. He resigned from Vanderbilt to accept a position at the University of Alabama in 1949. He suffered a fatal heart attack while at Cambridge University on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1956.

#### John Crowe Ransom

John Crowe Ransom, noted poet, critic, educator and editor, was born April 30, 1888 in Pulaski, Tennessee. He graduated from Vanderbilt University in 1909, was a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, 1910-1913, and joined the faculty of Vanderbilt in 1914, where he taught English until 1937. While at Vanderbilt, Ransom was a major figure in the Fugitive and Agrarian literary groups and their publications, *The Fugitive* (1922-1925) and *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). In 1937, Ransom accepted a position at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio as professor of poetry and later founded and edited an important literary quarterly, *The Kenyon Review* (1939-1959). Ransom retired in 1959, but remained active in literary pursuits until his death in 1974 at the age of eighty-six. His works of poetry include *Poems About God* (1919), *Chills and Fever* (1924), and *Selected Poems* (1945, 1963, 1969).

#### Allen Tate

Allen Tate graduated from Vanderbilt University with his B.A. in 1922. While at

Vanderbilt, Tate was invited by Donald Davidson to join the Fugitives literary group. Returning to Vanderbilt after a forced medical leave of absence, Tate roomed with Robert Penn Warren and Ridley Wills during his last semester of academic work.

In 1924, Tate moved to New York City where he continued to write poetry as well as produce freelance articles for *The Nation* and *New Republic* and worked as an editor. During his literary career, he became acquainted with a host of other literary figures including Hart Crane, John Peale Bishop, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and Ford Madox Ford. Tate taught at a variety of colleges and universities, including Vanderbilt, while producing volumes of poetry and criticism. He died in Nashville, Tennessee on February 9, 1979.

#### John Donald Wade

John Donald Wade received his B.A. from the University of Georgia in 1914 and his M.A. from Harvard University in 1915. He completed his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1924 after an interruption in his studies to serve in World War I. He taught at the University of Georgia from 1919 until 1927, when he left over a dispute with the university president over intercollegiate football and academics. He helped compile the *Dictionary of American Biography* in Washington, D.C. in 1927-1928 before accepting a teaching position at Vanderbilt University in 1928. While at Vanderbilt he joined the Agrarian literary group and contributed an essay to their book *I'll Take My Stand*. He returned to the University of Georgia in 1934 and served as the founding editor of *The Georgia Review* when it debuted

in 1947. He remained at the University of Georgia for the rest of his academic career, retiring in 1950 to return to his family home in Marshallville. He died in Marshallville, Georgia on October 9, 1963.

### Robert Penn Warren

Robert Penn Warren received his B.A. at Vanderbilt University in 1925 before continuing his graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley, Yale University, and Oxford University, where he received a B. Litt. degree. While at Vanderbilt, "Red" Warren was invited to join the Fugitives literary group and contributed poetry for *The Fugitive* magazine. He was the recipient of several honorary degrees and was the author of over fifty books. His novel, *All the King's Men*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1947. He was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1957 and 1979. He was named Poet Laureate of the United States in 1986, the first to be nominated. Warren taught at a number of universities over the course of his life, including Vanderbilt University, Southwestern Louisiana State University, the University of Minnesota, and Yale University. He died in Stratton, Vermont on September 15, 1989.

### Stark Young

Stark Young graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1901 with a B.A. in Latin and Greek. He received his M.A. from Columbia University in 1902, majoring in English but also taking courses in theater and drama. He taught at both University of Mississippi and the University of Texas, and later joined the faculty at Amherst College. In 1921, he resigned from Amherst and moved to

New York to become a free-lance writer. He joined the editorial staff of the New Republic and remained there for the rest of his career, also doing work for the New York Times and the Theatre Arts Magazine. He became well known as a drama critic and also began to write plays and fiction. He wrote the final essay in the Agrarian literary group manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. By the late 1930s, Stark gave up writing fiction and confined his writing to editing and translation. He also enjoyed some success as a painter in the 1940s. He died in New York on January 6, 1963.

### **ANALYSIS OF SELECTIONS FROM "I'LL TAKE MY STAND"**

In the Introduction by the authors, they issue their joint "Statement of Principles".

Chief among these is the declaration that all twelve

"tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian versus Industrial."<sup>4</sup>

They lament the sanctity afforded science and raise concerns that scientific progress is entirely unquestioned; they are dismayed that modern science has created conditions in which God has become a superfluity<sup>5</sup>; they point out that in industrial civilization, we experience a degradation of "the amenities of life... [such as] manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, [and] romantic love."<sup>6</sup> In pointing out that industrial progress never pursues a single goal but rather "it initiates the infinite series" they find that "(t)he result in an increasing disadjustment and instability."<sup>7</sup>

They acknowledge that the proposition of agrarianism in modern times begs

numerous questions, particularly in the application and feasibility of implementation. They admit that these are great and important questions but that they cannot be answered here. Instead, they offer that it is time to rethink whether or not industrialization is “an evil dispensation” and if so, it then becomes the duty of a society to figure out how to cast it off.

It is not necessary here to cover each of the twelve essays – indeed much has been written already about their content and their goals. I have chosen a representative sample of three essays which fully relate the content and the spirit of the collection. I have omitted the readings which correspond to outdated racial opinions such as segregation, later acknowledged by the authors themselves as no longer valid.

Indeed, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. writes in the 1977 Introduction:

“It will also be noted that in the 1962 introduction relatively little is said about racial segregation. So much had happened in the three decades since “I’ll Take My Stand” first appeared that many of the racial assumptions in it no longer represented the views of Tate, Ransom, Warren, and certain other contributors to the symposium.”

John Crowe Ransom begins his essay “Reconstructed But Unregenerate” by flatly stating, “It is out of fashion in these days to look backward rather than forward.” Ransom’s thesis is simply that the culture of the South is unique in America in that it “enjoyed a leisure, a security, and an intellectual freedom” akin to that of England while a hurried, materialistic culture pervaded the North. He points out that the deracination of American citizens brought on by industrial development in the name of Progress has resulted in “brute materiality” and enslavement.



Industrialism is a program under which men, using the latest scientific paraphernalia, sacrifice comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance.<sup>8</sup>

Donald Davidson wrote that industrial society will not only destroy art but will destroy the conditions that give art a meaning. He points out that the war waged against nature by industrialism severs man from the very foundation of art – “the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature.”<sup>9</sup> He refutes the notion that industrialism affords man more leisure time and therefore in so doing, affords man more time to enjoy the arts. Davidson calls the leisure afforded by industrialism a “dubious benefit” in that “it helps nobody but merchants and manufacturers.” He notes that the furious pace of the industrial life simultaneously carries over into our pleasure pursuits and thus, the frantic pace that becomes our habit of mind prohibits us from properly enjoying the arts. Moreover, the frantic pace of modern life deadens our senses to the sublime thus rendering us incapable of enjoying art properly.

In Lyle Lanier’s “A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress,” he argues that the unqualified, unquestioned, and mysterious cult of ‘progress worship’ renders society susceptible to control and therefore exploitation. Starting with Bacon, he argues, institutions and customs “were subjected to critical rational analysis with a view to determining their efficiency in promoting the happiness of individuals.”<sup>10</sup> This tendency of “emancipation from the past” eventually was fully realized socially and politically in the French Revolution; with regards to metaphysics and theology, it was realized in Deism whereupon the doctrine of a personal God was replaced by that of an impersonal deity with limited powers. These sea changes

in thought have had a profound effect on man and have contributed to the notion of progress as an abandonment of outdated traditions. He describes European and American men, now “loosened from traditional social moorings” as “fully disrupted by industrialism by its urbanization, shifting population, abnormal concentration of wealth, panics, unemployment, labor unions, and a train of attendant phenomena.”<sup>11</sup>

Later, Lanier points out the dissolution of the traditional bonds of family in industrial society due to the fact that the family no longer functions as a unit but rather as separate, individual units. The moral and educational functions of the family wither as “we are fast surrendering to the industrial order, whose patterns of conduct are incompatible with the conditions necessary to the stability and integrity of family life.”<sup>12</sup>

He calls for “far-sighted social engineering” to restore agriculture as a way of life, to remove the stigma it suffers against the prestige of “the false glamour of cities,” and the political leadership “to effect a synthesis, in some sense, of the unified manner of living inherent in the agrarian family and community with the energy and inventiveness which have been diverted into industrialism.”<sup>13</sup> Lanier concludes that the restoration of the agrarian economy will effectively restore the integrity of the family and the individual, both of which have been throttled by the reckless pursuit of never-ending progress.

Thus, the Agrarians not only warned about the potential dangers to society posed

by industrialism but they pointed out the actual damage already done. Their point was not only to describe the ill effects wrought on society by the forces of so-called progress but also to call for a restoration of traditional society through a drastic change of course. As modern society had already yielded a great deal of control to the state, they called on the state to take a heavy role in reducing the tendency toward industrialization and urbanization. Unfortunately, the interests of the state are tied to the consolidation and mechanistic ordering of society provided by industrialism. Thus, the call by the Agrarians to the central state to restore a traditional agrarian society has gone unanswered.

### **WHY THE STATE DOES NOT DISCOURAGE INDUSTRIALIZATION AND URBANIZATION**

The mass demographic shift to urban and sub-urban areas produces an economic benefit to citizens already there as well as those newly arriving. The consolidation of economic forces in concentrated areas results in a greater concentration of free market benefits there as both human capital and economic capital flow to these “hot” economic hubs. Today, the United States is characterized by urban and sub-urban sprawl, particularly in the South, by not only the migration of rural Southerners to urban centers but also of migrating Northerners and Midwesterners relocating to urban centers in the New South. As Southerners continue to leave the limited opportunities of the rural South for the thriving economies of growing Southern cities, outsiders are also flocking here to enjoy those same opportunities, plus a better climate and a lower cost of living compared to the North and the Midwest. Civic leaders in these Southern

cities enjoy the recognition of leading “thriving hubs of economic activity” in addition to the increased revenues from taxes on new homes, new shopping centers, and relocated industries. The most pressing question on leaders in Southern urban centers is not whether or not to expand, but simply how to manage their growth.

It is in the interest of modern urban and suburban areas to promote economic growth, to lure lucrative industries, and to appeal to talent to relocate there in an effort to capture the “markets” of talent and industry. Therefore, free-market principles of supply and demand apply to cities and municipalities as they compete for the valuable resources of human and traditional capital.

### **ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE TO MODERNISM**

Agrarianism does not own a monopoly in opposing modernity. In fact, classical liberalism appears to be making a resurgence as contemporary liberalism (as well as what passes for conservatism these days) have begun to retreat.<sup>14</sup>

Modern civilization is characterized by the rise of the modern state. The modern state is widely seen as the Leviathan that is most responsible for the loss of civil liberties, personal freedom, the rule of law, and the organic natural processes of the market which characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern state poses many problems for those who love classical liberty and adhere to the ideas put forth by John Locke and Adam Smith. Many rightly see the hard-won benefits of

freedom, liberty, individual natural rights, and free-market economics as obstacles in the way of Leviathan. As these important principles are the foundation of modern civilization and the source of our prosperity, the hostile reaction of modern states to them in the name of “progress” is rightly seen by many as the undoing of civilization. In the *zeitgeist* of the modern state to protect its own interests contra the individual rights and liberties of its own citizens, it may be hastening its own downfall and the return of society toward a more Hobbesian state of political and economic anarchy. Nationalism, bureaucracy, and de-humanization are the antipodes of traditional liberalism and unfortunately are the most common characteristic of modern states.

Some scholars who have noticed the rise of the modern state at the expense of individual rights and liberties have begun to resurrect the notions of classical liberalism which had become dormant in recent decades. This renewal of classical thought does not conflict with agrarianism nor does it thwart the agrarian perspective; they are complementary. The agrarian offers a stark contrast to the modern citizen so that we may properly view the effects of modernity on man, while classical liberal thought reveals the effects of modernity upon our most fundamental political institutions.

### **TAKING THINGS TOO FAR**

The principle feature of agrarianism, it cannot be stated firmly enough, is its alternative perspective from and rejection of modernist thought. Concepts such

as radical egalitarianism, universal entitlements, and democratic revolution enjoy a special status in the political establishment as more and more political and social leaders aspire toward creating a political and economic utopia here on earth, quite apart from the realities of real people, organic communities, actual market processes, and real political structures.

Agrarian thought rejects the notion of progress as an ever-advancing process whereby old habits and forms are rejected in favor of new ones. Toward that end, modern conservatives, particularly neo-conservatives (which have never conserved anything), recalcitrant lay people, and Progressives are lumped together as contributing toward the erosion of modern society, the advancement of the all-powerful state, and the betrayal of the individual and their local communities.

'Marxism consists of a thousand truths but they all boil down to one sentence: "It is right to rebel"<sup>15</sup>

Revolution may be a good deed, but it is a bad habit.<sup>16</sup>

The notions of continual progress, perpetual revolution, and the continuous march of humanity away from the bedrock traditions of Western Civilization have resulted in fractured societies, unstable markets, and authoritarian government, all of which threaten the very establishment of Western Civilization itself. To cultural relativists, neo-Conservatives, disciples of Leo Strauss, and followers of Trotsky, this is welcome news. For many concerned citizens, however, these trends point toward an ominous future where the welfare-warfare state takes on ever greater authoritarian measures to reign in political and economic control and in pursuit of its own goals.

“We in the West have failed to grasp the true nature of Marxism-Leninism. We think of communism as being all about state ownership of the means of production and central planning: in fact, Karl Marx advocated neither. Instead, according to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the 'soul of Marxism' lies in something called dialectical materialism. Derived from Hegel and ultimately Heraclitus, this doctrine holds that the world is in a constant state of flux, that nothing is absolutely true or false, and that everything is connected to everything else. Permanent revolution is consequently the natural state of reality, and hence of politics. Because flux is the natural state, Marx, Engels and Lenin all reasoned that all fixed forms of political association, i.e., the state, were oppressive, and that men would not be free until the state itself had 'withered away'.

“It is [the] promise to emancipate the whole of mankind which so endears George Bush to a phalanx of former Marxist ideologues like Christopher Hitchens, Nick Cohen, John Lloyd, Julie Burchill and David Aaronovitch. People who in their youth idolised the worker 'who has no country' have little difficulty identifying with today's cosmopolitan ideology of globalisation, or with George Bush's internationalism. Hitchens has defended his own surprising work with the neoconservatives by saying, 'I feel much more like I used to in the 1960s, working with revolutionaries', and he understands that George Bush's policy of regime change is by definition going to be supported by revolutionaries.

“Like Marxists, indeed, and like many of his European friends, George Bush appears to believe both that freedom is an ineluctable 'force of history' and also that it requires constant struggle to achieve it. He argues, like Hegel, Marx's precursor, that humanity is one, and that a free state like the USA is not really free if other states live under tyranny. In his mind, old-fashioned American Puritan millenarianism marries easily with the missionary mentality of world revolutionists. 'The survival of liberty in our land,' he said in January, 'increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.' A true conservative, by contrast, would say that there is much evil in the outside world--and that the duty of a statesman is to hold it at bay.”<sup>17</sup>

The Modern Agrarian argues that it is the duty both of the citizen and the statesman alike to hold the evils of authoritarianism, global revolution, and industrial society run amuck at bay. Only by an ordered society where the traditions of individual freedom and liberty are maintained can the evils of modernity be overcome. The Modern Agrarian need not necessarily live on a farm, but rather they must jealously guard against the erosions of liberty posed by industrialism and hold fast to the traditions of personal freedom and individual liberty.

## CONCLUSION

The strength of agrarianism lies not in its prescription as an antidote to the modern poisons of consolidation, nationalism, the bureaucratic state, social upheaval due to constant 'revolutions', the destruction of native, organic communities, political discord, and radical egalitarianism. The strength of agrarianism is in its appeal to First Things: to political simplicity, to social harmony, to the natural cycles of the market, and to the proper end results toward which just political and social systems should aspire. By proper end results I mean no less than the traditions of political liberty, equality before the law, and respect for individual rights put forth by John Locke and Adam Smith which were the founding principles (along with Christianity and the Greek city-states) of Western Civilization.

It seems to me that the world is now more than ever dominated by the gods of mass and speed and that the worship of these can lead only to the lowering of standards, the adulteration of quality, and, in general, to the loss of those things which are essential to the life of civility and culture.<sup>18</sup>

Agrarian thought requires that we at once consider that our modern notion of progress comes with trade-offs of liberties and values that we have heretofore taken for granted. By encouraging thoughtful citizens to consider these tradeoffs, we enable society to make better choices about our social and political future as well as thoughtfully critique the supposed gains of the past century. In effect, the agrarian perspective illumines the costs of perceived progress and reminds the thoughtful that there are traditions and values worth preserving, traditions and values in real danger of being lost forever due to carelessness and "irrational exuberance" toward perceived, often hollow, gains.<sup>19</sup>



In 1930, the Vanderbilt Agrarians gave the world an intellectual foundation for understanding the complexities of an industrial society. Not only did they examine the limits imposed upon liberty and freedom by unchecked industrialism but they also described a just social and political system characterized by harmony and balance. "I'll Take My Stand" stands today as a lasting commentary on the very nature of man as well as a convincing critique of modernity. Toward that end, it is as relevant today, if not moreso, than when it first appeared.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>3</sup> "A Brief Guide to the Fugitives," Academy of American Poets, online at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org)
- <sup>4</sup> "I'll Take My Stand," Twelve Southerners, (1930), p. xxxvii
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. xlii
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. xliii
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. xlv
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 15
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 29
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 129
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 132
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 147
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 154
- <sup>14</sup> "The Challenge of Liberty: Classical Liberalism Today," edited by Robert Higgs and Carl P. Close, (2006)
- <sup>15</sup> Attributed to Chinese Communist Chairman Mao Zedong
- <sup>16</sup> Attributed to G.K. Chesterton
- <sup>17</sup> "Full Marx for George Bush: the President of the United States is not a communist," John Laughland, The Spectator (UK), Nov 5, 2005 v299 i9248 p.42
- <sup>18</sup> "Ideas Have Consequences," Richard Weaver (1948), p. vi (Introduction)
- <sup>19</sup> Here I borrowed Alan Greenspan's term where he warned against the irrational exuberance of market investors in over-valuing stocks and market shares. By this term he referred to a heightened state of speculative fervor in financial markets.