

The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture

by Wendell Berry

Sierra Club Books / San Francisco

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FOR MAURICE TELLEEN

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Preface

This book was meant to be a criticism of what I have called modern or orthodox agriculture. As I now realize, it is more a review than a criticism. Criticism requires a subject that is "finished." When agriculture is "finished," no would-be critic will be available. I am therefore constrained to accept my demotion as a privilege.

Nevertheless, there is a difficulty in writing a book on so inherently topical a subject as agricultural policy, and this difficulty is time: events that were the immediate cause of the book may be "finished" before the writing is. No reader of this book can fail to observe that it deals at length with the assumptions and policies of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, though Mr. Butz and the administration he served are now out of office.

I can only insist that my book is not for that reason out-of-date. Secretary Butz's tenure in the Department of Agriculture, and even his influence, are matters far more transient than the power and the values of those whose interests he represented. Moreover, the cultural issues that I attempt to deal with have been with us since our history began, and, barring miracle or catastrophe, they will be with us for a long time to come.

As a matter of fact, this book's origins go back farther than the secretaryship of Mr. Butz. The first notes I made for it were incited by a news story in the summer of 1967 on the report of President Johnson's "special commission on federal food and fiber policies."

The commission said, according to an article in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, that the country's biggest farm problem was a surplus of farmers: ". . . the technological advances in agriculture have so greatly reduced the need for manpower that too many people are trying to live on a national farm income wholly inadequate for them." The proposed solutions were to find "better opportunities for the farm people," "a more comprehensive national employment policy," "retraining programs," "improved general educational facilities," etc. Both the commission and the writer of the article had obviously *taken for granted* that the lives and communities of small farmers then still on the farm—and those of the 25 million who had left the farm since 1940—were of less value than "technological advances in agriculture." There seemed also to be no official doubt that adequate solutions were to be found in government-supplied "opportunities," facilities, and programs. Reading that article, I realized that my values were not only out of fashion, but under powerful attack. I saw that I was a member of a threatened minority. That is what set me off.

W.B.

Preface to the Second Edition

When I was working on this book—from 1974 to 1977—the long agricultural decline that it deals with was momentarily disguised as a “boom.” The big farmers were getting bigger with the help of inflated land prices and borrowed money, and the foreign demand for American farm products was strong, so from the official point of view the situation looked good. The big were *supposed* to get bigger. Foreigners were *supposed* to be in need of our products. The official point of view, foreshortened as usual by statistics, superstitious theory, and wishful prediction, was utterly complacent. Then Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz issued the most optimistic, the most widely obeyed, and the worst advice ever given to farmers: that they should plow “fencerow to fencerow.”

That the situation was *not* good—for farms or farmers or rural communities or nature or the general public—was even then evident to any experienced observer who would turn aside from the preconceptions of “agribusiness” and look at the marks of deterioration that were plainly visible. And now, almost a decade later, it is evident to everyone that, at least for farmers and rural communities, the situation is catastrophic: Farmers are losing their farms, some are killing themselves, some in the madness of despair are killing other people, and rural economy and rural life are gravely stricken. The agricultural economists chart the “liquidations of assets,” the “shakeouts,” and the “downturns,” apparently amazed that now

even the large “progressive” and “efficient” farmers are in trouble.

But this is not just a financial crisis for country people. Critical questions are being asked of our whole society: Are we, or are we not, going to take proper care of our land, our country? And do we, or do we not, believe in a democratic distribution of usable property? At present, these questions are being answered in the negative. Our soil erosion rates are worse now than during the years of the Dust Bowl. In the arid lands of the West, we are overusing and wasting the supplies of water. Toxic pollution from agricultural chemicals is a growing problem. We are closer every day to the final destruction of private ownership not only of small family farms, but of small usable properties of all kinds. Every problem I dealt with in this book, in fact, has grown worse since the book was written.

The one improvement has been in public concern about the problems. Among farmers there is growing distrust of the “agribusiness” line of talk and growing interest in agricultural health and sanity. Among city people there is a growing awareness that sane and healthy agriculture requires an informed urban constituency. There is hope in these developments and in the continued existence of a remnant of excellent small farms and farmers.

Some prominent agricultural economists are still finding it possible to pretend that the only issues involved are economic, but that possibility is diminishing. I recently attended a meeting at which an agricultural economist argued that there is no essential difference between owning and renting a farm. A farmer stood up in the audience and replied: “Professor, I don’t think our ancestors came to America in order to *rent* a farm.”

’Nough said.

W.B.
March 1986

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Anything that I will ever have to say on the subject of agriculture can be little more than a continuation of talk begun in childhood with my father and with my late friend Owen Flood. Their conversation, first listened to and then joined, was my first and longest and finest instruction. From them, before I knew I was being taught, I learned to think of the meanings, the responsibilities, and the pleasures of farming.

But this book's greatest immediate debt is acknowledged in the dedication. Maury Telleen has been an indefatigable friend both to my book and to me. He has arranged indispensable meetings, written me letters, sent me clippings and books, talked to me on the phone, read my manuscript, borne up through hours of fervent conversation in his house, in my house, and over many hundreds of miles of happy agricultural travels. To his wife, Jeannine, I am indebted for understanding and for hospitality.

I am, of course, hopelessly in debt to my own wife, Tanya, for keeping farm and household together during my absences, and for enduring both my travels and my travails. But she has also participated in the thinking-out of this book, has been its critic, and, finally, its typist.

My neighbor, Tom Grissom, gave me invaluable help with the preliminary reading, and in many talks helped me to clarify my ideas.

For reading the manuscript and other kindnesses, I am grateful to Robert Rodale, Jerry Goldstein, Cia and Ed McClanahan, James Baker Hall, Joan Hall, Gary Snyder, Jim and Barbara Foote, and my father.

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This list of my debts will make clear that much of the good of my book has been the gift of other people. Its flaws, on the other hand, have been furnished exclusively by me.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE	
The Unsettling of America	3
CHAPTER TWO	
The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character	17
CHAPTER THREE	
The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Agriculture	27
CHAPTER FOUR	
The Agricultural Crisis as a Crisis of Culture	39
CHAPTER FIVE	
Living in the Future: The “Modern” Agricultural Ideal	51
CHAPTER SIX	
The Use of Energy	81
CHAPTER SEVEN	
The Body and the Earth	97
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust	143
CHAPTER NINE	
Margins	171
Notes	225
Afterword to the Third Edition	229

*Who so hath his minde on taking,
hath it no more on what he hath taken.*

MONTAIGNE, III. VI

So many goodly citties ransacked and razed; so many nations destroyed and made desolate; so infinite millions of harmelesse people of all sexes, states and ages, massacred, ravaged and put to the sword; and the richest, the fairest and the best part of the world topsiturvied, ruined and defaced for the traffick of Pearles and Pepper: Oh mechanicall victories, oh base conquest.

MONTAIGNE

The Unsettling of America

One of the peculiarities of the white race's presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be. The continent is said to have been discovered by an Italian who was on his way to India. The earliest explorers were looking for gold, which was, after an early streak of luck in Mexico, always somewhere farther on. Conquests and foundings were incidental to this search—which did not, and could not, end until the continent was finally laid open in an orgy of goldseeking in the middle of the last century. Once the unknown of geography was mapped, the industrial marketplace became the new frontier, and we continued, with largely the same motives and with increasing haste and anxiety, to displace ourselves—no longer with unity of direction, like a migrant flock, but like the refugees from a broken ant hill. In our own time we have invaded foreign lands and the moon with the high-toned patriotism of the conquistadors, and with the same mixture of fantasy and avarice.

That is too simply put. It is substantially true, however, as a description of the dominant tendency in American history. The temptation, once that has been said, is to ascend altogether into rhetoric and inveigh equally against all our forebears and all present holders of office. To be just, however, it is necessary to remember that there has been another tendency: the tendency to stay put, to say, "No farther. This is the place." So far, this has been the weaker tendency, less glamorous, certainly less successful. It is also the older of these tendencies, having been the dominant one among the Indians.

The Indians did, of course, experience movements of population, but in general their relation to place was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, veneration. The land was their homeland. The first and greatest American revolution, which has never been superseded, was the coming of people who did *not* look upon the land as a homeland. But there were always those among the newcomers who saw that they had come to a good place and who saw its domestic possibilities. Very early, for instance, there were men who wished to establish agricultural settlements rather than quest for gold or exploit the Indian trade. Later, we know that every advance of the frontier left behind families and communities who intended to remain and prosper where they were.

But we know also that these intentions have been almost systematically overthrown. Generation after generation, those who intended to remain and prosper where they were have been dispossessed and driven out, or subverted and exploited where they were, by those who were carrying out some version of the search for El Dorado. Time after time, in place after place, these conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities, the beginnings of domestic cultures. They have always said that what they destroyed was outdated, provincial, and contemptible. And with alarming frequency they have been believed and trusted by their victims, especially when their victims were other white people.

If there is any law that has been consistently operative in American history, it is that the members of any *established* people or group or community sooner or later become "redskins"—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation. The colonists who drove off the Indians came to be intolerably exploited by their imperial governments. And that alien imperialism was thrown off only to be succeeded by a domestic version of the same thing; the class of independent small

farmers who fought the war of independence has been exploited by, and recruited into, the industrial society until by now it is almost extinct. Today, the most numerous heirs of the farmers of Lexington and Concord are the little groups scattered all over the country whose names begin with "Save": Save Our Land, Save the Valley, Save Our Mountains, Save Our Streams, Save Our Farmland. As so often before, these are *designated* victims—people without official sanction, often without official friends, who are struggling to preserve their places, their values, and their lives as they know them and prefer to live them against the agencies of their own government which are using their own tax moneys against them.

The only escape from this destiny of victimization has been to "succeed"—that is, to "make it" into the class of exploiters, and then to remain so specialized and so "mobile" as to be unconscious of the effects of one's life or livelihood. This escape is, of course, illusory, for one man's producer is another's consumer, and even the richest and most mobile will soon find it hard to escape the noxious effluents and fumes of their various public services.

Let me emphasize that I am not talking about an evil that is merely contemporary or "modern," but one that is as old in America as the white man's presence here. It is an intention that was *organized* here almost from the start. "The New World," Bernard DeVoto wrote in *The Course of Empire*, "was a constantly expanding market. . . . Its value in gold was enormous but it had still greater value in that it expanded and integrated the industrial systems of Europe."

And he continues: "The first belt-knife given by a European to an Indian was a portent as great as the cloud that mushroomed over Hiroshima. . . . Instantly the man of 6000 B.C. was bound fast to a way of life that had developed seven and a half millennia beyond his own. He began to live better and he began to die."

The principal European trade goods were tools, cloth, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and alcohol. The sudden availability of these things produced a revolution that "affected every aspect of Indian life. The struggle for existence . . . became easier. Immemorial handicrafts grew obsolescent, then obsolete. Methods of hunting were transformed. So were methods—and the purposes—of war. As war became deadlier in purpose and armament a surplus of women developed, so that marriage customs changed and polygamy became common. The increased usefulness of women in the preparation of pelts worked to the same end. . . . Standards of wealth, prestige, and honor

changed. The Indians acquired commercial values and developed business cults. They became more mobile. . . .

"In the sum it was cataclysmic. A culture was forced to change much faster than change could be adjusted to. All corruptions of culture produce breakdowns of morale, of communal integrity, and of personality, and this force was as strong as any other in the white man's subjugation of the red man."

I have quoted these sentences from DeVoto because, the obvious differences aside, he is so clearly describing a revolution that did not stop with the subjugation of the Indians, but went on to impose substantially the same catastrophe upon the small farms and the farm communities, upon the shops of small local tradesmen of all sorts, upon the workshops of independent craftsmen, and upon the households of citizens. It is a revolution that is still going on. The economy is still substantially that of the fur trade, still based on the same general kinds of commercial items: technology, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and drugs. The one great difference is that by now the revolution has deprived the mass of consumers of any independent access to the staples of life: clothing, shelter, food, even water. Air remains the only necessity that the average user can still get for himself, and the revolution has imposed a heavy tax on that by way of pollution. Commercial conquest is far more thorough and final than military defeat. The Indian became a redskin, not by loss in battle, but by accepting a dependence on traders that made *necessities* of industrial goods. This is not merely history. It is a parable.

DeVoto makes it clear that the imperial powers, having made themselves willing to impose this exploitive industrial economy upon the Indians, could not then keep it from contaminating their own best intentions: "More than four-fifths of the wealth of New France was furs, the rest was fish, and it had no agricultural wealth. One trouble was that whereas the crown's imperial policy required it to develop the country's agriculture, the crown's economy required the colony's furs, an adverse interest." And La Salle's dream of developing Louisiana (agriculturally and otherwise) was frustrated because "The interest of the court in Louisiana colonization was to secure a bridgehead for an attack on the silver mines of northern Mexico...."

One cannot help but see the similarity between this foreign colonialism and the domestic colonialism that, by policy, converts productive farm, forest, and grazing lands into strip mines. Now, as then, we see the abstract values of an industrial economy preying

upon the native productivity of land and people. The fur trade was only the first establishment on this continent of a mentality whose triumph is its catastrophe.

My purposes in beginning with this survey of history are (1) to show how deeply rooted in our past is the mentality of exploitation; (2) to show how fundamentally revolutionary it is; and (3) to show how crucial to our history—hence, to our own minds—is the question of how we will relate to our land. This question, now that the corporate revolution has so determinedly invaded the farmland, returns us to our oldest crisis.

We can understand a great deal of our history—from Cortés' destruction of Tenochtitlán in 1521 to the bulldozer attack on the coal-fields four-and-a-half centuries later—by thinking of ourselves as divided into conquerors and victims. In order to understand our own time and predicament and the work that is to be done, we would do well to shift the terms and say that we are divided between exploitation and nurture. The first set of terms is too simple for the purpose because, in any given situation, it proposes to divide people into two mutually exclusive groups; it becomes complicated only when we are dealing with situations in succession—as when a colonist who persecuted the Indians then resisted persecution by the crown. The terms exploitation and nurture, on the other hand, describe a division not only between persons but also within persons. We are all to some extent the products of an exploitive society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp.

Let me outline as briefly as I can what seem to me the characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind. I conceive a strip-miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce *dependably* for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as

well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, “hard facts”; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.

It seems likely that all the “movements” of recent years have been representing various claims that nurture has to make against exploitation. The women’s movement, for example, when its energies are most accurately placed, is arguing the cause of nurture; other times it is arguing the right of women to be exploiters—which men have no *right* to be. The exploiter is clearly the prototype of the “masculine” man—the wheeler-dealer whose “practical” goals require the sacrifice of flesh, feeling, and principle. The nurturer, on the other hand, has always passed with ease across the boundaries of the so-called sexual roles. Of necessity and without apology, the preserver of seed, the planter, becomes midwife and nurse. Breeder is always metamorphosing into brooder and back again. Over and over again, spring after spring, the questing mind, idealist and visionary, must pass through the planting to become nurturer of the real. The farmer, sometimes known as husbandman, is by definition half mother; the only question is how good a mother he or she is. And the land itself is not mother or father only, but both. Depending on crop and season, it is at one time receiver of seed, bearer and nurturer of young; at another, raiser of seed-stalk, bearer and shedder of seed. And in response to these changes, the farmer crosses back and forth from one zone of spousehood to another, first as planter and then as gatherer. Farmer and land are thus involved in a sort of dance in which the partners are always at opposite sexual poles, and the lead keeps changing: the farmer, as seed-bearer, causes growth; the land, as seed-bearer, causes the harvest.

The exploitive always involves the abuse or the perversion of nurture and ultimately its destruction. Thus, we saw how far the exploitive revolution had penetrated the official character when our recent secretary of agriculture remarked that “Food is a weapon.” This was given a fearful symmetry indeed when, in discussing the possible use of nuclear weapons, a secretary of defense spoke of “palatable” levels of devastation. Consider the associations that have since ancient times clustered around the idea of food—associations of