ANTJE KLEY
HEIKE PAUL
Editors

Rural America

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ALFRED HORNUNG
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ANTJE KLEY AND HEIKE PAUL

Rural America: An Introduction

The 60th Annual Conference of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS), hosted by the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in 2013, was dedicated to the overall theme of 'rural America.' The papers in this volume document this gathering. Our collection includes the key-note addresses from scholars in the field of American studies, sociology, history, and political science (delivered by Barbara Ching, David Danbom, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, Jerry Hagstrom, and Rogelio Saenz) as well as selected papers from the workshops offered at the conference. Topics include readings of the multiple manifestations of the pastoral mode in American culture and literature, discussions of the 'authenticity' of rural America's cultural production as well as analyses of the reservation and the plantation as precarious rural spaces. The book closes with a short story by Stewart O'Nan, "Calling," and thus with a critical look at rural America by one of the most eminent contemporary writers of American fiction, and with a sequence of images, indebted to the new topographics movement, by Austrian photographer Andreas Horvath, who looks at the so-called American heartland from a transatlantic perspective.

The conference was generously sponsored by several institutions whose support made the event and this book possible. We are grateful to the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg, the Embassy of the United States of America, the Bavarian American Academy, the Dr. German Schweiger-Stiftung, the Fritz und Maria Hofmann-Stiftung, the Louise Prell-Stiftung, the Dr. Alfred Vinzl-Stiftung, and the Universitätsverlag Winter in Heidelberg. In preparing this collection for publication, Katrin Horn has been of invaluable help.

In a time of transnational cultural and economic flow, our volume is concerned with those vast geographical and social spaces frequently but unduly neglected in investigations of American politics, culture, and

society, and it addresses the past, present, and future challenges of 'rural America.' It traces how rural regions have been imagined in diverse cultural productions, it explores the multilayered individual and collective identities, emotions, and convictions produced in and around rural spaces, and it picks up and further develops conceptualizations – from the Western to the pastoral – that might help to better grasp the rural and the ever shifting boundaries between the country and the city. In an age of global markets, global migration, and global cultural currents, the project of mapping the diversification and the transformations of the so-called American heartland will show the significance of the local and the regional. As Timothy Mahoney and Wendy Katz claim in their introduction to *Regionalism and the Humanities*: "in a modern world increasingly homogenized and standardized by the forces of globalization, the regionalist impulse is still very much alive" (ix). They see this vitality particularly in interactions between humans and physical as well as natural environments and in "a focus on locating oneself in the space lived in, inhabited, made home, or traveled through" (ibid.). Negotiating 'rural America' prompts us to think locally, but understand global connections. This doubling of perspectives is essential for the development of innovative modes of understanding contemporary social spaces and their multiple historical, political, and cultural genealogies and contexts.

Any discussion of rural America summons a variety of images that include Jefferson's yeoman farmer, evangelical billboard signs, trucks, horses, gun culture, rustic simplicity, fly-over states, utopian communities and communitarian experiments, meth cooking, farm aid, Walden Pond, and country music. Whereas these somewhat random associations of canonical and popular material all speak to our sense of the rural in American culture and history, they are also contradictory and at times incommensurable with each other and thus call for a more systematic approach. In the discourse of rural America, it is suggested here, five different ways of defining and conceptualizing the rural can be distinguished, and it is by offering this typology that we seek to provide a context and a suggestive if necessarily contingent classification for the analyses presented in this volume. Attempting to map an interdisciplinary discursive field, we hope our readers will find points of entry relevant to their own most immediate interests as well as useful bridges into less familiar territory.

First of all, the rural connotes notions of **the past**. Richard Hofstadter's famous dictum that "The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city" (23) draws attention to the ways in which America is imagined as a space *that once was rural*. Thus, the rural is used to describe (often nostalgically and euphemistically) a history of settlement that preceded the formation of cities and urban spaces. In this diachronic perspective, the rural is often addressed as a "usable past" (in Commager's term) that was instrumental for the shaping of the nation and the formation of a national identity. As the 'birthplace' of the nation, it has been formative of the national character, it is argued, and the site of a specifically American pastoral tradition as well as of a distinctively American version of the sublime. The "agrarian myth," according to Richard Hofstadter, has lingered and become even stronger with the advent of the "machine in the garden" (Leo Marx), new "commercial realities" (Richard Hofstadter) and the "incorporation of America" (Alan Trachtenberg). **David Danbom** has chronicled the history of rural America in much detail and does so again in this volume with a particular focus on the role of agrarianism in the social history of the US. Historically, agrarianism (or its perceived decline) has often been connected to the emergence of environmentalism and conservationism. **Philipp Löffler** addresses Henry David Thoreau as a mid-19th-century environmentalist. In his reading of Thoreau's book *Walden* and in his shorter nature writing, Löffler teases out a tension between an opposition to contemporary American economic and cultural developments on the one hand and a defense of a kind of progress that develops in unison with modes of production and consumption which foster personal growth. The article thus reads the green Thoreau's insistence that any commodification *of* nature, i.e. rural America, needs to be embedded in an understanding of ourselves *in* nature as a usable past and a vision relevant to a sustainable post-rural American future.

Second, the rural is not only suggestive of a particular national past but continues to be appropriated as an **allegory of the nation**, as a *pars pro toto*, so to speak, and thus historical conjectures about the rural are constantly extrapolated into the present. In this version, much of what is today considered as paradigmatically 'American' is related to a rural life style and a culture of rurality. Here, the rural becomes a "territorial fiction" of the nation at large (LeMenager) – as evidenced in popular culture and advertisement (see, for instance, the 2013-superbowl Ram

commercial with Paul Harvey). Among those scholars and writers who have affirmed this *pars pro toto*-logic are Frederick Jackson Turner with his dictum that "American democracy came out of the forest," Randolph Bourne's observation of the rural Midwest as "American Civilization […] in the full tide of believing in itself" (267), as well as (more recently and less favorably) Daniel Woodrell's and Cormac McCarthy's neo-noir rural novels dominated by violence and bloodshed. In these versions of the rural, a particular ethics of place and community (at times a perverted one) is foregrounded as foundational not only for rural America but for the nation at large.

Brigitte Georgi-Findlay investigates this dimension when exploring the rural in the Western and finding that, time and again, the rural is slipping and sliding into the allegorical mode of an origin myth. Thus, the rural seems to disappear behind a national myth of the West, a mythical region that is apparently hard to pinpoint in geographical terms. **Monika Sauter** subsequently shows how an idealized notion of the rural is used in the 2010 Citizens United documentary film *Fire from the Heartland: The Awakening of the Conservative Woman.* Focusing on its representation of the conservative woman as a "mama grizzly bear" and as a virtuous native of the American heartland, Sauter reads the film as a powerful ideological maneuver designed to foster 'traditional American values' of limited government, free enterprise, strong family bonds, motherhood and well-fortified nation building. The rural here functions as an oppositional category and a figure of critique which saves 'true' American values from degeneration.

Equally problematic symbolic slippages and slidings between rural particularity and the nation are observed by **Kerstin Knopf, Carmen Dexl,** and **Jens Temmen**. **Knopf** addresses convict labor and the re-emergence of the chain gang, especially since the 1990s, as a legacy of the rural plantation regime. She demonstrates that contemporary scholars as well as 20th-century American prison literature clearly comprehend prison labor and chain gangs as transformed continuations of slavery-like exploitation, imposed not to rehabilitate but to humiliate, punish, and extract labor from the prisoner,. Convict labor thus marks not only a 'benighted rural south' but the US in general as a deeply racialized and racist society. **Dexl** articulates linkages between patterns of consumption and ideologies of race in James W. Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.* Her essay demonstrates how the

novel associates capitalist social relations with lynch logics in both rural and urban areas of the US and elsewhere in the early 20th century. She thus reads the novel as undermining dichotomous notions of the backward country versus the progressive city and as attributing responsibility for a culturally embedded lynch logics to the entire nation. **Temmen** turns to the reservation as a precarious rural space legally designated to confine an idealized Anglo American nation's unwanted Native others. He reads the 19th-century dime novel *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*, by Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge, as a narrative of resistance against legal textual authority and discriminatory national spatial allocations. Temmen's reading demonstrates how Murieta physically 'overrides' the plantation and symbolically 'overwrites' the inscriptions of US law and jurisdiction and thus challenges both renderings of indigeneity as illegitimate and the legitimacy of national identity.

Because it figures so prominently in a national discourse of 'authentic' Americanness, the rural may ultimately appear as unmarked. It may even become invisible as a specific locale amidst all of its hegemonic appropriations and in its "lived relation to the real" (Althusser); thus, third, we also need to acknowledge rural spaces as culturally specific milieus contrasting with urban or metropolitan spaces: Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* has captured the synchronic, binary logic in which rurality emerges as a concept that only works in contradistinction and in a dialectical relationship to the non-rural, i.e. the urban. In this logic, the rural is not connected to American beginnings but emerges as a discursive formation only in the context of large-scale urbanization in the second half of the 19th century. Without the latter, there is simply no sense of the rural. In the dichotomy of urban vs. rural (read also: center vs. margin), rurality is often viewed from the outside, so to speak, as a category of difference and otherness: Much in the same way that we address differences of race, gender, class, and age, "rural others" (cf. Kaplan) are produced in a discourse that is informed by what J. Halberstam has called "metronormativity." This kind of normativity renders a rural population as 'backward' and finds rurality characterized by attributes such as conservative, reactionary, intolerant, and religiously fanatic – in sum, as anti-modern.

In turn, rural self-representations may focus on such issues as economic hardships, health, community building, and issues of class more

generally. Rural voices may present a critical, counter-hegemonic (in fact heterotopian) perspective on the discourse of the nation that has appropriated their positionality and lived realities in a persuasive national 'fantasy.' In fact, the cultural logic of rurality seems to involve a splitting, as it were, considering a kind of unspecific rurality as national cultural capital and a specific rurality as local stigma. "Can the rural speak?" we may at times be prompted to ask. Barbara Ching and Mary L. Gray have pointed to the neglect of the rural in American studies and to the subversive aspects of rural culture and cultural production that are often 'misread' by a dominant discourse informed by urban elites (cf. Ching; Gray). In particular, intersectionality is an issue here, and **Jerry Hagstrom** profiles some of these intersections in rural America with regard to agricultural politics when he addresses the situation of female farmers, black farmers, and gay and lesbian farmers in light of recent class action suits that are aimed at ameliorating discriminatory institutional practices. The rural as a category of difference becomes significant in our volume on various levels. While some essays trace how cultural products and practices produce and use the rural as a deliberate marker of difference, others discuss how such manifestations actively or implicitly undermine the dichotomy between the rural and the urban rather than denigrating or defending a decidedly 'rural' position.

Katrin Thomson discusses Robert Redford's 1998 film *The Horse Whisperer* as suitable high school classroom material for an enhancement of students' film literacy. While the film reproduces stereotypes of the rural, Thomson argues that a formal analysis of how those images are constructed helps identifying and questioning students' frequently simplified ideas of American rurality.

The following essays mobilize the supposedly static dichotomy between the rustic and the modern, three of them by discussing and rearticulating the notion of the pastoral. **Mark Büchsel** reads Jane Smiley's critique of the Jeffersonian self-sufficiency myth in her 1991 farm novel *A Thousand Acres* as a revision and reassertion of pastoral values. Similarly, **Jochen Achilles** seeks to reposition the pastoral as a versatile and mobile quality that mediates between the forces of nature and technology in his reading of Flannery O'Connor's 1957 short story "A View of the Woods." Starting from Leo Marx's metaphor of the *Machine in the Garden*, which remains indeterminate in relation to whether the conflict between natural resources and technological

demands will lead to either the resuscitation or eradication of a pastoral lifestyle, Achilles reads the story as opening up a liminal sphere for the renegotiation of both anthropocentric and ecocentric beliefs and values. And finally, **Ingrid Gessner** turns to Charles Brockden Brown's 1799 gothic novel *Arthur Mervyn* to explore its portrayal of the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic. The essay traces how the novel's spatial negotiation of a culture of fear complicates notions of both a safe countryside and a dangerously contagious city.

While the 'rural' as category of difference still lumps together very different regions of the US, or treats particular regions as paradigmatic, the rural also needs to be worked out, forth and more concretely, in terms of **regional particularity**, i.e. rural America as sparsely populated areas (population size is the official criterion for defining the rural for the US census) that can be identified via constructions of specific regional identities. Most prominently, we may think of the Midwest, Appalachia as the object of Appalachian studies, the 'old' South or the Southwest (cf. Charles Reagon Wilson's work on the South and on regionalism). All of these regions can be accounted for by way of material realities, cultural practices, and narratives of rural life. The latter have been produced, for instance, in the context of so-called local color-fiction at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, often with a gesture of self-exoticization, and yet as rural regions existing in contrast to and apart from a national discourse. Recently, Colin Woodard has identified "the eleven rival regional cultures of North America," and it has been argued that many writers of the American canon (ranging from Henry David Thoreau to Zora Neale Hurston and beyond) are, in fact, writers of rural America with a distinctly regional focus.

In this volume, **Rogelio Saenz** discusses rural America's Chicano population and its social and political vulnerabilities that are specific to the Southwest. In a different disciplinary context, **Ariane Schröder** exemplarily addresses spatial negotiations of disease and progress by analyzing 18th- and 19th-century New England vampire rituals employed to fight tuberculosis. Against the background of an emergent urban biomedicine, these rituals were frequently cast as backward country practices, but Schröder finds that they constitute a locally grounded theory of contagion, the practical consequences of which were not that far removed from contemporary biomedically approved cures.

Whereas traditional regionalist approaches and various 'returns' to the regional at times run the risk of isolating regions in a essentialist framework of mentality studies and the like, fifth, the so-called **critical regionalism** offers a more constructivist perspective on rurality and regionalism. This scholarly paradigm conceptualizes rurality and the rural in the age of globalization and under conditions of neo-liberal capitalism. Here, the rural is configured in a new relationship to the urban (as, for instance, in eco-critical discussions of urban gardening and similar phenomena), yet also critically discussed as the object of (global) processes of commodification and branding (consider 'rural chic'). Critical regionalists also think in terms of transnational connections that establish important links between seemingly isolated and remote rural regions in vastly different locales, e.g. the Midwest and Ireland (cf. Herr) or the Appalachians and Scotland (cf. Blaustein). Over all, critical regionalism clearly moves away from discourses of rural origins, from allegorizing the rural, and from essentialist, sentimental fictions of the rural. In this sense, **Barbara Ching** opens the final scholarly section of our volume with her presentation of Johnny Cash as the epitome of urban-normative notions of the rural. Also critiquing the practices of foraging and urban farming, she argues that urban America literally and symbolically feeds on rural America and that the nation's dependence on rural America needs to be more fully acknowledged.

Country music and its ambivalences within the framework of a global music market are the common concern of **Christian Schmidt**'s, **Nadja Gernalzick**'s, **and Frank Mehring**'s essays. **Schmidt** reads Nashville, the capital of country music, as a paradigmatic symbolic locale for the genre's constitutively contradictory quality of staged country authenticity. He interprets mainstream country songs by Alan Jackson and the early Dixie Chicks to identify their paradigmatic symbolic essence as a constant invocation and re-negotiation of a discourse of country authenticity. **Gernalzick** also emphasizes the characteristic duality of country music as tied to notions of both the rural and the nation. She demonstrates how alternative country music in general – and the Cowboy Junkies' work in particular – critically reflects these symbolic ties from a transnational or even post-nationalist perspective. **Mehring** picks up on the transnational and ties it back to the shaping of regional, subnational, and national American identities in his analysis of the German-American composer Kurt Weill's 1948 operatic remediation of rural America *Down*

in the Valley. He traces the process of cultural transfer and mobility in the folk opera's interplay of different media in different cultural contexts, demonstrating how Weill turned his work into an artistic immersive experience for an urban theater culture, a remediation anchored in a cultural imaginary of 'America' as rural. All three essays undermine and displace the dichotomy between the urban and the rural by emphasizing their discursive construction.

This is also true for **Florian Gross**', **Sina Nitzsche**'s, and **Klara Stephanie Szlezák**'s work**.** With Leo Marx, **Gross** reads New York City's High Line as a "middle landscape" between the country and the city, as a revitalized urban pastoral ideal, and as a popular, sentimental, imaginative, and complex integration of the rural into a post-industrial urban space. The High Line quotes the rural – as a non-urban, communal, authentic space of the past –, re-creates it, and places it ambivalently in an unabashedly affluent and urban environment, thus creating unusual aesthetic as well as real estate value. Similarly, **Nitzsche** shows how Bernice Abbott's New York photography from the 1930s projects an urban pastoralism by placing the rural within urban space and vice versa. Finally, **Szlezák** also discusses a renewed invention of the rural in her essay on the Vermont cheese trail as an instance of sentimental pastoralism gone capitalist. The tourist industry produces and undermines the pastoral, thus substantiating and benefitting from the image of Vermont as a mainstay of rural America and locale of small-scale local food production.

These five ways of thinking about rural America (as history, as national allegory, as category of difference, as regional, and as critical regionalist) certainly do not exhaust the topic; these different conceptualizations may overlap at times and are, at other times, in tension with each other regarding the meaning of rurality in the US and beyond. Even as this typology is not exclusive, it serves as a point of entry in order to think about the rural and the different kinds of cultural work that are performed in terms of more particular and more general claims about rural American culture and history. The contributions in this book argue within these parameters of the rural; they shed light on rural cultures, past and present, local and global, and they do so in a way that does not fall back on simplified and clichéd notions of the rural in American history and culture.

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DAVID B. DANBOM

Americanism Distilled: The Place of the Countryside in American Thought

In what follows, I would like to address how Americans have thought about agriculture, farmers, and rural life over the history of the Republic, and what they think of those things now. This thought has been broad, wide-ranging, and complex, encompassing politics, society and culture, economics, and ecology. It is artificial to separate these varied perspectives on rural life, because they inform one another and overlap. But the aspects of thinking about rural America on which I want to focus most of my attention are political, by which I mean the particular role rural America plays in the Republic and in its politics and civic institutions; and social, by which I mean the effects farming and rural life have on rural people and on the larger national society.

While thinking about rural US and rural Americans has evolved tremendously over the course of the Republic's history, I want to focus on three broad periods – the era of the Revolution and the early Republic, the industrial age of the late-19th and early 20th centuries, and the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. In the first period rural and America were virtually one and the same, and the farmer was the bedrock of the Republic. In the second period rural and America were no longer coincidental, but farmers remained essential to the Republic's political and social health. In the last period rural and America were largely dissociated and alienated from one another, and rural people had become a shrinking social remnant, besieged by incompatible people and ideas.

I. The Era of the Revolution and the Early Republic

Modern Americans celebrate nature, but their ancestors did not always regard it highly. The early North American colonists were Europeans with

early modern European ideas. For many of them, the town was the realm of God, while the mountains and forests beyond the town limits were the abode of bandits and murderers and fantastic but no less frightening trolls, ogres, and witches. Their unease with the open country was one of the factors compelling New Englanders to create strong, self-sufficient, and self-governing towns. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Puritan heroes and heroines, remember, never got into trouble in town – only in the dark New England forests with their mysterious strangers, satanic Indians, and witches' Sabbaths. In Virginia, too, town living was promoted, but the desperate unhealthiness of Jamestown and other early settlements and tobacco farmers' need for lots of land led to the dispersal of population.

By the early 18th century these ancient superstitions were fading away, and abundant lands from which Native Americans had been removed were beckoning farmers. As a result, in most places settlement was becoming quite dispersed and towns were becoming service centers for surrounding farms. Population dispersal made sense in a country with a lot of land and very little labor, but to many Europeans the predominantly rural and agricultural nature of the colonies marked them as rudimentary and unsophisticated. European social thinkers believed that as societies matured they became more urban, more economically diverse, more hierarchical, and more socially complex. The colonies were socially and economically homogenous. They were heavily rural and based in a large class of landowning farmers. They were not 'barbaric,' but they were immature and unsophisticated in terms of social development – a judgment with which much of the American commercial and planter elite agreed.

Yet ideas about rural life emanating from Europe in the 18th century were not monolithic. Enlightenment philosophers, English ruralists, and French Physiocrats were among those expressing positive views of agriculture and the people who practiced it. The Physiocrats argued that agriculture was more than just a way station on the road from barbarism to sophistication. To them it was the basis for a strong national economy and farming was the most legitimate occupation because farmers met the basic human needs for food and clothing. Moreover, because farmers lived in natural surroundings and coaxed forth nature's bounty, they were assumed to be purer, more moral, and more God-fearing than those who pursued other occupations. Recalling Cato, Cicero, Cincinnatus, and other figures from ancient Rome, the new champions of agriculture also emphasized farmers' patriotism and devotion to liberty.

It was appropriate that these European ideas would be applied to America by a European – Frenchman J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. Crèvecœur emphasized the goodness, independence, freedom, and egalitarianism of American farmers and, most famously, argued in letter III that “a new race of men” was being created in rural America as “individuals of all nations are melted together” (23).

Literate Americans were undoubtedly pleased when Crèvecœur and others redefined their rurality, simplicity, and equality as virtues, yet it was the Revolution and the creation of a republic that truly elevated farmers to paragons of civic rectitude. Based on their understanding of the history of Greece and Rome, most American and European political theorists believed that republics were unstable forms of government because they depended on individual selflessness and patriotism – or virtue. Since people were naturally selfish, corrupt, and disputatious, however, republics were expected to be inevitably torn apart and ultimately replaced by tyrannies. According to this intellectual tradition America could avoid the descent into tyranny because over 80 percent of its people were farmers. As such they were virtuous, patriotic, independent, self-disciplined, roughly equal to one another, and jealous of their liberties. As Thomas Jefferson put it in his much-quoted formulation in *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

> 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 proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts. (164–65).

As long as there were plenty of nature’s noblemen around, there was no danger of the new United States treading the path traveled by Athens and Rome.

The late-18th century was a heady time for American farmers. As Gordon Wood notes, they were no longer

> regarded as primitive folk living on the edge of Western civilization and mired in the backwaters of history [...] They now saw themselves [...] leading the world into a new era of republican liberty” (38).

Many of the ideals and promises of the Revolution faded over time, but the belief in the moral superiority and civic necessity of farmers did not

soon falter. Public commentators, authors, and newspaper and magazine editors praised them reflexively. Labor reformers devised policies that would allow urban workers to become farmers. Men who made their fortunes by law, finance, and trade repaired to farms when freed from city work in order to refresh their minds and bodies and cleanse their souls of the taint of commerce. And most politicians praised them, echoing Jefferson's contentions that they were better than America's non-farming citizens and were the essential bedrock of the Republic and its values. There were exceptions, notable mainly for their rarity. Abraham Lincoln, for example, told a group of farmers at a Wisconsin agricultural fair that he did not consider them special: "My opinion [...] is that, in proportion to numbers, they are neither better nor worse than other people" (qutd. in Hagenstein 63). He concluded that politicians flattered them because they cast so many votes.[1]

II. Challenges to Agrarianism

This celebration of farmers was remarkable for how dramatically it diverged from reality. The independent and self-sufficient farmers of Jefferson's imagination were becoming profit-driven commercial producers, increasingly dependent on others to supply them with producer goods and to process and transport their crops. Many of these 'innate lovers of liberty' made their livings by exploiting the labor of slaves – Jefferson himself owned 200 – of whom there were 3.5 million by 1860. Furthermore, these so-called 'stewards of nature' were ruthlessly mining their soil, wearing it out and moving further west, which they only were able to do due to the forceful dispossession of Native American peoples of their lands.

Additionally, there was a commercial threat to agrarian dominance growing in the early Republic, ironically resulting from agriculture's economic strength, which nurtured other industries. Non-agricultural sectors of the economy – finance, commerce, and industry – were assuming more important roles. Already in 1820 the United States was second only to Great Britain in industrial production. And as the non-agricultural

[1] See also: Thornton, Tamara Plakins. *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite, 1785–1860*.

sectors grew, the cities in which they concentrated also grew, becoming home to a larger fraction of the population.

After the Civil War this trend became even more apparent. While agriculture continued to expand, industrial expansion was much more impressive. As the Bureau of the Census documented, the rural population grew by 60 percent between 1860 and 1890, as did agricultural employment. The amount of land in farms increased by over 50 percent, and the number of farms by nearly 125 percent. At the same time, the urban population grew by 255 percent, manufacturing employment rose by 220 percent, and manufacturing output increased by over 340 percent. In 1860 one in six Americans lived in a city. In 1890 one in three did. In that latter year the United States was judged to be the leading industrial nation in the world, and for the first time the total value of its manufactured products exceeded the total value of its agricultural commodities. Also in 1890, as Frederick Jackson Turner noticed, the Census Bureau declared that the frontier was no more, foreshadowing an end to the expansion of agriculture across the continent.

These developments occurred with a rapidity that shocked many observers. It was clear that the United States, while still a nation with many farmers, was no longer a nation dominated by farmers. The country was still rural, but impending urban domination was on the horizon. Industry, not agriculture, represented the nation's future. Farmers no longer enjoyed the respect that had been accorded them in Jefferson's day or even Lincoln's. Fewer national publications spoke of nature's noblemen and more referred to hicks and rubes. No longer was it easily assumed that farmers were morally superior to others; now social scientists wrote of rural degeneracy and its threat to the country. Nor was it the case any longer that farmers formed the bone and muscle of the body politic. In his "Cross of Gold" speech in 1896 William Jennings Bryan taunted the urban members of his party, saying

> burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up as if by magic. But destroy our farms and grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.

That might have sounded good to farmers, but Bryan lost the Presidential election when he was able to carry only 40 percent of the urban vote. From then on national candidates could still brag about their rural backgrounds, but they attacked cites and urban people at their peril.

III. The Back-to-the-Land and Country Life Movements

Champions of rural life responded to this growing challenge in two ways. On the one side there was a Back-to-the-Land movement that was based in the notion that the countryside was the best place for people to live. On the other side there was the Country Life Movement, much of which was dedicated to the proposition that the best people lived in the countryside, and that they should stay there.

The Back-to-the-Land movement that developed at the turn of the 20th century appealed to urbanites who desired to escape what one of its champions called "the horrors of city life" (Dixon). And horrors aplenty there were. American cities were unplanned and generally unattractive. Their provision of essential comforts and services had not kept pace with their rapid growth. They were dirty, loud, unhealthy, and frequently dangerous. Life in America's growing industrial sector was economically insecure. For the working class, employment was sporadic, uncertain, and dangerous. For the white-collar workers, whose numbers had exploded as modern corporate bureaucracies developed, work was better compensated and slightly more secure, but still precarious. Corporate bureaucrats were dependent on bosses willing and often eager to replace them with cheaper, younger, and more promising employees. Even when white-collar workers enjoyed the favor of their employers, economic cataclysms such as the devastating Depression of 1893 could cost them their jobs and their homes, shaking them from their uncertain holds on middle-class status. The 'new middle class' of corporate America might have enjoyed education, sophistication, and consumer goods that the 'old middle class' of farmers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers lacked, but the latter appeared to enjoy greater independence and security.

The alternative offered to oppressed and anxious urbanites by the Back-to-the-Land movement was seductive. Bolton Hall, Malthusian, birth-control advocate, and premier figure in the Back-to-the-Land movement, argued in his pointedly-titled *Three Acres and Liberty* that urban families could achieve economic independence even on small farm plots, while enjoying "the natural condition of living" (4). Many Back-to-the-Landers stressed the spiritually rewarding life of rural America, in contrast to "the worthlessness and unwholesomeness of the average metropolitan existence" (Hall, "Why" 522). They also emphasized the independence presumably offered by rural living. While "every other

vocation is conducted in chains," wrote one, shaped by "the demands of employers, or directors, or stockholders, or a spoiled pubic. It is only the farmer who is free of these things" (Dyer 535).

Farm-making was an attractive idea to a lot of people in the early 20th century, both as individuals and in organized groups. For example, several dozen Jewish agricultural colonies were launched, mostly under the auspices of the Baron de Hirsch Fund and other Jewish philanthropies. But the people who responded to such enthusiasts as Hall and Ray Stannard Baker, whose "Adventures in Contentment" series, written under the pseudonym David Grayson, championed back-to-the-land ideas, were overwhelmingly white, middle-class, native-born, urban males, few of whom had any agricultural experience. Women were conspicuous by their scarcity in the Back-to-the-Land movement, perhaps because while urban life involved a loss of independence for men, it represented the opposite for women. As a recent study of the Back-to-the-Land movement suggests, "'manhood'" as represented by "independence, autonomy, and [...] personal integrity" (Brown 90) was a preoccupation of those drawn to the back-to-the-land idea.

The Back-to-the-Land movement was concerned with the problems of city dwellers. The contemporaneous Country Life movement, on the other hand, focused on the inadequacies of farmers, and how those threatened to weaken the nation. Most Country Lifers believed that the problem with rural America was that it was not keeping up with the urban-industrial segment of the nation, either economically or socially. Country Lifers worried that farmers were technologically backward, undereducated, heedless of conservation, and rudimentary in their business methods. Because of their shortcomings their standards of living lagged behind urban standards, and their backwardness threatened the nation's economic future. Moreover, their social institutions were underdeveloped and anachronistic, and their homes were inconvenient and unattractive. The many problems of the countryside and the attractions of the city drew the best and brightest rural youth away, exacerbating the fundamental problems of rural work and life. As the Country Life Commission, created by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907, concluded, rural America needed "better farming, better living, and better business" (Bailey 3). The image of the farmer had deteriorated significantly. Once the backbone of the Republic, he had become a drag on the nation and a fitting subject for

study by a government commission. Once the national paragon, he had become a national problem.

Country Life reformers believed that a rural renaissance was needed for economic reasons. A backward, unproductive agricultural sector would hold the entire economy back, drive up the cost of living, and threaten America's favorable balance of trade. But Country Lifers also believed that American society required a healthy rural component if it was to thrive, and they defined that component in racial terms. E. Benjamin Andrews argued that "a vigorous country population is necessary" (29) to counter "the undesirable influences of our newest immigration" (232). Kenyon Butterfield, a member of Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, added that a healthy countryside was required to offset the "extreme poverty, reeking crime, unutterable filth, [and] moral sewage" of immigrant-dominated cities (5). Southern Country Lifers such as newspaper editor Clarence Poe were more concerned about African Americans than immigrants. He favored segregated land holdings as a means of nurturing and protecting the white rural community (see Baker). Theodore Roosevelt, who defined the American farmer as the "preeminently typical American" (6), shared similar views, though he did not state them in print or in public with the vehemence of Andrews, Butterfield, or Poe. Roosevelt was a believer in eugenics who worried about "race suicide" among old-stock Americans. To him, country life reform was a facet of his larger commitment to conservation – environmental conservation, to be sure, but also the conservation of that "typical American" so necessary to offset the immigrants numerically dominating cities. Whereas to Crèvecoeur, the American farmer had personified the melting pot, by the early 20th century he was seen as the melting pot's balance and counter.

IV. The Survival and Revival of Agrarianism

The Country Life Movement faded out of public prominence after World War I, its economic concerns diminished by a surge in agricultural production and productivity and its social fears assuaged by immigration restriction. The Back-to-the-Land movement faded as well, but its sharp critique of urban-industrial society lived on. During the 1920s the most provocative spokesman for that viewpoint was Ralph Borsodi, an

advertising executive whose father had been a close associate of Bolton Hall. In the early 1920s Borsodi moved his young family out of New York City and on to a small farm on Long Island. There they practiced agricultural self-sufficiency, while Borsodi continued to pursue his lucrative business career. Borsodi's back-to-the-land experience prompted him to write *This Ugly Civilization* in 1929. As the title suggests, Borsodi's book was an uncompromising attack on industrial civilization, which he damned for weakening family life, removing people from necessary connection to the soil, and stripping them of their resourcefulness and self-reliance. It is a harsh and ugly book mixing strains of Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Nietzsche, among others, and it demonstrates an insensitivity to women that called forth bitter rejoinders from a number of female readers.[2]

Another critical assessment of urban-industrial society was *I'll Take My Stand* by 'Twelve Southerners,' published in 1931. The disparate essays that comprise *I'll Take My Stand* were written by twelve humanists, most of whom were associated with Vanderbilt University. The 'Nashville Agrarians,' as they were called, worried that industrialism was destroying the Southern way of life, rooted in agriculture. They argued that industrial society imperiled religion, threatened the family, eroded the amenities of life, and poisoned interpersonal relationships. The Nashville Agrarians held a romantic view of the rural South that ignored the grinding poverty, stultifying ignorance, and vicious racism that characterized much of the region. To them, as to many other agrarians, rural realities were less compelling than rural fantasies.

The voices of critics of industrialism were dramatically augmented in the early years of the Great Depression. While it was an overstatement to proclaim, as Borsodi did in 1933, that the Depression proved "the whole industrial world was mistaken" (*Flight* 112) it certainly appeared to be seriously flawed. Urbanites who lost jobs and property in the cataclysm flowed back to the countryside, reversing the long-term trend of rural-urban migration. Many of these refugees moved in with friends or relatives, but some formed cooperative communities in the open countryside or on the urban fringe, sometimes sponsored by municipal

[2] For contemporary criticisms of Borsodi see letters to the editor of *The New Republic* by F.E.B and Zella Wright Newcomb under the headlines "Mr. Borsodi's Way Out" and "A City Dweller, and Likes It" respectively.

governments or charities. Borsodi helped develop and manage one of these for the unemployed of Dayton, Ohio. Some believed that the Depression demonstrated that industry and agriculture had got out of balance. Lewis Mumford, Stuart Chase, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others who took this position embraced some of the ideas of English Distributists, who believed that a portion of the urban population should be moved to the countryside and that land should be redistributed to accommodate them. Henry Ford relaunched one of his favorite ideas –- that factory workers should live in subsistence farm settlements near cities where they could live off the land during industrial slowdowns. Ford was a former farm boy who never lost his affection for the countryside, but this was still a stunning idea coming from a man whose very name was synonymous with everything many agrarians associated with the ills of industrialism.[3]

The popular culture also shunned urban-industrial America and embraced the countryside. Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood chose rural themes emphasizing the goodness and decency of the common man, as did such films as King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* (1934) and Ricardo Cortez' *Heaven With a Barbed Wire Fence* (1939). Farm Security Administration photographers Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange brought the faces of rural America to national attention, often romanticizing them in the process. In the Depression-era popular culture rural Americans were not H.L. Mencken's hicks and yokels; they represented the best of America – dignity, courage, perseverance, and character.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was also a champion of rural America. In part this was due to his feel for the vagaries and shifts of public opinion. But Roosevelt was a true believer in country living, who told census takers that his occupation was "farmer." Like his distant cousin Theodore, he defined conservation broadly, to include rural people as well as forests, rivers, and landscapes. But unlike Theodore, he surrounded himself with agrarian fundamentalists such as Henry A. Wallace and M.L. Wilson of the United States Department of Agriculture, who believed that the economic, social, and political health of the nation was dependent on a strong and numerous farming population. Roosevelt believed that

[3] For a discussion of Distributism see Lawson.

agriculture and industry had gotten out of balance, both economically and demographically. One of his administration's ideas for correcting that imbalance was the Subsistence Homestead program, created by Congress in 1933 and administered by the Department of the Interior. The Subsistence Homestead program involved federal government creation of communities near cities where the unemployed would engage in subsistence agriculture and commute to nearby towns and cities for wage labor when it became available. This was already being done in a less formal way in localities all over the country, and was a popular idea in Europe, including in Germany where land settlement was embraced for a time by the Nazi regime. Over the life of the program at least 60 and perhaps as many as 200 projects were initiated. The subsistence homesteads were not particularly popular with residents, who complained of federal micromanagement, a lack of individual initiative and freedom, and the amount of work subsistence farming actually required. Conservatives in Congress damned them as semi-communist experiments. Even if they had been popular, there were never enough subsistence homesteads to begin the demographic rebalancing of rural and urban America.[4]

To meet the needs of full-time farmers the administration created the Resettlement Administration, which was succeeded by the Farm Security Administration. The former relocated farmers from submarginal to more productive lands. The latter continued that effort, while also making it possible for renters and sharecroppers to become farm owners. These programs did not begin to meet the need for their services, and those they served were not placed in a position to enjoy commercial success.[5]

The biggest problem with the New Deal agricultural program from the small farmers' point of view was that while it gave crumbs to subsistence homesteaders and tenants, it lavished loaves on large-scale, commercial

[4] For more on the Subsistence Homestead program see Paul K. Conkin's *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, Richard S. Kirkendall's *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* and Dona Brown*, Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America*. For parallels between German and American land settlement see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939.*

[5] For some of the shortcomings of New Deal programs for small farmers see Michael Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929–1945*.

agriculture. New Deal subsidy programs targeted substantial commodity producers. These farmers used some of the federal money they received to mechanize production. In the cotton South mechanization resulted in the removal of tens of thousands of sharecroppers and share tenants from the land, and everywhere it made it more difficult for small-scale, unmechanized farmers to compete. By accelerating the production revolution in American agriculture, the New Deal ironically exacerbated the very demographic imbalance that had so troubled Roosevelt and his advisors.

V. The Production Revolution and Its Consequences

By the end of the Depression decade the direction in which agriculture and rural life were moving was becoming clear, and it was not the direction Borsodi or Mumford or the Twelve Southerners had in mind. As Paul Johnstone noted in his 1940 *Yearbook of Agriculture* essay, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," most Americans continued to think of farming in warm, nostalgic, Jeffersonian terms. Yet farmers were becoming more commercial and businesslike, agriculture was becoming more highly capitalized, mechanized, and technologically sophisticated, and materially, socially, and culturally rural life was becoming more like urban life. Rural and agricultural life was no longer an alternative to urban industrial life. It had *become* urban industrial life.

The production revolution in American agriculture during and after World War II made the changes Johnstone had highlighted impossible to ignore. The increasing mechanization of farm operations – including very labor intensive ones such as cotton and dairy production – the growing significance of farm chemicals, such as 2,4-D, DDT, and anhydrous ammonia, and the development of improved – often hybridized – cultivars, and eventually genetically-modified plants, transformed commercial farmers into highly capitalized, technologically sophisticated producers whose farms were almost literally factories in the fields.

The demographic consequences of the production revolution were stark. Because mechanized farmers could farm large acreages, and because it became so expensive for farmers to achieve commercial success, the number of farms and the population on farms fell dramatically. In 1940 there were about 6 million farms in the United

States, and 30.5 million people – or 23 percent of the country's population – lived on them. By 1970 there were less than half as many farms as in 1940 (2.78 million), and only 9.7 million people lived on them. In 2010 there were about 2.2 million farms in the country, and only about 6 million people – most of whom no longer identified themselves as farmers – occupied them. By then only 7 percent of *rural* people lived on farms. Even these striking figures fail to chart the demographic and economic descent of agriculture into marginality. Of the nation's farms in 2010 about 1,175,000, or over half, were weekend or hobby farms marketing under $10,000 in produce per year. Only about 275,000 farms marketed at least $250,000 in produce per year. In 1800 the average American was a farmer and agriculture was the foundation of the economy. As late as 1940 a significant portion of the population farmed and agriculture remained an important component of the economy. Today farmers are a curiosity, and production agriculture is a minor – almost trivial – component of the American economy.

Agrarians in the post-World War II period were concerned about agriculture's demographic decline, but they were deeply disheartened by the adoption of industrial methods and behaviors by commercially successful farmers. Previous generations had used farming and rural life as foils to criticize urban-industrial society. Postwar agrarians ignored urban-industrial society almost entirely and focused their attention on industrial agriculture. One line of criticism, developed especially by Wendell Berry, was that industrial agriculture disconnected farmers from nature and the community. In their rage for profits, Berry argued, farmers forgot the lessons of the natural world, mistreated land and water, and sacrificed close and sustaining communities. "The great breakthrough of industrial agriculture," Berry wrote in 1987, "occurred when most farmers became convinced that it would be better to own a neighbor's farm than to have a neighbor" (356). Others placed their main emphasis on the environmental destructiveness of industrial agriculture. Drawing especially on Aldo Leopold's land ethic, Wes Jackson scorned industrial agriculture for its destruction of natural soil fertility through excessive chemical use, its harmful monocropping, and its dependence on finite petroleum resources.

Earlier generations saw the countryside as an alternative to urban-industrial society. Contemporary agrarians are hard-pressed to find a *rural* alternative to industrial agriculture, most often pointing to "the

Amish as the best – and perhaps only – example of traditional agrarian culture being carried on in a way that is coherent and thriving" (Hagenstein 304). That modern agrarians have been reduced to celebrating an insular, traditional religious group as the most viable alternative to industrial agriculture indicates how dramatically agriculture has changed and how limited even theoretical alternatives are.

VI. Urban Americans and Rural America Today

Berry, Jackson, and other critics of industrial agriculture were not voices in the wilderness. By the end of the century their critiques were being repeated and amplified by the Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, the Wild Farm Alliance, Slow Food USA, the Family Farm Alliance, Roots of Change, Food and Water Watch, and numerous other organizations in what was often referred to as the Sustainable Agriculture movement.

The Sustainable Agriculture movement concedes that industrial farming has at least temporarily helped produce abundance. The average American family devotes less than 10 percent of its income to purchasing food today, as opposed to 36 percent in 1945 and 23 percent in 1970. But these low prices obscure substantial costs, according to Sustainable Agriculture advocates. Many of those costs are environmental. Modern industrial agriculture is unsustainable, dependent as it is on large amounts of petroleum and other finite resources. Moreover, the large carbon footprint left by contemporary agriculture exacerbates potentially catastrophic global climate change. Sustainable Agriculture reformers also question the safety of industrial farming. They doubt the long-term safety of consuming fruits and vegetables produced using large inputs of chemicals, of meat animals overtreated with antibiotics, and of dairy products from cows whose production has been stimulated by hormones. They believe that the food industry encourages the consumption of processed foods that contribute to obesity and associated health risks. Widely publicized outbreaks of salmonella and e-coli in spinach, melons, and meats have raised further questions about food safety, especially the safety of foods produced in distant locales. Sustainable Agriculture reformers are also concerned about diminished diversity in crop varieties

and are worried about the long-term impact of genetically modified crops on human health.[6]

The Sustainable Agriculture movement's support for organic, low-input agriculture with a significantly reduced carbon footprint is reflected in the growing popularity among relatively affluent urban consumers of consuming locally-produced food. In recent years there has been a boom in the number and size of farmers' markets around the United States. Community sponsored agriculture (CSA), in which consumers sign contracts to purchase a given amount of produce from a local farm that operates in a low-input, sustainable manner, is also expanding rapidly. Home gardening or gardening on vacant lots has similarly surged in popularity among urbanites, stimulated in part by Michele Obama's enthusiasm for home-produced foods, as has the raising of chickens, which increasing numbers of towns and cities have legalized.

The Sustainable Agriculture movement supports rural life, small-scale family farming, and – in contrast to most earlier agrarian movements – social justice for farm workers. However, it speaks mainly to and for urban consumers. Sustainable Agriculture does not suggest that any kind of balance between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors or between rural and urban life can be achieved. The dreams of turn-of-the-century Back-to-the-Landers and even New Deal planners have no place in modern agrarian thinking.

The Sustainable Agriculture movement has benefitted small farmers, who fill most of the stalls at farmers' markets, rent some of their land to ambitious city gardeners, convert their farms into CSAs, or supply local organic restaurants. But the movement's patronage has not been sufficiently lucrative to allow most small producers to make farming their primary occupation. 80 to 90 percent of farm income in the United States comes from off-farm sources, and small farmers are more dependent on off-farm jobs than are large farmers. Moreover, as the sustainable niche expands small farmers will be compelled to share it. Some large farmers and ranchers are producing crops and animals using organic, chemical-free production methods to appeal to the slice of the market committed to sustainability. Farmers' markets are overshadowed by natural foods chains such as Whole Foods, which touts its commitment to organic and environmentally friendly foods, and which had over $12 billion in sales

[6] See for example Hagenstein 369–76, or the *Farm Family Alliance*-website.

in 2012. Even our local supermarket, which is part of a large national chain, emphasizes its commitment to locally raised fruits and vegetables, and carries a full line of organically produced products. The chain has even developed a store brand of organic fruits, vegetables, and meats produced without hormones or antibiotics. In short, American capitalism has seen the demand and is seeking to fill it, a development that might bode well for human health and environmental sustainability, but potentially imperils the sustainability of small farmers.

One other aspect of the Sustainable Agriculture movement that is noteworthy is its sense of imminent crisis. As the Declaration for Healthy Food and Agriculture, adopted by several Sustainable Agriculture groups in 2008, puts it, "ahead lie rising food costs, a changing climate, declining water supplies, a growing population, and the paradox of widespread hunger and obesity" ("Declaration"). The movement's vision of the future has a dystopian flavor. Peak oil, catastrophic climate change, and/or a breaking down of the international food production and distribution system are components of what the movement sees coming. A pre-emptive rebuilding of local and regional food production, processing, and distribution systems is the Sustainable Agriculture answer to these looming catastrophes.

Supporters of sustainable agriculture are not the only Americans who tend to view the countryside in dystopian or apocalyptic terms. On the other side of the political spectrum are far-right groups, such as secessionists, survivalists, militiamen, members of the Posse Comitatus or the Patriot movement, and Christian Identity, who see in rural America – especially the rural Northwest – the last redoubt for their brand of Americanism. Their numbers have surged since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In that year the government counted 149 "patriot" or "militia" groups. Three years later it identified 1274. Indeed, they have even inspired a reality television series, *Doomsday Preppers* (see Johnson).

In contrast to the Sustainable Agriculture movement, these right-wing extremists are not concerned about peak oil or climate change. They worry about a breakdown of social order in urban America, threats to liberty by a tyrannical federal government, or oppression by the United Nations, which they seem to believe is bent on destroying American national sovereignty and the liberties of American citizens. They believe

they will be able to defend themselves best in rural America against whichever of these dire scenarios comes to pass.

Most rural Americans are not anti-government extremists or survivalists, but rural America has become the most conservative part of the country. In the 2012 election Barack Obama received only 37 percent of the rural vote, and likely much less of the rural white vote. He lost 15 of the 19 most rural states, while winning 27 of the nation's 30 largest cities. In some areas Obama did especially poorly. In the rural South and the Mountain West he had little support, and in Appalachian counties he ran 15 to 30 percent below John Kerry's 2004 totals. Among large farmers he was especially unpopular, losing the votes of 77 percent of those with farms larger than 500 acres. Most of Obama's weakest rural counties were relatively isolated and distant from urban centers. In 25 rural counties he won less than 10 percent of the vote. One of those was Garfield County, Montana, famous – or infamous – for being the home of the Montana Freemen, the Christian Patriot anti-government group that came to national attention for its armed standoff with Federal Bureau of Investigation agents in 1996.[7]

There are many reasons for the increasing conservatism of rural America. Rural people complain that government is becoming too big and too intrusive. They worry that the federal government will 'take their guns away.' Some chafe under the regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Bureau of Land Management, and other federal bureaucracies. In the Appalachian region the Obama administration's perceived antipathy to coal has played a role in their embrace of the Republican Party. What has probably been most significant, however, has been the growing divide on social issues between many rural white voters and the mainstream of the Democratic Party. As the party has more fully embraced the legalization of abortion and gay marriage, as well as the separation of church and state, and women's equality, it has lost much of its appeal to social conservatives.

[7] For an analysis of the urban-rural divide in the 2012 election coverage see Matt Barron, "Speak Your Piece: Deciphering the Rural Vote," Josh Kron, "Why the Urban-Rural Voting Divide Matters," Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, "The Obama Coalition in the 2012 Election and Beyond," Richard Kline, "Thoughts on the 2012 Vote," and Bill Bishop, "The 50 Most Republican Counties."

Race has also played a major role. As the Democratic Party reached out to African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, it offended the racial sensibilities in heavily white communities. In such places, residents had little contact with non-whites. They considered such people to be ’others,’ citizens of the United States, perhaps, but not really Americans. Marie Myung-Ok Lee, an Asian American writer for *Salon.com*, describes how the casual racism of the all-white northern Minnesota community in which she was raised was made

> familiar, even normal. The black licorice candies at the nice old man’s store were labeled ‘n_____babies,’ the clawlike Brazil nuts in the holiday nut mix were n_____toes, and even eeeny-meeny-miney-moe was to catch a n_____ by the toe….Some…did…scream ‘Chink’ as they drove by our house.

When people in places like that watched the Democratic convention they saw a group more diverse than the country appeared to them. When they watched the Republican convention, on the other hand, they saw a bunch of people who looked just like them. It was easy for them to choose. As one commentator put it, “rural whites were NOT going to appear in public with the Democratic constituency, so they have lodged themselves firmly in the Republican Party” (Kline). This process was well under way before Barack Obama became the first African American President, but his ascension brought it to a climax. His re-election in 2012 was greeted by an outpouring of racist tweets, disproportionately from Mississippi, Alabama, and North Dakota, all heavily rural states (Garber). Rural America, once *the* America, is moving ever farther out of the national mainstream.

VII. The Future of American Agrarianism and Agrarians

In the optimistic days of the early Republic the farmer was what Crèvecoeur called a “new man,” an American. He was the bedrock of the Republic, whose patriotism, independence, and moral goodness assured the nation’s present and its future. A century later agriculture had fallen behind industry, but the farmer was still cherished as the old-stock American manning the ramparts against the immigrant hordes. Today most urban Americans do not think about rural America very much, and

when they do it is often in apocalyptic terms of massive climate change or tyrannical government. Many rural people still think of themselves as farmers were thought of in 1800 – as patriotic, independent, and moral people – the *best* Americans. And many think of themselves as they were thought of in 1900 – defending the Republic from alien people and alien ideas. But now they have become a remnant that is shrinking, demographically, economically, culturally, and politically. They sense that the America they knew has changed, and that the new America is passing them by. There is an anger and a bitterness there, and a sense of being besieged by ideas and people "they really want [...] to leave the country and never come back" (Kline). Is this to be the final distillation of Americanism in the countryside, or just another step on a path to a destination unknown?

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PHILIPP LÖFFLER

Thoreau's Economy: *Walden*, Homestead Politics, and the Use of the Land in 19th-Century American Culture

Henry David Thoreau did not know about fracking. And he probably did not think too much about the possibility of mountain top removal either, when, in the 1840s, he was writing and sampling the material that he then included in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and later *Walden*. Still, Thoreau counts as one of America's earliest and finest 'green' writers. Even if he did not exactly anticipate today's fracking endeavors, he was very much aware that land use and the commercialization of natural resources, such as wood, coal, gas, and later oil, were central issues in what was going to become America's post-rural future. Thoreau indeed knew about the damage the Concord landscape had already suffered in the first half of the 19th century. The systematic deforestation started with the building of the Concord and Fitchburg railroad; there were additional new roadways, and wood in general was recognized as an increasingly marketable fuel. An early account of these developments can be found in George Emerson's *Report on Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* (1846), a book that Thoreau read immediately upon publication.[1]

[1] Thoreau's interest in the natural world from a more specifically scientific point of view grew stronger toward the end of his life. This scientific perspective, however, began to become relevant already in the context of his Walden project and cannot be treated separately. For a very comprehensive discussion of Thoreau's role as a natural philosopher and scientist, see Worster, 57–111, and Harding, 45–61. See also Eiseley, 51–61. The various influences on Thoreau's intellectual career are well documented in Robert Sattelmeyer: *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue*.

This focus on Thoreau's environmentalist consciousness and his valorization of untouched nature has been instrumental in the construction of Thoreau both as a religious seeker and as a politically engaging, adversarial intellectual: critical about the emerging market economy, opposed to technological progress, and against the authority of the state.[2] Such assessments of Thoreau's nature writings are all legitimate in one way or another. But they might also lead readers too easily into forgetting a number of aspects that significantly complicate the notion that Thoreau's main concern was the preservation of nature or its religious idealization. What if there is no such higher religious-philosophical or ecocritical goal connected to his conception and experience of nature? What if eating wild apples, plucking huckleberries, and measuring the ponds really only meant 'eating wild apples,' 'plucking huckleberries,' and 'measuring the ponds'? To ask such questions is not to suggest that we abandon the green Thoreau, Thoreau the romantic Pantheist, or Thoreau the social critic. But it is to assume that the logic of Thoreau's materialism, "the intensity of his interest in and care for physical nature," as Lawrence Buell has it ("Thoreau" 529), might have yet another dimension, one that turns Thoreau more overtly into a proponent of the age of industrialization and the world of commerce in the 19th century than he himself would have probably anticipated or claimed.

Hence, what I want to argue in the following pages is that first, Thoreau had a strong interest in the material uses of nature; he took nature at face value as a potential source of nourishment and of economic income. Second, despite his perennial critique of American society and industry, Thoreau was very much intrigued by the idea of technological progress – and not necessarily opposed to it. And third, what seems much like an opposition between materialist and idealist readings of nature in

[2] The religious dimension in Thoreau's writings has been analyzed most carefully in Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*. The best-known ecocritical account of the Transcendentalists and Thoreau in particular can be found in Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination.: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. For an instructive discussion of Thoreau as a social critic, see Lance Newman: *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature*. See also Jack Turner (ed.), *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* and Clemens Spahr, *Radical Beauty: American Transcendentalism and the Aesthetic Critique of Modernity,* 191–222.

Walden is an argumentative figure necessary to make a particular historical argument about American culture and society in the middle of the 19th century. The idea of technological innovation and the reciprocity of consumption and production in *Walden* is a foreshadowing of a post-rural American future, a future that for Thoreau was as promising as it remained politically and philosophically ambiguous:

> Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. (Thoreau, *Walden* 66)

This sense of uncertainty points to a very productive tension or antinomy, if you will, which is crucial for understanding Thoreau's position as an intellectual in the ante bellum era, writing *against* the constraints of contemporary America yet *in defense* of progress, of new modes of consumption and of processing natural resources.

I. Materialism

Early on in *Walden's* first chapter, "Economy," we have Thoreau complaining about what he believes is wrong in "this comparatively free country," where "most men" "through ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them" (7).[3] Whatever the promise of these finer fruits is, Thoreau first of all bemoans that the routines of daily labor have put the average American in a position where "he has not time to be anything but a machine" (ibid.). He then cautions that we must not forget about the richness of the natural world and that "the finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom of fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling" (ibid.). Such passages are rhetorically powerful and readers immediately sense how discontented Thoreau must

[3] Unlike the majority of his essays, *Walden* is a fictional text (despite its confirmed historical basis). I refer to Thoreau as the speaker or narrator in the text simply to account for the fact that the narrative "I" is constructed consistently as Thoreau throughout the text – not to identify the historical figure Thoreau with the speaker or narrator in the text. For a longer discussion of *Walden*'s fictionality see Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism*, 188–207.

be about the direction into which “this comparatively free country” was headed. It is not entirely clear, however, what “delicate handling” really means. And we are also left guessing what it is that we are supposed to “preserve.” To be sure, there are relatively straight-forward passages in *Walden*, where Thoreau – again very powerfully – outlines the pursuit of his life in the woods: “to live deep and to suck out all the marrow of life,” “to live Spartan-like,” or to “reduce life to its lowest terms” (65).[4] Yet such passages cannot conceal how ambiguous Thoreau remains whenever he tries to define more narrowly the relation between man, on the one hand, and the natural environment, on the other.

In order to tackle these ambiguities in *Walden* and Thoreau’s shorter nature writings, we must first acknowledge that Thoreau was no reactionary and that his Walden “experiment” was not meant to be only a lamentation about the loss of a rural New England, as it were (9). The point of Thoreau was not that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the fact that there are commercialized forms of production and consumption. What Thoreau argues, though, is that the modes of production and consumption available to man are inefficient and must therefore be improved. He complains, for example that he “cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing” (21). Even more importantly, the rules of the market will eventually inhibit personal growth. The market helps us to accumulate wealth through the commodification *of* nature, but it forestalls a true understanding of ourselves *in* nature.

In a particular way, then, what Thoreau sets out to do at Walden Pond may be described as the attempt to test out new forms of doing business, of redefining traditional modes of consumption and production in the pursuit of a more “serene and healthy life” (92).

> My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad and foolish. (17)

The use of business vocabulary is intentional as is the fact that *Walden* starts out with a stunning 60 pages rumination about the most efficient

[4] For a discussion of the rhetorical strategies implemented in *Walden* see Henry Golemba’s *Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric*, 174– 230.

ways of living called "Economy." We hear of "transactions," of "capital," of "work force," and of "expenses and earnings," all of which represented in little charts that document what he spent on food, the materials he needed to build the cabin and also what he earned as a day-laborer.[5] Thoreau quite frankly states that "the reader will perceive that I am treating the subject rather from an economic than a dietetic point of view" (45). Though Thoreau enjoyed continued support from friends and acquaintances in the village – he in fact "occasionally dined out" (ibid.) – his professed life style was premised on material and philosophical autonomy. Most of what he consumed he also single-handedly produced, and thus Thoreau proudly states "that my food alone cost me in money about twenty-seven cents a week" (ibid.).

Such business speculations are continued throughout the whole book and even in his most ephemeral descriptions of nature, in "The Ponds" and, of course, in "Spring," Thoreau remains deeply committed to the empiricism of a field worker. *Walden* as a whole is replete with passages that insist on the intensity of physical labor without necessarily relating such moments of physical exposure to a higher, metaphysical end. This sense of materialism is well represented in "The Bean-Field" and can be illustrated from two perspectives. On the one hand, the episode details most accurately his income-spending balance, and readers in fact learn that there was not too much left on the income side. Thoreau needed extra subsidies to fully finance his Walden project. On the other hand, "The Bean-Field" also reveals how much Thoreau conceived of himself as a natural scientist whose research basis consists of the very materials that nature offers. Hence, the accuracy of Thoreau's nature descriptions must be read not only symbolically as anticipating a moment of intense spiritual revelation. They are also indicative of his firm belief in the immediacy of the senses and the functions of the body in general. The following quotation features a number of quite different sensory and tactile descriptions which the barefooted Thoreau records while he works the land. For Thoreau, the physicality of lived experience provides the basis for understanding and appropriating nature:

> Early in the morning I worked barefooted, dabbling like a plastic artist in the dewy and crumbling sand, but later in the day, the sun blistered my feet. There the sun lighted me to hoe beans, pacing slowly backward and

[5] See in particular the chapters "Economy" and "The Bean Field."

> forward over that yellow gravelly upland, between the long green rows, fifteen rods, the one end terminating in a shrub oak copse where I could rest in the shade, the other in a blackberry field, where the green berries deepened their tints by the time I had made another rout. (108)

Even though we learn in the same chapter that – economically – Walden was a huge failure, it can hardly be denied that Thoreau was somewhat proud of what he did and that there is a sense in which he was really convinced that owning a piece of land and cultivating the land for one's own individual needs fulfills an almost universal human desire. Thoreau acknowledges the centrality of nature's resources in as much as he proclaims the centrality of his own subjecthood. He is not just a passive observer, but also an active intruder.

The fact that Thoreau cannot help insisting that he managed to lead such a life all by himself, that he needed almost no extra help, and that even the most challenging physical labor was practically no problem for him is further underlined in his sometimes prophetic, sometimes patronizing uses of the pronouns 'I' and 'myself.' Thoreau's favorite pronoun 'I' appears in the first two chapters an astounding 6.6 times each page in average, while the pond and the surrounding landscape is mentioned only in passing twice throughout the whole 60 pages of "Economy."[6] In the first couple of chapters, Thoreau remains his own protagonist, while the natural world around his log cabin is barely present in the text. Hence, readers must quickly come to the realization, as Lance Newman has insisted that "*Walden* is not a book that is mainly about the woods. It's about making a living there" (649). And it is man himself who defines the standards of life in nature in either good or bad ways.

To be sure, Thoreau abstains from any form of capitalistic entrepreneurship – he in fact says he hates commercial trade. He fears that if it were possible, even the pond's bottom would be sold. And yet the emerging industrial America with its developing market economy is the historical backdrop against which Thoreau's economy becomes meaningful in the first place. Thoreau's use of business vocabulary, consequently, is no mere mockery, but an indication of how closely his life experiment in the woods was linked to the actuality of contemporary political culture. Thoreau is aware of the timeliness of his endeavor. He

[6] For a more detailed analysis of these numbers, see Marlene Ogden and Clifton Keller, *Walden: A Concordance*.

knows that what he does at Walden Pond stands in direct relation to the challenges of the present moment. It seems to him as if he is literally witnessing "the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line" (14). Taken as a whole, *Walden* may thus be viewed in New Historicist fashion as a collection of particular, private anecdotes about consumption, production, and transportation of natural goods reflecting the conflicting social and political energies that defined American culture and politics at the middle of the 19th century.[7] To exemplify the dialectics of valorizing the purity of nature and speculating about its practical uses, we should look at a few of these anecdotes in closer detail.

II. The Uses of Nature

The historical correspondences between Thoreau's *Walden* experiment and the rapid social and political transitions in America at mid-century become apparent on several levels. One may first think of the unconcealed individualism that Thoreau advertises in conjunction with his understanding of proper land use and the experience of one's own work. A starting point for understanding the notion of independent labor is Thoreau's description of harvesting fruits and vegetables. The following section is a rather well-known passage from "The Ponds":

> The fruits do not yield their true flavor to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market. […] If you would know the flavor of huckleberries, ask the cowboy or the partridge. It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them. (119)

Here, the authenticity of consumption is bound to the authenticity of production and thus one way of reading passages like this would be to argue that Thoreau subverts the logic of the capitalist market in as much as he questions the very idea of commercial trade. The immediacy of physical exposure – taking natural objects literally, not as metaphors – is synonymous with a critique of market economy. The fruits are not made for the market, as Thoreau maintains. In similar fashion, he insists in his essay "Wild Apples" that there is "a certain volatile and ethereal quality"

[7] For the New Historicist's conception of the "anecdote," see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote."