

The death of the rural community.

by Wendell Berry

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Since its inception, the industrial economy has systematically undermined rural communities, and with globalisation, this process is accelerating throughout the world.

Some five years ago, the New York Times announced that the US Census Bureau would "no longer count the number of Americans who live on farms". In explaining the decision, the newspaper provided some figures as troubling as they were unsurprising. Between 1910 and 1920, America had 32 million farmers living on farms - about a third of the American population. By 1950, this population had declined, but farm population was still 23 million. By 1991 the number was only 4.6 million, less than 2 per cent of the national population. That is, the farm population had declined by an average of almost half a million people a year for 41 years. By 1991, 32 per cent of farm managers and 86 per cent of farm workers did not live on the land they farmed.

These figures describe a catastrophe that is now virtually complete. They announce that we no longer have an agricultural class here in the USA that is, or that can require itself to be, recognised by the government; we no longer have a "farm vote" that is going to be of much concern to politicians. American farmers, who for years have wondered whether or not they counted, may now put their minds at rest: they do not. They have become statistically insignificant.

We must not fail to appreciate that this statistical insignificance is the successful outcome of a deliberate national programme. It is the result of great effort, and of principles rigorously applied. It has been achieved with the help of expensive advice from university and government experts, the tireless agitation and exertion of the agribusiness corporations, the renowned advantages of competition - of our farmers among themselves and with farmers of other countries. As a result, millions of country people have been 'liberated' from farming, land ownership, self-employment and other idiocies of rural life.

What has happened to our agricultural communities is not exceptional any more than it is accidental. This is simply the way a large, exploitative, absentee economy works. For example, here is a New York Times news service report on "rape and run" logging in Montana:

"Throughout the 1980s, the Champion International Corporation went on a tree-cutting binge in Montana, levelling entire forests at a rate that had not been seen

since the cut-and-run logging days of the last century. Now the hangover has arrived. After liquidating much of its valuable timber in the Big Sky country, Champion is quitting Montana, leaving behind hundreds of unemployed mill workers, towns staggered by despair and more than 1,000 square miles of heavily-logged land."

The article goes on to speak of the revival of "a century-old complaint about large, distant corporations, exploiting Montana for its natural resources and then leaving after the land is exhausted". And it quotes a Champion spokesman, Tucker Hill, who said, "We are very sympathetic to those people and very sad. But I don't think you can hold a company's feet to the fire for everything they did over the last 20 years."

If you doubt that exhaustion is the calculated result of such economic enterprise, you might consider the example of the mountain counties of eastern Kentucky, from which over the last three-quarters of a century, enormous wealth has been extracted by the coal companies, leaving the land wrecked and the people poor. The same kind of thing is now happening in banking. In the county next to mine, an independent local bank was recently taken over by a large out-of-State bank. Suddenly some of the local farmers and small business people, who had been borrowing money from that bank for 20 years and whose credit records were good, were refused credit because they did not meet the requirements of a computer in a distant city. Old and once valued customers now find that they are known by category rather than character. The directors and officers of the large bank have reduced their economic thinking to one simple question: "Would we rather make one big loan or many small ones?" Or, to put it only a little differently: "Would we rather support one large enterprise or many small ones?" They have chosen the large over the small.

This economic prejudice against the small has, of course, done immense damage for a long time to smaller family-sized businesses in city and country alike. But this prejudice has often overlapped with an industrial prejudice against anything rural and against the land itself, and this prejudice has resulted in damages that are not only extensive but also long-lasting, or even permanent.

We in America have much to answer for in our use of this continent from the beginning, but in the last half-century we have added to our desecrations of nature a deliberate destruction of our rural communities. The statistics I cited at the beginning are incontrovertible evidence of this. But so is the condition of our farms and forests and rural towns. If you have eyes to see, you can see that there is a

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limit beyond which machines and chemicals cannot replace people, and there is a limit beyond which mechanical or economic efficiency cannot replace care.

The great, centralised economic entities of our time do not come into rural places in order to improve them by 'creating jobs'. They come to take as much of value as they can, as cheaply and as quickly as they can take it. They are interested in 'job creation' only so long as the jobs can be done more cheaply by humans than by machines. They are not interested in the good health - economic, natural or human - of any place on this Earth.

And if you should undertake to appeal or complain to one of these great corporations on behalf of your community, you would discover something most remarkable: you would find that they are organised expressly for the evasion of responsibility. They are structures in which 'the buck' never stops. The buck is processed up the hierarchy until finally it is passed to 'the shareholders', who are too widely dispersed, too poorly informed, and too unconcerned to be responsible for anything. The ideal of the modern corporation is to be (in terms of its own advantage) anywhere, and (in terms of local accountability) nowhere. The message to country people, in other words, is this: Don't expect favours from your enemies.

That message has a corollary that is just as plain and just as often ignored: the government and educational institutions from which rural people should by right have received help have not helped. Rather than striving to preserve rural communities and economies, and an adequate rural population, these institutions have consistently aided, abetted and justified the destruction of every part of rural life. They have eagerly served the superstition that all technological innovation is good. They have said repeatedly that the failure of farm families, rural businesses and rural communities is merely the result of progress and efficiency and is good for everybody.

We are now pretty obviously facing the possibility of a world that the supranational corporations, and the governments and educational systems that serve them, will control entirely for their own enrichment - and incidentally and inescapably, for the impoverishment of all the rest of us. This will be a world in which the cultures that preserve nature and rural life will simply be disallowed. It will be, as our experience already suggests, a post-agricultural world. But as we now begin to see, you cannot have a post-agricultural world that is not also post-democratic, post-religious, post-natural - in other words, it will be post-human, contrary to the best that we have meant by "humanity".

In their dealings with the countryside and its people, the promoters of the global economy are following a set of cold, simple principles. They believe that a farm or a forest is, or ought to be, the same as a factory, that care is only minimally necessary in the use of the land, and that affection is not necessary at all. They believe that, for all practical purposes, a machine is as good as a human, and that the industrial standards of production, efficiency and profitability are the only standards that are necessary to apply. They believe that the topsoil is lifeless and inert, that soil biology is safely replaceable by soil chemistry, and that the nature or ecology of any given place is irrelevant to the use of it. And they believe that there is no value in human community or neighbourhood, and that technological innovation will produce only benign results.

These people see nothing odd or difficult about unlimited economic growth or unlimited consumption in a limited world. They believe that knowledge is property and is power, and that it ought to be. They believe that education is job-training. They think that the summit of human achievement is a high-paying job that involves no work. Their public boast is that they are making a society in which everybody will be a "winner" - but their private aim is to reduce radically the number of people who, by the measure of our historical ideals, might be thought successful: the independent, the self-employed, the owners of small businesses or small usable properties.

The argument for joining the new international trade agreements has been that there is going to be a global economy whether we like it or not, and that we must participate or be left behind. But there are unanswered questions about the global economy, two of which are paramount: how can any nation or region justify the destruction of a local productive capacity for the sake of foreign trade? And how can people who have demonstrated their inability to run national economies without inflation, usury, unemployment, and ecological devastation, now claim that they can do a better job in running a global economy?

American agriculture has demonstrated by its own ruination that you cannot solve economic problems just by increasing scale and, moreover, that increasing scale is almost certain to cause more and separate problems - ecological, social and cultural. We can't go on too much longer without considering the possibility that we are simply unable to work on the scale to which we have been tempted by our technological abilities, and that strong local communities, supported by thriving rural economies, are the bedrock on which human happiness is to be built.

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over 40 volumes of essays, poems, stories and novels, which have earned him many honours and awards. He is perhaps best known for his book *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. This article, and the following article by the same author has been adapted from two previously published articles entitled: *Conserving Communities* and *Does Community have Value?*