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“THE SILENT ARTILLERY OF TIME”

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE RURAL MIDWEST

JON LAUCK

The great historian of republicanism, J. G. A. Pocock, noted that “[f]rom Jefferson to Frederick Jackson Turner and beyond, it was commonplace that sooner or later the frontier would be closed, the land filled, and the corruptions of history—urbanization, finance capital, ‘the cross of gold,’ ‘the military-industrial complex’—would overtake America. Here are the origins of American historical pessimism.”¹ The American frontier has long since closed, the agrarian order has long-since passed

away, and the pessimism has mushroomed into a “palpable despair and cynicism and violence,” “dark signs of the times,” according to the philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain.² The disappearance of the American farmer, long thought the anchor of a republic blessed with rich soil and a “citizenry of Virgilian farmers,” imperils our democratic prospects, some would say, especially when juxtaposed with what many view as the wholesale assault on American moral and social institutions since the 1960s.³ Pocock’s “historical pessimism” is articulated by what Christopher Lasch termed the American republic’s “darker voices”: heartland farmers, farm advocates, and novelists, for examples, who failed to see recent developments in American agriculture and rural life as anything resembling “progress,” but as a fateful step backward for a republic dependent on civic virtue, decentralized economic institutions, a large class of property owners, and community.⁴

Large numbers of farmers, to be sure, accepted the changes in agriculture during the twentieth century and thrived using new technologies and employing greater capital, often bristling at the federal government’s economic

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interventions aimed at solving the "farm problem." These farmers adhered to the powerful American tradition of Lockean liberalism, devoted to property rights, economic freedoms, and civil liberties. Farmers who were less sanguine about the developments in agriculture embraced certain components of republican ideology, devoted to the ideals of dispersed wealth and land, a freeholding citizenry, and the civic virtue and responsibility inherent in small-town and rural culture. It is past time to begin a conversation about the proper method of interpreting this fading agrarian remnant in American life.

Such a conversation is a part of a much wider discussion about the health of the republic. Historically, American political culture has mixed republican and Lockean traditions. Fears that the republican component are dwindling or are being forgotten are reflected in the criticism of shriveling community ("bowling alone," in Robert Putnam's phrase), collapsing civic institutions and eroding citizenship (the source of "democracy's discontents," in Michael Sandel's phrase), fragmenting cultural traditions (the "disuniting of America," in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s phrase), and failing political institutions (the "democratic malaise," in Lasch's phrase).⁵ Such concerns are the contemporary expression of Abraham Lincoln's lament over "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," the speech in which he emphasized the importance of remembering the republic's first principles, the "living histories" of the revolutionaries themselves, lest we lose our way, allowing republican virtue to be submerged by narcissism:

But those histories are gone. They can be read no more forever. They were a fortress of strength; but, what invading foemen could never do, the silent artillery of time has done; the leveling of its walls. They are gone. They were a forest of giant oaks; but the all-resistless hurricane has swept over them, and left only, here and there, a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage, unshading and unshaded, to mur-

mur in a few more gentle breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs, a few more ruder storms, then to sink, and be no more.⁶

The many "props" the republic had to support it through its first half-century had "decayed, and crumbled away," according to Lincoln, just as the heritage of republicanism and agrarianism has faded in the 1990s.⁷ The long-term consequences of losing such traditions are unknowable, but the predictions are dire. Elshtain again: "Culture changes through the ongoing engagement between tradition and transformation. If we lose tradition, there will be no transformation. Only the abyss."⁸ The fading of these traditions was not lost on rural Midwesterners. Despite some claims that a capitalist cultural hegemony has undermined social protest and squelched dissent, farmers' regrets about the radical social consequences of nineteenth-century American liberalism—economic and cultural—are widely evident, although in forms not acknowledged by many scholars.

The hard work of farmers and ranchers made them good citizens, and their disappearance weakens the republic. As former Iowa governor and long-time agrarian activist Dan Turner argued, "[t]he man on 80 acres or 160 acres of land . . . is not small. Character, prudence, honesty, energy, and patriotism has been typical of the citizens on family type farms throughout our history."⁹ After losing so many farmers, we have become a nation of "mollycoddles," as Ben Hogan, the farmer in Douglas Unger's novel *Leaving the Land*, would say. We have become disconnected from an agrarian heritage in which farm families stacked ten tons of hay in a day, maintained—with shovels, no less—intricate and wide-ranging irrigation systems, and organized fence-building operations as if they were military campaigns.¹⁰ The absence of work leaves spiritless souls drained of energy, shrinking from the *vita activa*. In *Land Circle*, the South Dakota poet-rancher Linda Hasselstrom describes her neighbor the beekeeper: "Like many ranchers of forty or older, Bill was raised to do everything as

well as possible, and believes any work done with pride is enjoyable. I consider his kind a vanishing species in an America that used to teem with pride in all its labors, and found enjoyment in that pride, and that work." She writes that "[p]eople whose lives are a challenge are healthier in every way; by taking the difficulties, the tests, out of life, we've turned it into oatmeal" (74). Another frequenter of the Dakotas would agree—one of Teddy Roosevelt's most famous speeches celebrated "The Strenuous Life," encouraging "those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of life."¹¹

Hasselstrom wonders about what physicians call "'diseases of civilization,' consequences of our less active lives": "We take a body with [a] history [of physical survival], prop it upright for eight hours while the fingers lightly punch buttons, then seat it in a car where moderate foot pressure and a few arm movements take it home. It hugs the other members of its small tribe, then slumps down on a cushiony surface and aims its eyes at a lighted screen for two to six hours, and lies down on another soft surface until it's time to get up and do it all again. No wonder we're sick" (73). Hasselstrom pities city folks forced to find artificial means of exercise. "Armed with the strengthening effects of fresh air and exercise, and saved from the mental problems created by urban stress and overcrowding, country people who regularly do physical labor are healthier and saner than anyone in the city, and we'll outlive and outsmart our critics" (79). Instead of abandoning hope and fussing over the hitches of life, Hasselstrom's ranchers master their adversity. Her husband "could accept whatever came his way later in life; perhaps it had something to do with his patience, his calm, his determination to make the best of his life, and of his death" (xix). For Hasselstrom, these qualities were on display every morning in the local "Coffee Cup Cafe":

Soon as the morning chores are done,
cows milked, pigs fed, kids packed
off to school, it's down to the café

for more coffee and some soothing
conversation. . . .

So for an hour they cheer each other, each
story
worse than the last, each face longer. You'd
think
they'd throw themselves under their trac-
tors
when they leave, but they're bouncy as a
new calf,
caps tilted fiercely into the sun.

They feel better, now they know
somebody's having a harder time
and that men like them
can take it. (26-27)

Hasselstrom's ranchers have also learned to live with less. Her neighbor Margaret asked her if she ever saw any wastebaskets at antique sales, but Margaret doubted any could be found: "Our ancestors never threw anything away; they didn't have anything to waste" (77). Hasselstrom regrets the attitudes of some ranchers' children, consumed by "their desire for instant and immense gratification in the form of electronic gadgets, a bigger car, [and] a designer home [which forces] them to live in towns where they can earn more" (63). Emerson described them as the "people whose vane points always east, who live to dine, who send for the doctor, . . . who intrigue to secure a padded chair and a corner out of the draught."¹² Hasselstrom and Emerson echo Rousseau's lament about luxury, which ultimately "overwhelms and ruins the ploughman and the citizen, like those scorching winds of the Midi, which, covering the grass and shrubs with ravenous insects, deprive useful animals their subsistence and carry famine and death into all the places where they are felt."¹³

Similar to the many writings of the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, Hasselstrom sees virtue in the small-scale producer, recounting that "[o]lder ranchers were raised with the philosophy that people should

not expect to get more than they can make or grow with their own hands and sweat, an idea scorned in our consumer society" (69). She writes about her home, "we like it here; we like the country a little bit empty, so we have space for our thoughts. We're used to conserving our resources; most of us were brought up to 'waste not, want not,' and consider conservation no hardship" (xx). Contrasting sharply with the rancher philosophy and agrarian tradition celebrated by Hasselstrom, Lasch detects in American life the growth of an elite social class which "maintain[s] the fiction that its power rests on intelligence alone. Hence it has little sense of ancestral gratitude or of an obligation to live up to responsibilities inherited from the past. It thinks of itself as a self-made elite owing its privileges exclusively to its own efforts. . . . Populated by transients, they lack the continuity that derives from a sense of place and from standards of conduct self-consciously cultivated and handed down from generation to generation."¹⁴

Fewer and larger farms also meant more farmers were forced to migrate to the most unstable, violent, and socially stratified of places, the big cities, which Jefferson called "open sores on the body politic." As Garry Wills has noted, "[t]he City in the American imagination has played roughly the role of hell in Christian theology" (partially explaining why, in one postwar survey, two-thirds of farmers thought forcing farmers to leave their farms un-American and even non-Christian).¹⁵ Hence the anxiety expressed by a North Dakota farm couple, who feared that large-scale farming was "driving contented folks off the land to the already congested, crime-laden city life. This is certainly not the way the Good Lord intended it to be."¹⁶ They echo the poem of the 1880s:

The city has many attractions,
But think of the vices and sins,
When once in the vortex of fashion,
How soon the course downward begins.¹⁷

The city is burdened, as another verse recounts, with

Its cries of want and wild despairs;
Its dust and smoke which stifle breath;
Its foul effluvia of death;
Its catacombs of human lairs.¹⁸

Hasselstrom admits that "[w]hen we retire, we visit California, and take pictures of ourselves lying on the beach in Florida, but we come home, and when we speak of those places, there is a trace of pity in our voices" (xx). The Minnesota farm couple in Will Weaver's story "Going Home" did not last six months in California, repulsed by the vulgar extremes and indignities of urban commercialism.¹⁹

Since the beginning of the contemporary American culture wars in the 1960s, many have wondered if the republic could survive the erosion of the older values Hasselstrom describes and Hogan represents. People questioned, as Spiro Agnew famously said, the tendency to "sneer at honesty, thrift, hard work, prudence, common decency, and self-denial . . . [and the] permissiveness that in turn has resulted in a shockingly warped sense of values." The embrace of personal liberation can be contrasted to the disappearing "Nebraskan character, founded upon the unglamorous virtues of common sense, reticence, compression, and reserve."²⁰ In the novel *Goodnight, Nebraska*, the farmer Lewis Lockhardt is the most stable influence amongst much dysfunction, believing that "[f]arming is planning, sweat and prayer" and attracting great admiration for his respectful, humble approach to life. Lockhardt "generally saw the sunny side of things. He paid people compliments and kept his problems to himself. He was thrifty and hardworking, the kind of sturdy, thick-necked, big-boned man who could be happy with farming and lean into its hardships." The Lockhardt farm saves the marriage of Lewis's daughter and her husband, conferring feelings of dignity, inclusion, and responsibility on the once-renegade son-in-law.²¹ In another

version of the theme, Nebraskans are the "plain, sensible, honest men, who have never begged any odds in the game of life, and whose strongest wish seems to be to stand square with their fellows."²² An Iowa farmer made the same point when noting the contrast between 1960s campus radicalism and farm protests in a letter to Congressman John Culver (D-IA), asking him "how many long-bearded militant farmers have stormed your office in Washington asking for the impossible? How many draftcard-burning and flag-burning farmers have picketed the Ag. building[?]"²³

Such comments presage the coming of the "character question" in American politics. Critics such as Lasch, who was once a Nebraskan, anticipated the demise of agrarian stoicism, the "repeal of reticence," and the emergence of a culture of exposure and personal divulgence. Lasch predicted the coming of a "certain type of personality, one that had become more and more common in our time." Andrew Ferguson sees the prediction personified in Bill Clinton, whom he calls "a perfect representation of his time—an exemplar of the narcissism and moist self-indulgence and chronic confession of the baby boomers."²⁴

The question of the yeoman, then, is in some ways another front in the recent culture wars, but the skirmishes started at least a century ago. Strains of high culture and thought have always scorned the uneducated and crude peasant farmer:

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within
that brain? . . .

Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him
Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?

What the long reaches of the peaks of song,
The rift of dawn, the reddening of the
rose?²⁵

Even in the United States, the haven of the yeoman farmer, the literati began to sneer in the late nineteenth century. As C. Elizabeth Raymond has written, rural life was increasingly seen as "smug, socially backward, and intellectually confining." Mild joking about farmers turned "savage," according to David Danbom, and "such derogatory labels as hick, rube, and yokel became regular parts of public discourse about people who were defined as distinctly—and perhaps dangerously—inferior." In 1903 an Eastern writer thought of the typical farmer as "a lean, gawky, be-whiskered creature, ignorant of all topics that lie outside the sphere of farms and crops." Presaging present-day coastie snobbery, Edmund Wilson, fresh out of Princeton, complained about traveling to California from the East by noting that "[t]he trouble is that you have to pass through the Middle West on the way, and I wouldn't be sure of the felicity of any union under those auspices. The children of such a union would be morose and deformed." Tired of the moralizing farmers injected into American politics, H. L. Mencken said, "We'll all be better off when the men who raise wheat and hogs punch timeclocks," agreeing with Marx that the "enormous cities . . . [have] rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life."²⁶ In the 1940s, a University of Iowa English professor noted the highbrow sneering and complained that "the 'American Mind' takes up its position on the rim of the country and looks in. Even to many intellectuals physically resident in Iowa, Iowa seems more 'remote' than Connecticut or Brooklyn. Often, in journalistic and political discussions, New York seems to block out everything farther west; in academic discussions, even now, Massachusetts is still occasionally allowed to perform that unhappy role. In no other country is the thinking so likely to be peripheral."²⁷

The emergence of the counterculture, and its currency in the academy, coupled with the hostility to farmers and the "bourgeois virtues" of enterprise, thrift, and prudence, divert attention from rural life and the consequences of its disappearance. The neglect and "anti-rural bias" of the "condescenders" in the historical profession partially explains why we know so little about what happened to farmers after World War II and why the Midwestern historical "landscape is quite barren."²⁸ It is also because farmers living the "strenuous life" do not fit the model of human behavior many academics recognize. Currently, a popular academic project attempts to understand why people have not revolted and attacked the concentrations of economic wealth in capitalist democracies. Work in this area follows the theories of Antonio Gramsci, who attempts to "explain why workers under advanced capitalism have not behaved the way Marx said they would." The powerful in society, so the story goes, so dominated the culture, ideas, and discourse that revolutionary ideas and therefore revolution was subverted.²⁹ And so historians set to work, trying to explain how the hegemonic system functions and to identify dissidents. Some people have resisted the cultural hegemony of liberal capitalism in the United States, so some historians claim to have discovered, finding, John Patrick Diggins derisively notes, what "Tocqueville and Orestes A. Brownson, Emerson and Thoreau, James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville, Veblen and Henry Adams, Charles A. Beard and Walter Lippman, and almost all other American intellectuals, including expatriates like Santayana and even émigrés like Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse, so consistently failed to find in America."³⁰

Farmers generate doubts about claims of hegemonic culture. The lack of revolt that so concerned Gramsci may be explained by a willingness to work within the system, an embrace of the American ideals of diligence, striving, enterprise—Ben Hogan working his kids hard, inventing new ways of being efficient, and searching for the best price for his

product. It is the kind of attitude that John Miller sees embodied in the iconic Pa Ingalls, representing the "typical frontiersman—willful, self-sufficient, industrious, and above all individualistic." In the recent documentary film *Troublesome Creek*, an older Iowa farm couple decides to sell out because they think the bank may soon call their loans. They had worked the farm for sixty years, and worked it well, and the sellout seemed unjust. People in the film disliked the banker, the symbol of the capitalist class, but instead of manning the barricades, they tried to be nice to the banker, believing insults or petty resistance to be beneath their dignified approach to life. They accepted and adapted in ways similar to Linda Hasselstrom's descriptions of her husband.³¹ The implication is that America is closer to the way Louis Hartz and others described it forty years ago. Social theories that privilege status, elitism, power, race, class, or gender as categories of analysis, methods of explanation, and theories of causation overlook what Hartz called the "Liberal Tradition" and Richard Hofstadter described as an enduring political tradition embracing the "belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition."³² Farmers' capitalistic tendencies are detectable from the beginning of the republic, and in the activities of their ancestors in fourteenth-century England for that matter, part of a persistent "capitalist hunger" in America.³³

But farmers in the postwar years were trapped by what Daniel Bell calls the "cultural contradictions of capitalism," or the conflict between social realms, the "techno-economic," the "polity," and the "culture." Farmers were largely individualistic, opposed to onerous statist controls, and capitalistic, conferring legitimacy on economic change. But their regrets about such changes can be seen in calls for social justice in the polity realm and in their sorrow over the cultural costs of a dwindling number of farmers and small towns. In this "disjunction of realms" Bell sees "many of the latent social conflicts that have been expressed ideologically as alienation,

depersonalization, the attack on authority." Much of agrarian protest over the last century, according to the economic historian Stuart Bruchey, can be seen as a "cry of protest on the part of individuals increasingly depersonalized and lost in corporate anonymity, of small towns increasingly invaded by the railroad, of small business and small farmers increasingly menaced by large-scale and distant competition."³⁴ Nowhere is the sadness and regret better reflected than in the divorce of the farmer from his land, forcing a proud man to move to town to start work at the "Cafe Down on the Corner":

At the cafe down on the corner
With a lost look on his face
There ain't no fields to plow
No reason to now
He's just a little out of place

They say crime don't pay
But neither does farmin' these days
And the coffee is cold
And he's fifty years old
And he's gotta learn to live some other way

At the cafe down on the corner
With a lost look on his face
There ain't fields to plow
He's busin' tables now
He's just a little out of place³⁵

It would be a mistake to overlook the sense of loss felt by many farmers and to interpret their experience as merely one of co-optation by the capitalist hegemony. It is an increasingly common oversight in historical interpretation, however, as the case of the Puritans makes clear. David Harlan recently explained how the great historian Perry Miller bequeathed a body of knowledge about the Puritans which explained their hopes, exposing readers to the complexities of the "New England mind" and its struggles with its own failings. But Miller's successor at Harvard, Sacvan Bercovitch, can see only the elements

of social control and cultural hegemony in Puritanism. Harlan explains that

Bercovitch approached American Puritanism not as a source of insight but as a system of deception . . . Puritan books seem to him little more than empty ciphers, incapable of exposing moral illusions or providing moral guidance . . . [Whereas] Miller saw something of deep and abiding value in the Puritan tradition: an acceptance of melancholy and sadness as ways of seeing, almost as signs of grace. Puritanism gave voice to what Miller knew, with all the intensity of his own melancholic mind, to be the very truth of lived experience . . . The Puritan tradition is no longer a source of strength, as it was for Miller, but a crippling limitation; it suggests not the hard, fine press of winter-bred minds but the tyranny of iron-brained theocrats; it is not a power that might guide us through the coming darkness but a nightmare from which we will never awaken. It is a positive torment, an oppressive and utterly depraved father who lies upon us full length and threatens to crush our life from us.³⁶

Harlan's warning warrants attention lest historians interpret the changes in farming as mindless acquiescence to economic change and fail to detect the sense of loss and pessimism among farmers leaving the land. They understood that farm life helped maintain a level of civic and personal virtue necessary to a functioning republic, a sentiment that needs to be captured by historians. Lasch, for example, while also noting the importance of taking the Puritans seriously, hopes for more attention to the "hitherto neglected traditions of thought, deriving from classical republicanism and early Protestant theology, that never had any illusions about the unimportance of civic virtue" and to thinkers "who understood that democracy has to stand for something more than enlightened self-interest, 'openness,' and toleration." Effective democracy, he

believes, "requires us to speak of impersonal virtues like fortitude, workmanship, moral courage, honesty, and respect for adversaries" so we can hold each other accountable, because "unless we are prepared to make demands on one another, we can enjoy only the most rudimentary kind of common life." Without this ingredient, according to Lasch, democracy becomes unworkable, suggesting "the need for a revisionist interpretation of American history, one that stresses the degree to which liberal democracy has lived off the borrowed capital of moral and religious traditions antedating the rise of liberalism."³⁷

How quickly such an assessment will come is in doubt given the tendency of farmers to get lost in other interpretive agendas. During April and May of 1999, for example, the international electronic discussion list H-Rural debated the documentary film *The Farmer's Wife*.³⁸ At one point, the discussion turned to the question of whether farming and rural life deserved to be romanticized and celebrated. The participating scholars tended to focus on a narrow range of factors when making such a determination. In keeping with the drift of social history in the academy, the factors tended to focus on the dynamics of race, class, gender, and homosexuality in rural life. Ignored were factors such as "social capital" or the degree of participation in civic life—Lions, Elks, Oddfellows, VFW—and the existence of strong community institutions such as churches and sports teams, institutions that bring people together.³⁹ By not attending to such factors scholars will not be able to explain, for example, the Spencer phenomena: after the little town of Spencer, South Dakota (320 people), was razed by a tornado during the summer of 1998, Governor Bill Janklow called for 1,000 volunteers to help with the cleanup, and 8,000 people showed up to help.⁴⁰ Such displays of republican spirit, along with the bonds among and between families, a basic level of trust among citizens, healthy attitudes toward work and craftsmanship, a respect for widely shared ideals, patriotism and civic pride, a willingness to make demands on one

another, and an expectation that one's responsibilities will be taken seriously, deserve consideration from scholars. That they were not even mentioned in the H-Rural discussion is especially troubling given that the film's main focus was the strength and perseverance of the young farm family of Juanita and Darrel Buschkoetter, an emphasis surely not missed by many of the 18 million PBS viewers. That it stands to be missed by scholars exposes the perverted perspective of more and more academic scholarship, a perversion that risks losing the virtues of the rural Midwestern heritage and missing the consequences of its passing.⁴¹

For a balanced interpretation, scholars must recognize that the social and cultural changes in America that took place in post-World War II America, coupled with the depopulation of farmers and the failure of many small towns, contributed to a "vague sense of loss," manifesting Pocock's "historical pessimism," exposing concealed regrets about several decades of chiseling away at American civic and moral institutions. According to James Shortridge,

Instead of generating wholesale condemnation by writers, small towns and traditional farms, indeed the entire Middle-western culture, began to be labeled quaint. Support for this viewpoint quickened in the mid 1960s, and by the early 1970s it was perhaps the dominant image that outsiders held about the region. From this perspective, the Middle West had become a museum of sorts. No up-and-coming citizen wanted to live there, but it had importance as a repository for traditional values. . . . A society increasingly complex, mobile, and avaricious was beginning to yearn occasionally for simplicity, virtue, and rootedness.⁴²

Such urban nostalgia can be validated. An academic study by the agricultural economist Luther Tweeten concludes that "compared to the general population, the farm family is more stable and the typical farmer more religious, politically more conservative, and happier and more satisfied with some aspects of life" and

that "farmers are among the better-adjusted members of society. They are optimistic and have a healthy outlook on life both in terms of interpersonal relationships and general viewpoint."⁴³ Garrison Keillor explains it more poetically:

What truly distinguishes Minnesota isn't majorness or hipness but a sweetness of character . . . This is a state of people not so far removed from the farm, and farming is a civil business that believes in sharing new information and helping your neighbor. It produces good-hearted people who are tolerant, helpful and friendly. Farming is why the narcissism quotient is low here, and people avoid stupidity when possible, not wanting to be a \$10 haircut on a \$.50 head. The sort of arrogance that amuses New Yorkers is here considered gauche.⁴⁴

Richard Critchfield doubts "whether America, having come so far from its rural roots, is governable."⁴⁵ It is, but not without attention to the virtues Lasch and others have mentioned, many of which stemmed from the country's farming and small-town heritage.

To say farmers participated in the economic change, often quite willingly, is not to say that many applauded the results or that they do not understand the cultural and social costs of a vanishing agrarian tradition. The absence of a violent agrarian revolt does not preclude the hope among farmers that their farms, small towns, and rural communities could survive the turbulence of economic change. One woman who regretted the changes in rural life and "saw [her] parents lose their farm during times which were truly difficult" proudly remembered that despite the pain involved "at no time did [her] parents resort to lawlessness and violence."⁴⁶ That most farmers were not willing to support radical political alternatives indicates the power and influence of republicanism—respect for civic institutions, an unwillingness to unravel the social fabric, and the personal hope that through hard work one could make a new life off the farm. But their

concerns about dwindling community and eroding virtue deserve attention. Historians need to pay attention to the subtleties and nuances of social protest, often difficult to detect when imposing stark ideological models of interpretation on the past. In so doing we will respect our past, come to terms with the America's unfolding pessimism and the silent artillery that has pounded our civic institutions and shattered our republican spirit, and address David Harlan's complaint that "[t]here is no sense of urgency in American historical writing, no sense that we must use the books and ideas we have inherited from the past to put our own lives to the test."⁴⁷

Lincoln's worries about an America adrift, having lost its agrarian and republican heritage, deserve consideration when interpreting the recent social changes of the Midwest. Recoverable or no, the rural Midwest's past virtues deserve to be remembered, as Wordsworth urged the remembrance of the Venetian republic, "the eldest Child of Liberty," to a modern world struggling with immature and delicate republican ideas and institutions:

And what if she had seen those glories fade,
Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;
Yet shall some tribute or regret be paid
When her long life hath reach'd its final day:
Men are we, and must grieve when even
the Shade
Of that which once was great is pass'd
away.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, Atheneum, 1971), pp. 98, 100.
2. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 20-21.
3. Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 9.
4. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 39.

5. Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995), pp. 65-78; Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontents: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 19; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflection on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); Jon Lauck, "Reviving Republicanism," *The Social Critic* 3, no. 1 (winter 1998): 6-9. See generally, David Millon, "The Sherman Act and the Balance of Power," *Southern California Law Review* 61 (July 1988): 1236-48.
6. Lincoln quoted in John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 308-9.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Elshstein, *Democracy on Trial* (note 2 above), p. xv.
9. NFO Reporter, May 1956, p. 1. Turner was governor in the 1930s but continued his farm activism into the 1950s.
10. Douglas Unger, *Leaving the Land* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 12; Linda Hasselstrom, *Land Circle* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1991), p. 69. Further citations to *Land Circle* are given in parentheses in the text.
11. Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," speech delivered to the Hamilton Club, Chicago, 10 April 1899, in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt-National Edition*, vol. 13 (New York: Scribner's, 1926), p. 320.
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35. "Café Down on the Corner" (Beginner Music [ASCAP], 1992) on Sawyer Brown: *Greatest Hits, 1990-1995* (Curb Records, 1995).

36. David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 43, 51.

37. Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites* (note 5 above), pp. 85-88.

38. A co-production of David Sutherland Productions, Inc., and Frontline in association with Independent Television Service (ITVS), © 1998 David Sutherland Productions, Inc. and WGBH Educational Foundation. See H-Rural Logs for April, May 1999, <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/logs/mlogs/cgi>>.

39. On the scholarly neglect of rural religion, see Robert P. Swierenga, "The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 71, no. 4 (fall 1997): 415-41.

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