Democracy without Farmers

The family farm in America has all but vanished, and with it we are losing centuries of social and civic wisdom imparted by the agrarian life.

by Victor Davis Hanson

> **The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.**
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> *—J. Hector Saint John de Crèvecoeur,*
> Letters from an American Farmer

Farmers see things as others do not. Their age-old knowledge is more than the practical experience that comes from the art of growing food or the independence of rural living. It involves a radically different—often tragic—view of human nature itself that slowly grows through the difficult struggle to work and survive from the land. Destroyed by hail that most others ignore, praying for a rain that few will notice, increasingly foreclosed upon in a national sea of cash, smug in their ability to nourish thousands but bewildered that they cannot feed their family, apart from town but dependent on those who are not, still confused over how and why plants usually produce harvests but sometimes do not, the last generation of American farmers have become foreign to their compatriots, who were once as they.

A farmer in Coryell County, Texas, September 1931. Photograph by George W. Ackerman

The farmers' understanding of man and society in our present age is critical to the survival of democracy as we once knew it. Democracy at its inceptions, ancient and American, has always been the outgrowth of an agrarian society; but its old bones now have new and different flesh. Consensual government can continue in the vastly transformed conditions of great wealth, urbanism, and rapidly changing technology never foreseen by its originators; but whether democracy can still instill virtue among its citizens will be answered by the age that is upon us, which for the first time in the history of the civilization will see a democracy without farmers.

More than 200 years ago, J. Hector Saint John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) published *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), a collection of 12 essays on American culture and rural life. Crèvecoeur's letters are generally regarded as the beginning of American literature, inasmuch as they are the first formal expressions of what it was to be "American." The opening to homesteaders of new frontier lands across the eastern seaboard, the immigration and assimilation of a wide variety of Europeans, and the turmoil of the American Revolution convinced Crèvecoeur that he was witnessing at the end of the 18th century the birth of a unique nation and a singular man. In his view, freeholding yeomanry lay at the heart of this great experi-

ment in creating a middling, rambunctious, democratic citizenry that could not be fooled, enticed, or enslaved. In America, the European

> now feels himself a man because he is treated as such; the laws of his own country had overlooked him in his insignificance; the laws of this cover him with their mantle. Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and the thoughts of this man. He begins to forget his former servitude and dependence; his heart involuntarily swells and grows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts that constitute an American. What love can he entertain for a country where his existence was a burden to him? If he is a generous, good man, the love of this new adoptive parent will sink deep into his heart.

Part formal essays, part autobiographical memoir, part fictive sketches (on everything from the island of Nantucket to slavery to the American humming bird), the letters of Crèvecoeur are rambling, confused, and at times almost unreadable. But they brilliantly use the landscape of contemporary 18th-century agriculture to demonstrate how the natural bounty of America and the availability of vast expanses of farmland molded the European religious and political heritage into something far more dynamic—something never before seen or even imagined.

Crèvecoeur was a materialist. Where people live, what they do, and how they work determine how they think and who they are. He believed that the farmland of North America was everything, its rich abundance critical to fashioning a new culture. Crèvecoeur's American man, then, was surely different from any in Europe, because he had room and resources that could be freely exploited. The American was a wholly untraditional creature whose successful existence proved that free and "insignificant" men fleeing Europe could create a novel culture from an unforgiving nature.

This "new" man was, of course, a curmudgeon who would be very hard to deprive of his newfound liberty. Only with difficulty would he be coerced or uprooted, and he would not be fooled by the trend and jargon of the town. He was as rough and unromantic among his urban peers as he was in his mute fields—in other words, a new, hard-nosed, no-nonsense American.

Crèvecoeur wrote his *Letters* in the belief that the emergence of yeomen and free landowners in America meant the genesis of a new egalitarian American culture. Muscular labor, now autonomous and in the service of the individual, would create a self-confident, viable, and pragmatic citizen in place of the passive serf and ignorant day laborer of past nonegalitarian regimes of the European monarchies. Yet this new

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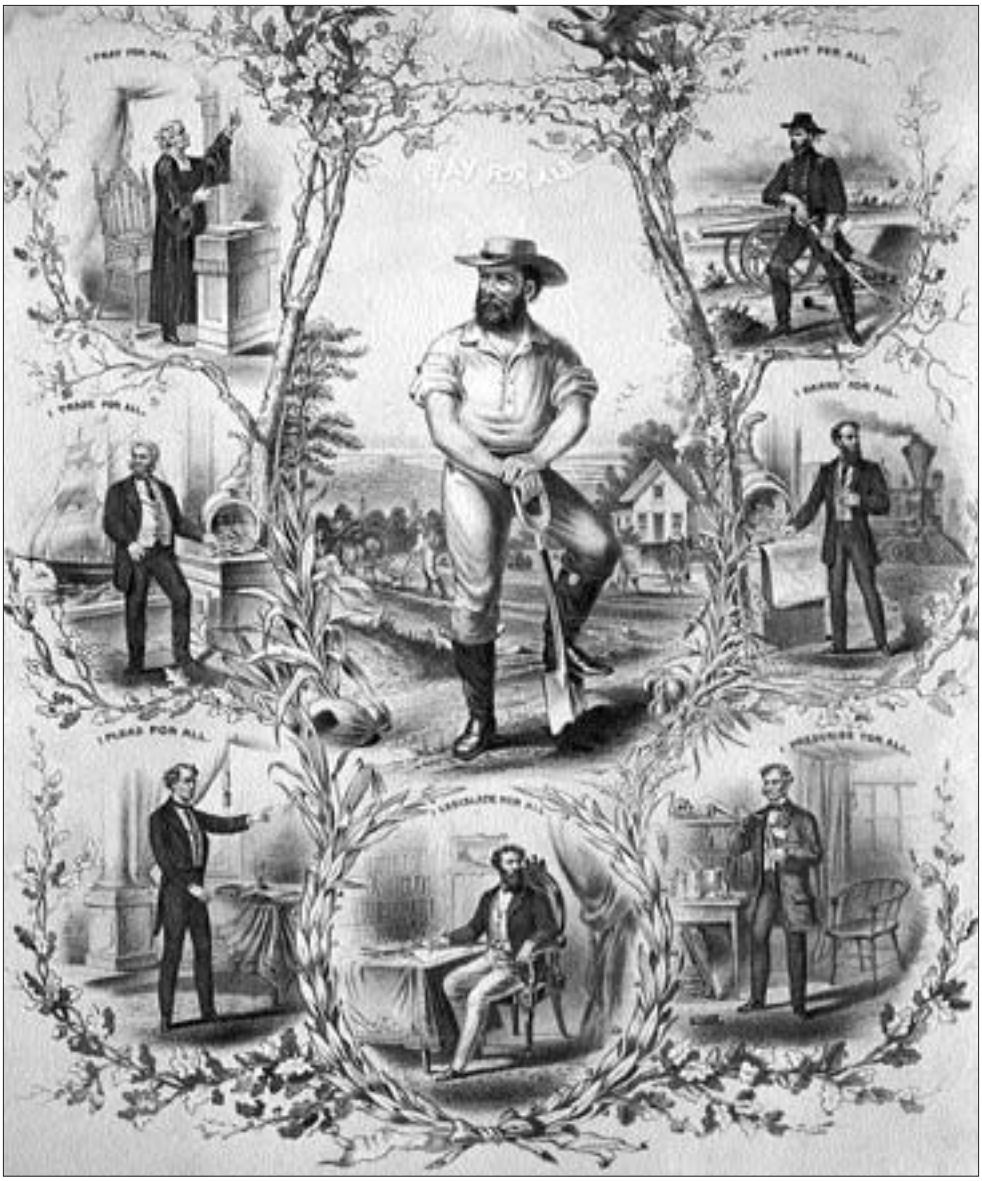

An 1869 lithograph highlights the universal influence of the farmer on American life.

farmer-citizen was also at odds with the trader and near-savage who left nothing in his wake, who was made brutish by North America's wild rather than tamed by it. Crèvecoeur's American agriculturists alone—who had created cultural order (homesteads, cultivated fields, bridges, small towns) out of natural chaos—had hit upon that rare middle ground: freeholding yeomen neither rich nor poor, wild nor pampered, brutes nor sophisticates, day laborers nor absentee lords. American democrats were not to be coffeehouse intellectuals or an envious and volatile mob eager for someone else's property and capital.

Crèvecoeur's powers of abstract observation and analysis derived from his own unique background. He was classically trained at a

Jesuit college in France, and his Latin phrases frequently remain untranslated in the *Letters*. He traveled widely, held a variety of jobs, and emigrated to the northern English colonies in 1759 by way of Britain and Canada. He was married and raised three children on his New York farm until the tumult of the Revolutionary War forced him to flee America. Crèvecoeur farmed for less than a decade before his return to Europe, where he entered the diplomatic service and became a literary figure in his own right in revolutionary France. Though he was a genuine farmer, agriculture was but a parenthesis in his life, which was, ironically, spent largely in Europe writing about farming in America. His *Letters*, then—as generations of critics have pointed out—suffer from the paradox of an ex-farmer writing about what he will not or cannot any longer do.

Still, the *Letters* were an immediate success among Crèvecoeur's contemporaries for two reasons: the largely European audience was curious about the creation of this new social paradigm in America, and it wanted to know the natural esoterica of a frontier and rural lifestyle pretty much unknown in Europe. The ostensibly fictional account is actually a firsthand look at life in rural New England and details the creation and management of a working farm.

But the book's real interest, past and present, arose from its literary exploration of a more important topic: What is an American, and is he really so new? What is the relationship between the cultivated landscape of America and the nature of its citizenry? What has American agrarianism done to improve upon the Western paradigm as practiced in Europe, and could the muscular and uncouth govern themselves without the guardianship of the academic and refined?

More than two centuries later, American citizens know less about farming than did Crèvecoeur's Europeans. This is a great tragedy, perhaps *the* tragedy of the last half-century. Americans have completely forgotten the original relationship between farming and democracy, which Crèvecoeur sought so carefully to explain. As a consequence, few Americans can define in the abstract what they were or who they are. Few of us work with our hands or become dirty from the soil, unless we are puttering in our gardens; those who do so for work more often wish that they did not. The labor of muscle, unless directed to the narcissistic obsession with the healthy body, is deemed unfortunate, whereas the work of the tongue alone is prized. That the two might be combined, and thus become greater than either, is ignored or forgotten. To Crèvecoeur, the dichotomy of the effete intellectual and brutish thug—so common in Europe—was resolved by the emergence in between of the independent American farmer who avoided through his autonomy, craft, and labor the pitfalls of both. And so it is: to walk into a room of farmers is to see some of the most rough-looking yet highly thoughtful citizens in America.

Just as Crèvecoeur held that the formation of freeholding yeomen created the American republican spirit, so now the decline of family farming in our own generation is symptomatic of the demise of his notion of what an American was. Just as Crèvecoeur saw unlimited land, small towns, multiethnicity, the growth of a middle class, self-reliance, and a common culture as essential to the creation of America and its democracy, so today the decline of family farming, the end of the egalitarian principle of farm ownership, the growth of urbanism, the assurance of material entitlement, and the virtual disappearance of a rural middle class ensure the demise of Crèvecoeur's American.

Crèvecoeur was neither naive nor entirely a utopian romantic: freedom, egalitarianism, and democracy were possible because man in America had little leisure and less affluence, and found success or failure largely in his own efforts. Surfeit for the human species was as great a danger as poverty, sloth the more terrible peril than exhaustion. Education and contemplation without action—the near religious faith of today's intellectual class—meant not impotence, but moral vacuity itself. It was not merely democracy that was important, but the type of people who created democracy.

To Crèvecoeur, like Aristotle, man was tame only to the degree that he was occupied, independent only as long as he owned property. Only through agriculture was the citizen in constant observation of how terrible loomed the animal and human world about him: man realizes the dangers of his own natural savagery only through his attempt at physical mastery of the world.

Many men and women who undergo this experience provide a check on those who do not. Such farmers question authority and yet follow the law; they are suspicious of the faddishly nontraditional, yet remain highly eccentric themselves; they vote and work for civic projects and group cohesion, and yet tend to be happiest when left alone, these who historically have been democracy's greatest supporters by not quite being convinced of the ultimate wisdom of democracy.

In contrast, Crèvecoeur's trappers and traders who live as natural men on the edge of the frontier are not romantic individualists, but more often beasts—without permanent residence, without responsibilities to others, without desire to clean and separate themselves from the foul world they must inhabit and have surrendered to. They and the refined urban merchant both dwell in antithesis to the farmer, who both conquers and lives with nature, who practices both a solitary and a communal existence, who is and is not one with the government at large. From that personal, strife-filled experience of working the soil, the yeoman-citizen alone, this muscled reader of books, this hardened lover of beauty, transfers his code of steward-

The Hailstorm *(1940), by Thomas Hart Benton*

ship, reasoned exploitation, and independence to the wider society of his peers. That the balance and stability of agrarianism in themselves explain the health of a culture seems preposterous to us in the postindustrial age. But to Crèvecoeur, the connection was self-evident to the point of being unquestioned.

In the great American debate over ecology, development, and the use and abuse of nature, we have forgotten the central role of agriculture, which is more than just to keep us alive one more day. Farming alone reminds us of the now-lost balance between wilderness and pollution and inculcates in our youth the thought that true erudition is not the mastery of the specialist's esoterica but broad learning, checked and tried daily through the pragmatics of the arm and back. The more abstract, liberal, and utopian your cant, the more difficult it is to live what you profess. The farmer of a free society uniquely solved the age-old Western dilemma between reason and faith, the balance between the Enlightenment and medieval minds, by using his reason and intellect to husband and direct the mystical world of plants, even as he accepted the limits of reason by experiencing every day a process that was ultimately unfathomable. The land taught us that, and so it was the nursery, not merely the breadbasket, of our nation.

We are not starving in this country and need not worry about our food supply, even under corporate conglomerations to come. But we are parched and hungry in our quandary over how to be good citi-

zens—whom the Greeks, the logical forefathers of modern democracy, said were ultimately the only real harvest of the soil.

Our new American is responsible for little property other than his mortgaged house and car; his neighbors and friends, indeed, his very community, are more ephemeral than they are traditional and rooted. Although not an aristocrat, he is esteemed by his peers to the degree that he is polished and secure and avoided once he is at odds with comfortable consensus. He depends on someone else for everything from his food to his safety. Lapses in his language and manners can end his livelihood; obsequiousness, rather than independence, is more likely to feed his family. Yes, America is more democratic and free, and perhaps a kinder and gentler nation than in the past; but political and economic advance came at a price. For a time we have become more humane collectively and in the abstract, but somehow far worse individually and in person.

We American agrarians of the latter 20th century fought a war for land that we did not even know we were in. Yet we apparently have lost it nonetheless. Family farmers as a species were mostly unknown fatalities in the new wave and final manifestation of market capitalism and entitlement democracy, the final stage of Western culture that is beyond good and evil. Ever more unchecked democracy and capitalism—because they alone succeed at achieving what they are designed for, and since there is no alternative to either—are now nearly global. In the next century, both practices will ensure to the billions of the world material prosperity, entertainment, and leisure undreamed of by any generation in the planet's history. Surely billions will prosper as princes where millions once lived as the dispossessed in squalor, disease, and filth. Even the exploiters of capital cannot siphon the sheer abundance of lucre from the mob.

Yet this remarkable success has brought us to the end of history as we have known it. The age-old Platonic antithesis between what we can do and what we should do has been settled in favor of the former. There is no political, no religious, no cultural idea left that stands in the way of bringing more things to more people at any cost, to dismantling every cultural, religious, and social impediment to self-expression and indulgence.

In the absence of an agrarian creed, no intellectual has stepped forward to craft a higher culture for the people that is beyond materialism and consumerism. No abstract thinker dares to advocate the love of soil, a legacy of hard work, loyalty to family, town, and country, or even fealty to a common culture. No one suggests an erudition that is harmonious with, rather than antithetical to, muscular labor. These are the glues that hold—and should hold—a people together, that make their day-to-day drudgery mean more than the gratification of desire. Say that, and one would be dubbed a crank,

misfit, and worse—corny, naive, and silly for sure. And why not? Everything that we hold dear—our mass entertainment and advertising, cars, leisure, music, material wealth, easy jet transportation, health, and consumer democracy with its moral relativism, academic bromides, and cheap caring—are ours precisely and only because we have evolved away from the agrarian ideal and a vibrant countryside. The end of family farming gave us more food—you must confess it, agrarian romantics—more time, more money, and less shame. Indeed, maybe even more equality as well.

Our new age is akin to the period between A.D. 98 and 180, the era of the so-called Five Good Emperors in Rome, whose monotony and materialism Edward Gibbon called the most tranquil period of human existence. Ours now is. "No other way of life remains," wrote the contemporary Greek toady Aelius Aristides of a similar past epoch:

> There is one pattern of society, embracing all. . . . Were there ever so many cities, inland and maritime? Were they ever so thoroughly modernized. . . . Seashore and interior are filled with cities, some founded and others enlarged. . . . The whole world, as on a holiday, has changed its old costume . . . and gone in for finery and for all amusements without restraint. All other animosities between cities have ceased, but a single rivalry obsesses every one of them—to show off a maximum of elegance and luxury.

Not just yeomanry, but even race, language, custom, and locale are falling before the onslaught of instant communications, advertising, unfettered speech, and material dynamism—before the idea that leisure and escape from muscular labor are the agreed-on prize. For the first time in civilization, real material overabundance, and at least the veneer of egalitarianism that it spawns, are upon us. The $10 sneakers of the illegal alien look and feel hardly different from the $200 designer brands of the corporate lawyer; the tap water of the welfare mom can be as clean as that of the exploiting blueblood; the video brings entertainment—any entertainment—as quickly, cheaply, and frequently to the illiterate as to the opera buff. Ease of consumption unites us more than race, gender, and class divide us. In short, for the first time in the history of civilization, the true age of democracy is at hand, encompassing not only the ideal of political equality but a real material kinship and shared vulgarity at last. There are no longer the age-old skeptics from the countryside to come into town and remind us that it is all but dross.

The agrarian life, which is neither materialist nor fair, is the most visible casualty of what we have become in this age of Pax Sumptuosa. And we all have on occasion become willing casualties in this Faustian tradeoff. It is baffling still to see one's children emerge exhausted from a

day's hoeing of vineyard weeds with enough energy left to head right for their video game consoles. We poor farmers do not understand the present because we believe in ethical restraint on the economy. Yet at the same time, as American consumers we, too, want and expect what this efficient and amoral economy has to offer.

For most of my early adult life I was called a failure for farming; now I am dubbed a success for having failed at farming. Thus I can offer some insight into the consequences of the cultural demise of agrarianism through my own inability to live an exclusively agrarian life: I can write well of what I do not like, because in some sense I have just about become exactly what I do not like.

The alternate Western—and agrarian—tradition of autarcheia, autonomy, localism, and shame, which was always at war with our urban genius for materialism, uniformity, and entitlement, now more or less has lost out as it has always lost out—just as the polis has always given way to the kingdom, republic to empire, culture to civilization in this endless cycle so inherent to our history. These voluntary checks on acquisition and consumption, on efficiency and bounty itself, put too much responsibility on us. The middling agrarian, whose age-old role was to preserve society from the dominion of the gifted but brutal renegade—Plato's solitary superman who would live by natural law alone—now gives way to the contemporary man of desires. He is full of reason of

The Halleys are part of a trend among American farmers. They left their family farm in Bisbee, North Dakota, and moved to a new home in Fargo rather than continue to lose money year after year.

sorts, but without spirit, and uses his knowledge mostly to seek complacency amid his bounty. This contemporary clerk, teacher, salesman, and bureaucrat is everything the farmer is not: mobile, material, careful, and timid; at peace with security, sameness, petty reputation, and complacency; glad for an endless existence of leisure and affluence without the interruption of strife or discord; nose always to the scent of cash and pleasure. He wants liberty, but too often liberty for indulgence alone, and then is surprised that when such commensurate license is extended to the less fortunate, they shoot and inject rather than show a taste for industry. Agrarianism was such a brief interlude between savagery and decadence; it was such a hard teacher of the human condition.

The old conception of an entire family—grandparents, parents, and children—living from nothing other than the fruits of their labor, raising (not surviving by selling) produce; passing on a successful livelihood to sons and granddaughters; conveying ideas of independence, shame, and skepticism; and criticizing both the bookish and weak, the robust and the ignorant, will disappear. Indeed, it already has. Was the agrarian tradition of Western culture, the sum total of millions of mostly unknown existences and personal tragedies, of lost crops and ruined lives, all for this? Was the agrarian character of Thomas Jefferson's America to evolve only to give us the abundance, convenience, and freedom that we might become what we are? Was that what the family farming of Crèvecoeur's age was for? Was Crèvecoeur's yeoman to lead us to what we now are at the new millennium?

Other good souls still bravely resist. Their attempts to recreate rural farming communities, to share in neighborly agrarian enterprises, and to forge farm communalism indeed will be noble and needed enterprises. Yet something will bother us about many of them. We will in secret confess that they are a bit scholastic. They are without the challenge and disaster of the past. This alternate agriculture of the organic gardener and suburban homesteader will be contrived by those whose daily survival and capital are really found elsewhere, rather than in the spontaneous enterprises of working farmers.

In the postagrarian era to come, we who were not part of the classical age will do all in our power to restore it—a doomed endeavor, whatever our noble intent. Many agrarian idealists and restorationists will seek solace in pockets of vitality such as the much-praised Amish, who can withstand the tide and hold to their way thanks only to a fiery and uncompromising God—and a surrounding unagrarian society that indirectly subsidizes them. They prove that the horse and plow, dinner at five, and asleep at nine are yet possible if one will just suffer enough. But in the end, even the most diehard farming reformers will not wish to be as the Amish

are—and they will not know how to be like the Amish without being the Amish.

Their praiseworthy experience will emulate but not continue the agrarian idea, which grew out of a centuries-long tradition of families tied to particular farms of about the same size. At the end of agrarianism, when (as with autos or steel) there are but a score of megafarms, we will find the demise of real conservatism. When all the dour populists are gone, we will see that the market is not so conservative in its excess and the liberal not so tolerant in his utopian agenda for his peers. The second most bothersome Americans are globalist profiteers who justify every exploitation imaginable as the inevitable wages of their market-as-deity. Perhaps the most offensive are the very serious and usually affluent left-wing utopians, who foam and grimace from a distance in their elite white enclaves as they explain how we all must be forced to do this and that, here and now, to save some rare amphibian, a certain inert gas, someone's anonymous arteries or lungs, or an inner-city child's dreams—or else.

With the loss of this country's agrarian and conservative profile also goes a tradition of using agrarian life to critique contemporary culture, a tradition of farming as moral touchstone of some 2,500 years' duration in the West, beginning with Hesiod, Xenophon, and Aristotle and ending with us. Agrarian wisdom—man using and fighting against nature to produce food that ensured that his family stayed on the land and his community remained safe—was never fair or nicely presented. Family farmers prefer to be at loggerheads with society, yet they are neither autocrats nor disillusioned Nietzschean demigods sneering at the growing mediocrity of the inferior in their midst.

As their doomed and near-extinct status illustrates, yeomen are rather different from the rest of us. These Ajax-like men and women oppose us but mean us no harm; they are more suicidal than homicidal. They bother us with their "judgments" and "absolutes" and "unnecessary" and "hurtful" assessments that derive from meeting and conquering real challenges. But they also bother us in order to save, not to destroy, us, by giving a paradigm of a different, older way that once was in all of us. They want us to slow down, not to implode, to find equilibrium between brutality and delicacy, as they themselves have with their orchards and vines. They want us to try something out ourselves before advocating it for others.

Family farming is gone, yet democracy and Western civilization remain, the creations of agrarianism. We Americans, now so rich, free, and at peace, can survive, thrive even, under the material conditions of the 21st century. But we will never be anything like what we were. The hardest task in America now is not to fall into defeatism—even if it means verging on idealism. And perhaps we might still learn from what we are losing. ❑