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PALEOCONSERVATISM OF THE SOUTHERN AGRARIANS*

The emergence of the Tea Party movement in recent years has shown that under the surface of mainstream political life in the USA there exists a different layer of ideas, which cannot be satisfactorily described in terms of the Republican/Democrat dichotomy. These ideas have their origins in the foundation of the American Republic, which owes a lot to ancient and mediaeval political theory. In the twentieth century there was a revival of these ideas in the form of the so-called “paleoconservative” movements which rediscovered their ancient and mediaeval heritage. This paper focuses on one of them, the Southern Agrarian movement, as exemplary of this radical intellectual project.

Keywords: paleoconservatism, southern agrarians, south, slavery, civil war.

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There are some intellectual currents in American thought which, albeit not rigorously articulated, have nevertheless been a part of the national consciousness from the very beginning of the American Republic. These trends are not that easy to identify in terms of contemporary political theory because they reflect the values and sentiments of an altogether different epoch. They are the remnants of the past which prove to be vital enough to survive in the hostile intellectual environment of modernity. They are the values of the Republican nature in the ancient sense, which require a politically conscious, autonomous, armed citizen to profess them.

One of the reasons these pre-modern elements still exist and continue to influence the people of the United States is to be found in the very particular circumstances American statehood was born in. Historians have shown the role ancient and mediaeval political theory played in the early Republic, which owes its independence no less to Cicero and Aristotle than it does to the Enlightenment. Praise of the landed man, a chivalric attitude, a contempt of finance and trade, reverence for tradition were as characteristic of the political theory of the early American Republic as radical scepticism and the natural rights theory were. The difficult interaction of these components was especially evident in the discussions held during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the Constitution being the result of a compromise between them. This sophisticated mixture of very different, even contradictory, elements became the foundation of the American Republic, a foundation not too distant to be easily forsaken.

It is crucial to remember that these pre-modern elements provide a completely different but equally sound foundation for individualism and self-reliance, which have always been the pillars of American identity. The tension between the modern and ancient elements within American political consciousness is a prominent factor in the development of American social thought. It is impossible to get a thorough understanding of the latter without a careful study of those undercurrents which continue to provide a large portion of the American population with a satisfactory explanation of the nature of society and the man within it.

These tensions may not be very noticeable from the outside, but sometimes they come to the surface of political life, especially during debates about state rights, militia controversies and the gun ownership polemic. The recent emergence of the Tea Party movement shows that these tensions are not at all marginal. They are part of an intricate social pattern, which has hitherto not been sufficiently analysed.

The relative obscurity of this pattern does not mean that it never had its conscious exponents. Aside from the obvious examples amongst the works of the Founding Fathers on one

side and quite opaque texts of contemporary eccentrics on the other,² we can find cases which are relatively recent and at the same time do not have the connotations of marginality. This article focuses on one of these cases, the Southern Agrarian movement of the 1930s.

The works of the Agrarians provide us with a deeper understanding of the varieties of conservative thought and the profound and sophisticated connection which exists between European social philosophy and its American counterpart. The Southern Agrarian project shares with other traditionalist movements of the twentieth century the fate of a purely conservative agenda that turned radical because of the cultural milieu it had to struggle with. This problem was clearly defined by Julius Evola in the second half of the century: “My principles are only those that before the French Revolution every well-born person considered healthy and normal.”³ The difference between Evola and the Agrarians was simply that the latter could point at a much more recent event – the Appomattox defeat of the Confederacy which put an end to the *ancien regime* of the American South. This difference made the frustrations of the Southerners even deeper.

The Southern Agrarians belong to the lesser known “paleo” variety of American conservative thought.⁴ Paleoconservatism is a relatively recent umbrella term for the right-wing movements which preceded the contemporary American neoconservatism and its ideology of a powerful centralised state, industrial capitalism, an interventionist international policy, etc. The term “paleoconservatism” is being used now not only retrospectively, to denote the historically preceding versions of conservatism, but also to characterise contemporary right-wing theories which oppose the dominant neoconservative agenda. These “conservatives in opposition” regard the “neocon” version as non-authentic, lacking any historical heritage which could make it actually conservative. Neoconservatism, in their opinion, is a child of the quite recent process of rapid centralisation which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when the original decentralist tradition of the Founding Fathers (usually equated by the paleoconservatives with Anti-federalists) had been forsaken in the name of the alien concept of a welfare state and a single nation. The Southern Agrarians constitute an important part of the intellectual origins of

² I’m referring here to the numerous texts by contemporary American right-wing activists, conspiracy theorists, etc., which deserve attention, but do not serve the purpose of this article as they have a rather ambiguous status.

³ Cited in: Furlong P. *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*. Routledge, 2011, p.1.

⁴ For a brief general introduction to the Agrarianism see, i.e.: Conkin P. *The Southern Agrarians*. Knoxville, 1988; Rock V.J. *The Making and Meaning of I’ll Take My Stand: A Study in Utopian Conservatism, 1925-1939*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1961; Stewart J.L. *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians. The Nashville Groups of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Writings of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren*. Princeton, 1965. About the regionalist movement in XXth century USA in general see Dorman R.L. *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. Chapel Hill, 1993

contemporary paleoconservatism. In order to understand the latter it is essential to review the roots of the conflict between the adherents of the ancient ideas and the purveyors of the new conservative creed in the early twentieth century.

The Agrarian project was conceived at Vanderbilt University in the 1910s amongst a company of young intellectuals sharing a common interest in the culture of the Southern states.⁵ Many of the contributors to early Agrarianism were interested in poetry in the 1920s (and some devoted themselves to it after the break up of the movement). From 1922 to 1925 they published a poetry journal “The Fugitive”, which had a strong influence on the revival of Southern literature, and which became a pivotal point for the Agrarian “brethren” as they used to call each other.

But poetry was not enough – the leaders of The Fugitive strongly believed that the roots of literature had to be sought in the regional way of life and traditions. They felt deprived of their cultural ancestry due to the expansion of Northern industrialism which had not only transformed the economy of the South, but posed a danger to the very existence of a distinctively Southern civilisation. The schools and universities were being forced to teach the history of the South as it seemed fit to the Northern views and depict all things southern as backward, immoral and generally inferior. Those who were born within this cultural ghetto after the defeat of Dixie in the Civil War had to find their own ways to reconcile themselves with the past if they did not want to accept this derogatory status.

It was the John T. Scopes trial which acted as a catalyst for the Agrarian enterprise. A Tennessee high school teacher in Dayton was accused of violating the Butler Act, a Tennessee law which prohibited the teaching of evolutionary biology in “all the Universities, and all other public schools of Tennessee”. The Act was used by the Tennessee State to protect the religious beliefs of the South from the alleged perversions of modern science. The case escalated the conflict not only between the creationists and the adherents of the theory of evolution, but also between the South and the North. For the members of the Vanderbilt circle the trial represented the struggle for the right of society to maintain its beliefs and to protect them against the expanding spirit of scepticism and contempt backed by contemporary science. The trial “was a last-ditch effort to defend the old ways from the encroachment of the new”.⁶

Those on the prosecution side immediately became the targets of a nation-wide mockery and ridicule initiated by the Northern journalists and publicists. That was too difficult a situation

⁵ Stark Young and John Gould Fletcher apart, most of the future authors of the main Agrarian work “I’ll Take My Stand” had been affiliated with Vanderbilt University either as lecturers or as alumni.

⁶ Duffy B.K., Jacobi M. *The Politics of Rhetoric*. Richard M. Weaver and the Conservative Tradition. Westport, London, 1993. P.128.

to bear for the young Southern poets not necessarily fundamentalists themselves, but eager to accept the values of the “old time religion” for the sake of their regional identity. Donald Davidson wrote that “the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century, and how much more difficult to be a Southerner and also a writer. It was horrifying ... to realize that the south was being exposed to large-scale public detraction and did not know or much care how to answer.”⁷

The trial brought to the fore several topics which would later appear in the works of the Agrarians. The most important of those was the right of an established culture and its social and political institutions to remain intact and not to wither away only because its beliefs were not approved by the majority, the federal government, or “specialists” of any kind.

The Fugitives decided that they had to produce a book containing a number of essays, which should deal “with phases of the situation such as the Southern tradition, politics, religion, art, etc., but always with a strong bias toward the self-determinative principle”.⁸ And in 1930 despite the lack of organisation and editorial responsibilities they produced “I’ll Take My Stand”, an “admittedly partisan” book which would become a classic of conservative thought. It contains twelve essays of different levels of analysis and persuasiveness united in their fierce disagreement with the dominant political and economic trends of the moment – the centralisation of the state, the growth of industry and the financial sector at the expense of traditional agricultural vocations, and the emergence of a consumerist culture.

“I’ll Take My Stand” was definitely not a thorough and internally consistent treatise on economics or politics. It was a cultural statement, a radical anti-industrial and, to some extent, even anti-bourgeois manifesto, a poetical attack on mercenary civilisation.⁹ Despite the obvious differences in political and social views held by the contributors, the symposium had a unifying tone of Southern identity which makes it not a collection of loosely-connected essays, but a coherent piece of polemical work. And despite the overall Southern accent of this symposium, it brings out something more than personal bitterness over the destiny of the South. As Louis D. Rubin has noted, “for a polemically designed book to speak to an audience a half century after its occasion... it must possess an appeal, must make a commentary on something, that is at once

⁷ Davidson D. *Southern Writers in the Modern World*. Athens, 1958. P.40.

⁸ *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*. Athens, 1974. P.21.

⁹ Some authors insist that the Agrarianism was a literary other than political enterprise. See, i.e.: Rubin L.D., Jr. *The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South*. Seattle, 1963; *The Southern Review and Modern Literature, 1935-1985*. Baton Rouge, 1988.

more general and more timeless in its relevance”.¹⁰ It was a “commentary on the nature of man” more than anything else.¹¹ “It was a way of striking out against the deification of the machine, of warning against the depersonalizing forces of an unchecked, unrestrained industrial capitalism. It was not utopian so much as protest literature.”¹²

As some scholars have noticed, “I’ll Take My Stand” was in some way representative of a general trend of dissatisfaction with the spiritual degeneration characteristic of a growing industrial society. This dissatisfaction was a moving force behind the work of many thinkers regardless of their political stand: “conservative, such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and George Santayana; cultural radicals, including the ‘Young Intellectuals’ Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Waldo Frank; and such independent iconoclasts as H.L. Mencken”.¹³ Moreover, Southern Agrarianism had its allies on the other side of the Ocean, especially amongst the German Volkisch authors.¹⁴

The Agrarian concern with the pitfalls of industrialism led them to the refutation of the contemporary cult of progress. They saw the latter as a sign of the general process of alienation of men from nature and the traditional folkways characteristic of every healthy society in history. “Progress is both a slogan and a philosophy, a device for social control and belief in the reality of a process of cosmic development toward ‘some far-off divine event’.”¹⁵ The ancients did not regard the mere change of events as worthy of special interest aside from the symbolic meaning these events held within their worldview which was already in a sense complete. Even with the emergence of Christianity the situation had not changed drastically. For a Christian consciousness human life can not be improved by the secular means and the only progress possible is the one of a spiritual nature which delivers a person from sin.¹⁶

Progress implies the inevitability of what is contemporary, including contemporary ideas, but the Agrarians regarded as deeply servile the “notion that the existence of a powerful ‘trend’ is a mark of its ‘inevitability’”.¹⁷ Everything social is the result of a number of human choices,

¹⁰ Rubin L.D., Jr. *I’ll Take My Stand: The Literary Tradition // A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*. Baton Rouge; London, 1982. P.142.

¹¹ Roland C.P. *The South of the Agrarians // A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*. Baton Rouge; London, 1982. P.38.

¹² Rubin L.D., Jr. *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South*. Baton Rouge, 1978. P. 237.

¹³ Murphy P.V. *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*. Ph.D. Thesis, Indiana University, 1996. Pp. 69-70.

¹⁴ See Nicolaisen P. *The Southern Agrarians and European Agrarianism // Mississippi Quarterly*, vol.49, № 4, 1996. pp. 683-699.

¹⁵ Lanier L.H. *A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress // I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. P.122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P.125.

¹⁷ Young T.D. *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered*. Athens, Georgia, 1982. P.51.

which could have been made in a different way, there is nothing inevitable about them and the industrial system is not manifest destiny.

The idea of scientific and social progress makes it impossible for people to feel truly satisfied and connected to the circumstances they find themselves in, because progress implies the constant transformation conceived as the only possible way of achieving personal and community goals. However as the tempo of these changes increases, the goals themselves become less and less clear. The idea of progress becomes an undisputable value, detached from the actual needs and hopes of the common man. It serves the purpose of a “public anaesthetic” providing the people with ritualistic formulae which censure any doubts about the need for this exhausting pace of life. “The capitalization of the applied sciences has now become extravagant and uncritical; it has enslaved our human energies to a degree now clearly felt to be burdensome.”¹⁸

Underneath the layer of propaganda there still remains a reality which overall is not that satisfactory. As the actual dissatisfaction grows, the need for this industrial magic becomes more desperate: “A steady barrage of propaganda issues through newspapers, magazines, radios, billboards, and other agencies for controlling public opinion, to the effect that progress must be maintained.”¹⁹ The Agrarians believed that people should make clear and critically re-evaluate the ends which these measures of social control aim to secure.

Quite paradoxically the Agrarian critique of the relationship between scientific progress and the character of labour appears to be almost Marxist.²⁰ The science should have rendered labour easier and could have made the economic status of those involved in the production of goods secure. This could have led to the enjoyment of labour. However the only concern contemporary society has about matters of scientific improvement of labour is the improvement of its effectiveness. Even though the labourer has been provided with safer workplaces, “his labor is hard, its tempo is fierce, and his employment is insecure”.²¹

Therefore, labour itself in an industrial society remains as a necessary evil, it is deprived of its role as a specifically human activity. For the Agrarians (as it was for Marx) labour is

¹⁸ Introduction // *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. p.xi.

¹⁹ Lanier L.H. Op.cit. p.123.

²⁰ The Agrarians were definitely anti-Marxist and anti-Communist and they saw the Soviet system as an alternative form of the same evil – inhumane industrialism, worsened by the lack of private property. Some of them even wanted to print their symposium under the title “Tracts Against Communism”. See Young T.D. op.cit. pp. 17-18. At the same time, their texts strikingly resemble the upcoming attack on industrialism by Herbert Marcuse. This was also noted by John Shelton Reed in his *For Dixieland: The Sectionalism of I'll Take My Stand // A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*. Baton Rouge; London, 1982.

²¹ Introduction // *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. p.xii.

naturally one of the happy functions of human life, an activity which should emancipate rather than enslave. However within the industrial system the nature of labour is exclusively mercenary and servile. The only gain possible is a material one, the only meaning the labour has is hidden within the product. The act of labour is practiced solely for its rewards, which, however, do not bring any happiness. Labour is an activity which a person avoids and so it becomes a commodity. Therefore, “the philosophy of applied science is generally quite sure that the saving of labor is a pure gain, and that the more of it the better”.²² Consequently, the more despised labour is, the more it is practiced in the industrial economy.

The Agrarians were the followers of a well-established intellectual tradition of the opposition to industrial capitalism - as Eugene D. Genovese asserts, “in the Old South, outstanding political and intellectual figures denounced capitalism (“the free-labor system”) as a brutal, immoral, irresponsible wage-slavery in which the masters of capital exploited and impoverished their workers without assuming personal responsibility for them. They denounced the system for alienating human beings from community life and, indeed, from their own nature.”²³ The difference, however, was that the Agrarians had to adhere to these ideas *within* the belligerent industrial system.

The South for the Agrarians was a place with a profoundly different attitude towards labour. The latter served as a natural part of the life cycle, providing the required means for subsistence but never becoming exhaustive to the point where it would prevent someone from enjoying themselves. The South did not have a cult of gross material prosperity. Men were “committed to a form of leisure, and... their labor itself was leisurely”.²⁴

The Agrarians were amongst the pioneers of critical geography. They discerned the difference between the agricultural and capitalist society – people within the former did not specially separate the place they lived in from their place of work because they naturally belonged to both. A society infected by an industrial attitude breaks the connection between the process of production and the “life” of the individual, making the workplace a place of suffering and despair. Men “will not live where they work or work where they live. They will not work where they play. And they will not, above all, play where they work. There will be no singing in those fields. There will be no crews of workers or neighbors laughing and joking, telling stories, or competing at tests of speed or strength or skill. There will be no holiday walks or picnics in

²² Ibid. p.xii.

²³ Genovese E.D. *The Southern Tradition. The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism*. Cambridge; London, 1994. p.31

²⁴ Ransom J.C. *Reconstructed but Unregenerate // I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. p.14.

those fields because, in the first place, the fields will be ugly, all graces of nature having been ruled out, and, in the second place, they will be dangerous.”²⁵

In contemporary capitalism even the time of leisure is actually constricted by the forms of activity advertised and sold to a person to consume, not to partake in. People, alienated from the society they live in, do not actually know what to do with their spare time and surrender to the industry of entertainment. Man, alienated from the culture which is not rooted in everyday life, regards it as yet another product or as some kind of an obligation imposed which should be obediently fulfilled without any real need for it.²⁶ Contrary to the belief held by the proponents of contemporary capitalism, when culture becomes a mass product, accessible almost to everyone, it does not give birth to better art. Quite the opposite is usually true – it is much more profitable to produce and to disseminate the simple and the vulgar, than to educate the public.

Within this type of society people are connected to each other only through the products they consume and not by any real human ties. The number of superficial contacts a person has in the contemporary world does not match the close bonds which exist in an agricultural community. “The fact that along with ten million other persons a man eats potato chips made in Detroit is of about zero order of significance as far as the humanizing process of liberation of spirit in social interaction goes.”²⁷ Actually, men become isolated from each other, but not as individuals, but as highly specialised professionals, whose modes of interaction are being controlled in the form of formalised institutions, the family itself becoming one of them: “the moral and educational functions of the family are more and more intrusted to depersonalized external agencies which simulate the form of familial function but which are entirely devoid of its content”²⁸.

It is consumption as such which becomes the only way of spending one’s personal time and the only way really compatible with the logic of progress in an industrial economy. The technology which reduces the workload for a person is essentially the same technology which provides him with an overwhelming number of products to consume during the time rescued from the labour. “It is an inevitable consequence of industrial progress that production greatly outruns the rate of natural consumption. To overcome the disparity, the producers, disguised as the pure idealists of progress, must coerce and wheedle the public into being loyal and steady

²⁵ Berry W. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco, 1977. p.67.

²⁶ Davidson D. *A Mirror for Artists // I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. p.34.

²⁷ Lanier L.H. *Op.cit.* p.145.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.146.

customers, in order to keep the machines running... Advertising means to persuade the consumers to want exactly what the applied sciences are able to furnish them.”²⁹

In this way society imposes on its members a perilous obligation – an obligation to buy the commodities continually purveyed by the expanding market, even the commodities no one has ever expressed a need for. Material growth and the amount of spare time a person receives from the industrial economy turns out to be just a pre-requisite for his enslavement. We have to earn more because we have an opportunity (and therefore an obligation) to spend more. If we act otherwise, we become the enemies of progress. Almost 30 years after the initial publication of “I’ll Take My Stand” Donald Davidson wrote: “We were saying that life should determine economics, and not economics life. Our quarrel was not with industry or science in their proper role, but with industrialism as a tyrant enslaving and ruling science itself, and with it religion, the arts, education, the state, thus reducing all principles to one principle, the economic, and becoming a destroyer, ready to break the continuity of human history and threatening the very existence of human society.”³⁰

For the Agrarians industrialism is closely connected with intrusive central government as its vehicle. And “ever since the forming of the Union in 1787, the dominant political tendency in the southern states has been resistance to the centralizing of power. Far more than any other region, the South has set its face against Leviathan – that is, against the swelling omnipotent nation-state, what Tocqueville called ‘democratic despotism’, the political collectivity that reduces men and women to social atoms.”³¹ The state protects the interests of large corporations and consequently destroys the traditional way of life as detrimental to them. It does it by tariffs, sanitary regulations, taxes, etc. The federal government is as separated from the individual as a large corporation is – both have no bonds with a specific place on earth, their mode of action determined predominantly by financial categories. This separation of the government from the people is consistent with the growing indifference of the latter towards the actual involvement in politics. The industrial society does not constitute a recognisable pattern anymore, so a person does not feel responsibility and surrenders the right of self-government to some abstract entity, or to “specialists”, or even to procedures. Donald Davidson, one of the most prominent Agrarians wrote: “We uphold the abstract conception of the state - and lose all feeling for

²⁹ Introduction // I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. p.xvii-xviii.

³⁰ Davidson D. Southern Writers in the Modern World. pp.57-58. It is interesting to note that in his book “Gli Uomini e le Rovine” (1953) Italian ultra-conservative author Julius Evola has stated almost precisely the same idea of modern obsession with economics which unifies the Soviet and Western regimes despite their superficial differences.

³¹ Kirk R. The Attack on Leviathan: Donald Davidson and the South’s Conservatism. Heritage Foundation Lecture 206. Washington, 1989. p.1

government. We, as individuals are no longer sensible of ourselves as being the government and as composing the ultimate source of authority... No wonder that our liberty was taken away.”³²

That is why Western democracy for the Agrarians was no better than the Soviet political system – despite the free market ideology professed in the USA, the real economy, structured along the lines of big industry, opted for a controlled production: “they expect to find super-engineers, in the shape of Boards of Control, who will adapt production to consumption and regulate prices and guarantee business against fluctuations: they are Sovietists... They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government.”³³ Therefore, socialism was an inevitable outcome of the large-scale industrial and financial capitalism.

Despite the rhetoric of individualism which accompanies the capitalist ideology, the individual is lost in the process. Individuality was much more secure within the tenets of agrarian democracy as preached by Thomas Jefferson. The political institutions of the Old South did not make for a uniform society and government as they were as local as possible. Individuality grows more from the peculiarities, and the eccentricities, and even from the rules imposed on a person by his neighbourhood, than from some abstract notions of his rights which he shares with someone living in New York or Los Angeles. Distinctions, not similarities, are what create an individual. The Civil War on the part of the South was fought for the right to be different.

A man can not build his character and integrity through money, he needs some substantial objects – a piece of a land, a farm, an ancestral house – something he can truly love and respect.³⁴ “But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of ‘natural resources,’ a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market, or a credit system.”³⁵ The industrial system does not provide a person with anything worthy of building his life upon, a financial mechanism has no regard for an individual. The whole social project of contemporary “predatory and decadent” capitalism has nothing to do with an individual. “Men are prepared to sacrifice their private dignity and happiness to an abstract social ideal, and without asking whether the social ideal produces the welfare of any individual man whatsoever. But this is absurd. The responsibility of men is for their own welfare and that of their neighbors; not for the hypothetical welfare of some fabulous creature called society.”³⁶

³² Cited in: Murphy P.V. *op.cit.* p.104.

³³ Introduction // *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition.* p.xviii.

³⁴ Rubin L.D., Jr. *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South.* Baton Rouge, 1978. p. 218.

³⁵ Ransom J.C. *op.cit.* p.20.

³⁶ Introduction // *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition.* p.xviii.

During the discussions held at the symposium commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of “I’ll take My Stand”, one of the contributors to the book, Robert Penn Warren, cited Emerson regarding the problem of the individual: “Leave off this hypocritical prating about masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide and break them up and make individuals out of them.”³⁷ And at an earlier reunion of the Fugitives in 1956, Robert Penn Warren indicated that the Agrarian movement attracted him because of his concern for the “disintegration of the notion of the individual in the society we’re living in”.³⁸

The conservatism of the Agrarians was of a kind innate to the Patriots fighting against England for freedom of their states, not for the Union. Freedom means an ability to make cultural choices for a society. If this ability is lost due to the demise of regional consciousness, freedom is lost too. Freedom can only exist within actual institutions which represent and simultaneously constitute the way of life inherent to a specific society, which can not be the same in Virginia and New York. That is why the Southerners were very suspicious towards the notion of some abstract universal rights which are not based on the inherited practices of their forebears. This scepticism was deeply rooted in the constitutional theory professed by the Anti-Federalist thinkers and the state right theorists of the Old South. In their opinion the drafters of the Constitution did not create a single nation-state despite the efforts of the Federalists. The Constitution itself is “primarily a *negative* document in the sense that it consists of prohibitions and restraints imposed upon the authority of the state”.³⁹ Its aim being the protection of the specificities of already existing communities within the states, the Constitution could not *create* these communities. They were real historical entities which had no need for any external forces to confirm their existence. Moreover being in a sense natural, these entities were the best possible checks against the abuse of individual freedom. They were much better suited to serve this function than any legislators and their abstract ideas.

In their political reasoning the Agrarians have generally followed the Southern social theorist George Fitzhugh of Port Royal, Virginia, who wrote: “State governments, and senators, and representatives, and militia, and cities, and churches, and colleges, and universities, and landed property, are institutions. Things of flesh and blood, that know their rights, ‘and knowing dare maintain them’. We should cherish them. They will give permanence to government, and security to State Rights. But the abstract doctrines of nullification and secession, the general principles laid down in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and Constitution of

³⁷ Discussion // A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years. Baton Rouge; London, 1982. p.172.

³⁸ Young T.D. op.cit. p.51.

³⁹ Weaver R.M. The Southern Essays of Richard Weaver. Indianapolis, 1987. p.233.

the United States, afford no protection of rights, no valid limitations of power, no security to State Rights. The power to construe them, is the power to nullify them.”⁴⁰

In the Agrarian view, the great political experiment of creating a government based on human dignity and self-respect which became possible in the course of the American Revolution was finally abandoned at the outcome of the Civil War, which for the Agrarians was definitely not a triumph of liberty, but an economic struggle won by nothing short of the rape of the Constitution, in Allen Tate’s words.⁴¹ The very ratification of the Constitution of the United States was possible only because it sanctioned slave ownership. Therefore, the intervention of the North was anything but constitutional. As Eugene Genovese remarked, “the Yankee interpretation of the Constitution prevailed not because it was intellectually superior but because the North won a test of physical strength.”⁴² It was the North that was responsible for the war and consequently for the destruction of the Southern cultural heritage during the period of Reconstruction.

The abolishment of slavery served the purposes of capitalists who could then exploit their paid workers in a less reserved way than any slaves could ever be exploited. The cost of the waged labour became significantly less than the cost of slave-keeping, rendering the private ownership of slaves economically unsound. This situation had already been predicted at the Federal Convention of 1787, when Oliver Ellsworth, a delegate from Connecticut, reacted to the problem of slavery, stating that “poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless”.⁴³

The opinions on the slavery problem differed within the movement (it became especially clear later, during the debates about segregation issues), but all of the Agrarians followed the common line of argument, which again resembles a Marxist analysis. For the Agrarians slavery was not a thing which defined the Southern economy or culture to any noteworthy extent. It was the result of a number of historical circumstances, which were in some sense more detrimental to the slave-owners than to the slaves themselves. The Agrarians insisted that “slavery had been practically forced upon the country by England – over the protest of colonial assemblies”.⁴⁴ The Southerners had already been discussing the prospect of abolishment in the early nineteenth century, but only on terms of sending the black population to colonies out of the Union. “Negroes had come into the Southern Colonies in such numbers that people feared for the integrity of the white race. For the negroes were cannibals and barbarians, and therefore

⁴⁰ Fitzhugh G. *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*. Richmond, 1854. pp.188-189.

⁴¹ For his interpretation of Civil War see Tate A. *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier*. Nashville, 1991.

⁴² Genovese E.D. *op.cit.* p.28.

⁴³ *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. New Haven, 1937. vol.2. p. 370-371.

⁴⁴ Owsley F.L. *The Irrepressible Conflict // I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. p.77.

dangerous... Accordingly, all slaveholders and non-slaveholders who objected to slavery, objected even more to the presence of the free negro.”⁴⁵ The defence of slavery-based economics was a defence of civilization, and abolition was a threat to everything this culture stood for.

Moreover, “slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice”.⁴⁶ Despite the growing tide of propaganda, travellers to the slave-holding South from the North and from Europe reported that they saw none of the horrors they expected to meet. That was especially true for the Europeans and for those among the Americans who had travelled to Europe, because they could see that the life of a “free” European peasant was much harsher than the life of a slave in the South.⁴⁷

The Agrarians believed that contemporary wage labour was as vicious and as brutalising as chattel slavery. Actually it may be a lot worse, “for there is no feeling of responsibility even for the physical welfare of individuals dependent for a living upon the caprice of modern industry... As a matter of fact, the corporate form of our economic system makes possible a scale of exploitation unheard of in history.”⁴⁸

Another point that should be taken into account when discussing the attitudes towards slavery is that the South has always been a region most adherent to the classical Republican tradition. That makes the problem of equality a lot more comprehensive – the whites and the blacks *were* equal in a sense that they were equally bound by moral duties before God and that was not just an abstraction for that society.⁴⁹ Not only blacks, but women and children also were not “equal” to freemen, and that was not at all inconsistent with the republican virtues. Women were excluded because “their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience in the great businesses of life, and the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state”, and all the other dependants like children and those without property were excluded because they were “too little acquainted with public affairs to form a right judgment, and too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own”.⁵⁰ And the republican ideal has always been *essentially based* on such differences. If everyone got equal rights in society, it would “destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one common level”.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.77.

⁴⁶ Ransom J.C. op.cit. p.14.

⁴⁷ McDonald F. *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution*. Lawrence, 1985. p.52.

⁴⁸ Lanier L.H. op.cit. p.140.

⁴⁹ Wharton L. *Polity and the Public Good: Conflicting Theories of Republican Government in the New Nation*. Ann Arbor, 1980. pp.15-16.

⁵⁰ John Adams to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776 // *The Works of John Adams*. Boston, 1854. vol.9. p.376.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.378.

The whole “negro” problem was not however the main issue for the Agrarians, though some of them were, at the time, segregationists. But they did not regard the race question as the essence of their Southern identity. What did really bother them was the gradual extinction of a particular way of life specific to the South under the pressure of industrialism. This lifestyle was based on the culture of the soil as opposed to finances and industry. The Agrarians believed that they were the last proponents of a longstanding European tradition stemming from the ancient Greek and Roman ideals as found in Aristotle and Cicero. That was an aristocratic ideal closely bonded with the contempt for the trade and the praise of the man of the land “whose birth, wealth, and intellect had elevated him to independence of other persons”.⁵² The Agrarians pronounced this heredity and Allen Tate even stated that they should base the movement “less upon the actual old South than upon its prototype – the historical social and religious scheme of Europe”.⁵³ They even regarded themselves as more European than the contemporary Europeans because the South had been able to conserve the ancient traits of Western civilisation long lost in Europe. Therefore, they regarded their crusade not only as a battle for the South, but for “civilized society, as we have known it in the Western world, against the new barbarism of science and technology controlled and directed by the modern power state”.⁵⁴ In this sense, the cause of the South was “the cause of Western civilization itself”.⁵⁵ The problem was not strictly an American one – the Agrarians were fighting against the anti-humanist forces which have appeared both as Western capitalism and Eastern totalitarian regimes, equally producing the atomistic, alienated individual.

At the same time the Agrarians were in a more advantageous position than many of their conservative allies of the twentieth century in a sense that they did not have to look for their ideal in the Middle Ages or even *ancien regime* – their ideal had been realised until recently in the South, which had been a living example of a patriarchal hierarchical society based on virtue and honour. The cause the Agrarians were fighting for was not, however, a return to the past. The impossibility of such project was already clear even though there were people who had rejected the whole “Yankee thing” and tried to keep their Old Southern lifestyle intact despite being left without the economic base for their habits. The main aim was to revive the Southern spirit within the new circumstances, to re-identify with the old values and to state them not as resentment, but as a positive programme. The Agrarians were not the enemies of technology as

⁵² Sekora J. *Luxury. The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*. Baltimore, 1977. p.32.

⁵³ Cited in: Simpson L.P. *The Southern Republic of Letters and I'll Take My Stand // A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*. Baton Rouge; London, 1982. p.67.

⁵⁴ Davidson D. *Southern Writers in the Modern World*. p.45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p.45.

such, but of the “domination of the economic, political and social order by the notion that the greater part of a nation's energies should be directed toward an endless process of increasing the production and consumption of goods”.⁵⁶ A continuity between the past and the future should exist to make one’s life sound and worth living. However for this aim to become possible, we “must recover the past, or at least in some way realize it, in order that we may bring the most genuine and essential parts of our tradition forward in contact with the inevitable new tradition now in process of formation”.⁵⁷

A person with old world ideals should not become a remnant of the past, should not become a curiosity harmless enough to be an eccentric part of the “pluralist” industrial society, who would be adapted to be rendered helpless. There is no point in sitting on the ancestral fence with a shotgun on your knees ruminating on the old ways, as many Southerners do.⁵⁸

This accent on the renewal and not a restoration is reminiscent of Confucian ideas. The Agrarians themselves cited Confucius, saying that “the inferior, whether in life or in education, should exist only for the sake of the superior. We feed and clothe and exercise our bodies, for example, in order to be able to do something with our minds. We employ our minds in order to achieve character, to become the balanced personalities, the “superior men” of Confucius text, the “gentlemen” of the old South. We achieve character, personality, gentlemanliness in order to make our lives an art and to bring our souls into relation with the whole scheme of things, which is the divine nature. But the present-day system of American popular education exactly reverses this process. It puts that which is superior – learning, intelligence, scholarship – at the disposal of the inferior.”⁵⁹

Sceptical about the prospects of the government paying attention to their case, the Agrarians saw the possibilities of resistance on the individual level. A person conscious enough to understand the means by which he is being manipulated has the power of refusal. He should not believe the industrial propaganda, he “should know that prophets do not come from cities, promising riches and store clothes. They have always come from the wilderness, stinking of goats and running with lice and telling of a different sort of treasure, one a corporation head would not understand.”⁶⁰ The opportunity still exists to keep a relatively independent lifestyle rejecting the overwhelming wave of products and technologies. One can still control himself and refrain from increasing consumption not essential for his physical and mental well-being. A

⁵⁶ Lanier L.H. op.cit. p.148.

⁵⁷ Davidson D. *The Spyglass: Views and Reviews, 1924-1930*. Nashville, 1963. pp.201-202.

⁵⁸ Ransom J.C. op.cit. pp.16-17.

⁵⁹ Fletcher J.G. *Education, Past and Present // I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. pp.119-120.

⁶⁰ Lytle A.N. *The Hind Tit // I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. N.Y., 1951. pp.205-206.

person should rediscover the wealth of the soil and his own role within the chain of being. Weary of capitalistic propaganda disguised as entertainment, he should, as Andrew Nelson Lytle proposed, “throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall”.⁶¹ This personal resistance may in the long run lead to serious consequences: “...when a few hundred or a few hundred thousand median men would suddenly become aware that they had fallen into moral slavery... and so would set about a repetition of the Russian noble experiment”.⁶²

The autonomous man or a community would become a nightmare for the capitalist, because those who grow their own food, make their own clothes and educate their children as they consider it right, do not participate in a money-driven economy. They basically do not need money at all and so they do not consume and they do not pay the indirect taxes, letting the industrialists bear the burdens of government. The Agrarians even regarded it possible to refuse to pay the direct taxes would they become too burdensome for a farmer.⁶³

The reason for this withdrawal from the money economy should not be a purely economic one. The products may actually be cheaper to buy than to produce individually, but that is not the whole price a person has to pay for them because his involvement requires him to invest more than he gets, his investment being primarily his independence. The value of the farm can not be measured in money, as Andrew Nelson Lytle has written, “a farm is not a place to grow wealthy; it is a place to grow corn”.⁶⁴

The Agrarian fascination with the South was due to the perfect balance they found there between the community feeling not exaggerated to the point of totalitarian control and the individualism which stems from the republican virtue of a landed citizen, not from the abstractions of the French Enlightenment. However, it has soon become quite clear that there was going to be no agrarian revival of a noticeable kind in the USA and the southern nostalgia would soon become another emotion to be exploited by industry. At the end of the 1930s most of the early Agrarians who had participated in “I’ll Take My Stand” had lost faith in the efficacy of their enterprise. As the division between the main adherents of Agrarianism deepened, the prospect of the movement becoming a continuous intellectual project waned. The ideologues turned to their respective fields of poetry, criticism, history, and other pursuits. However, there

⁶¹ Ibid. p.244.

⁶² Kline H.B. William Remington: A Study in Individualism // I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. N.Y., 1951. p.326.

⁶³ Lytle A.N. op.cit. p.245.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.205.

were several waves of neo-agrarian revival associated with such notable men of letters and academics as Richard M. Weaver, M.E. Bradford, Eugene D. Genovese, and others.⁶⁵

The Southern Agrarians certainly did more to expose the social problems they observed than to scrupulously describe the ideal society they were after. But as other authors have already noted, the contemporary relevance of Agrarian literature remains intact not because of the programme it proposes, but because of the questions it asks. The Agrarian enterprise served the Marcusean aim of opposing the one-dimensional society by portraying the paradigmatic alternative, already romantic at the time but nonetheless valuable.

“I’ll Take My Stand” reminds the reader of a long-standing tradition of a cultural and political opposition to the forces of unification and simplification which tend to corrupt society. This paleoconservative tradition, born in Europe, has been transplanted to the American continent and has been saved from falling into oblivion. Regardless of many accusations of naïve utopianism, the Agrarians proudly bore the flag of idealism in the world concentrated on material acquisitiveness.

⁶⁵ See, i.e.: Young F.D. Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind. Columbia, 1995; Bradford M.E. Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative. Athens, 1985; Idem. The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political. Peru, 1990; Idem. Against the Barbarians and Other Reflections on a Familiar Themes. Columbia, 1992; Genovese E.D. Op.cit.; Idem. The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Cultural War. Columbia, 1995, etc.

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