

Countryside And Nation

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The world-war forces upon us the idea, if not the ideal, of nationality. The state becomes a superman demanding sacrifice of all individual and group interests. National power, survival, aggrandizement, are the tests applied to men and to measures. We think, not of persons, but of organizations, armies, hospital services, munition production, transportation control, food conservation, and other regulations of consumption, all dominated by a compelling common purpose. The contrast between these people at war and ourselves disturbs us. We ask uneasily whether we are capable of sacrifice and co-operation on so heroic a scale. Strenuous folk insist that we are slack, self-indulgent, undisciplined, blind to the dangers which menace us, incapable of taking the precautions which prudence dictates. Others less bellicose declare that our battles are to be fought, not in trenches and on the sea, but on farms, in factories, and in counting-houses. These men call us to industrial and commercial preparation for a national campaign in the markets of the world. Still other more idealistic prophets are proclaiming a moral crusade. They tell us that we can fulfil our mission only by exalting justice and righteousness, living virtuous lives, and seeking to make our country an agency of peace and good-will among men. From the conflict of ideals and programs one fact emerges: we are being forced to think nationally, to consider our problems from the standpoint, not chiefly of individual, local, provincial, or class interest, but from that of national unity and welfare. The railway situation gives us a vivid sense of the country as a whole. We shrink from a tariff revision which we fear would again reveal localism and special interest, rampant and unashamed. We have a pathetic hope that a tariff commission might see the nation as a unit. We are beginning to hold our noses at the thought of the putrescent "pork-barrel."

To most Americans, permeated with individualism and localism, insistence on the national test seems cold, impersonal, hard-hearted. For example, the social sanction for state-supported education is resented. The individual right to an unexacting education at public expense, to admission to professions on easy terms, is vigorously asserted. The career of the man is tangible, human; it arouses sympathy. The possible sacrifice of public welfare is remote, abstract. Little wonder that persons who are impatient with democracy declare that only bitter experience can force upon the people of the United States the national point of view; that they will have a powerful army only in the third or fourth year of a war in which they are getting a sound drubbing; that they will organize transportation, industry, and commerce nationally only under the whip of economic distress; that they will gain moral strength only through trial and suffering. These skeptics are sure that a well-conceived, consistent, and steadily pursued national policy is possible only to a state in which the competent

few successfully control the docile many. Those Americans who still have faith in democracy, and are suspicious of the real competence and foresight of the autocratic few, will not acquiesce in a fatalistic policy of drift; they will urge the national point of view with respect to every problem, in the belief that slowly the American mind will lose its intensely personal and local conception of life, and that truly national purposes and policies will be formulated and followed.

No one would question the assertion that the farm and village life of the United States presents a national problem. Yet it is doubtful whether many Americans realize the immense gravity of the question as to how fifty millions are now living in the rural regions, and as to the kind of life which still more millions will live in the future. To be sure, there has been talk and print enough about country life, to say nothing of commissions, conferences, and legislative projects in profusion. Unconsciously the emphasis has been upon the needs of country folk rather than upon the nation's need of them. It is the latter view which must be more clearly grasped if the farm problem is to be dealt with to some purpose. The personal and group view is natural enough, but this gets its larger meaning from inclusive, national considerations.

The nation is bound to ask questions like these: Is the ample land of the United States being utilized efficiently for the present, and conservatively for the future? Can the nation rely upon food supplies ample for its own needs, with a surplus for the purposes of international commerce? Are producers of agricultural goods receiving sufficient economic returns to stimulate them to high efficiency? Are countryside and village renting and training promising individuals, of whom many may be wisely drafted into the professions and occupations of the national life? Are enough persons of imagination and ability remaining in the rural districts to furnish local leadership? Do country schools offer opportunities fairly equal to those provided by town and city 'schools? Are these rural schools adapted to the needs of country life? Is rural life so organized as to give training in the responsibilities of citizenship, and so as to develop a community spirit? Can the farming population be counted upon to contribute to state and federal policies more than a local or class point of view? Is there reason to expect that spiritual and ethical idealism will be maintained and fostered in the open country? What can the governments of state and nation do to increase the efficiency of the rural population in its service to the United States? How can voluntary associations and private organizations be enlisted in this national undertaking? These questions might be condensed into one: Is the open country producing food enough physically to sustain, and personalities and communities of a quality mentally and morally to strengthen, the American nation? These inquiries may hurt the sensibilities of persons who feel the missionary spirit drawing them into the country. They may resent the idea that rural folk are to be exploited for national welfare. The reply is obvious. It is open to the countryside to raise similar questions about urban populations, and about all the organizations of the national life. The national point of view spares no individual, class, or function. Of each it asks: Is the work of the nation being well done or ill? It is not to be denied that rural life today as a whole is not in a sound and satisfying condition. Other national services, to be sure, are far from efficient, and are being subjected to criticism and reconstruction. The farm problem

is, however, entering a serious phase. The nation is beginning to ask how men and women can be induced to carry on country life with more satisfaction to themselves and better service to the whole people. It is absurd to describe the rural population as a group as in any sense degenerate or as constituting a pathological problem. Talk of uplifting the countryside by sending out urban missionaries is at once pharisaical and irritating. In spite of many disquieting tendencies, we rightly regard the rural folk of the United States as essentially sound, vigorous, and capable of serving the nation well, provided only the necessary means of stimulation and reward can be discovered and applied. An omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent despot could reorganize the nation promptly, put each of us in his proper place, assign tasks, appeal to the requisite motives, and make our common life a marvel of team-play. No wonder that we sometimes long for Plato's philosophers to come and take charge of us. But we should not recognize and accept wisdom so superhuman. We are doomed to grope our way slowly toward a far-off ideal of national cooperation.

Society has its ways of putting people to useful work and keeping them at it. These devices vary with the task, but in the long run and on the average, a social job does not get well and persistently done unless it insures these things: a satisfying economic reward, a sense of mastery over a technique, an occupational pride, congenial comradeship, social esteem and recognition. If our nation hopes to get its farming done efficiently, and to make country life appeal to the imagination of millions of its people, it will have to make sure that at least these stimuli are applied to them. For precisely because these rewards are today inadequate or lacking, farming and country life cause the nation anxiety.

It is not for a sociologist to venture far into the field of rural economics. Land problems, taxation, credits, cost accounting, marketing, co-operative industry, offer complexities too intricate and detailed for the merely speculative mind. But even the social philosopher perceives that ways of getting a living are fundamental and profoundly affect the entire structure of a given society. Any attempt then to improve country life must take into account its business basis. Until very recently it seems to have been taken for granted that the unit, ownership, and administration of agricultural industry have been finally determined. The farm-institute apostles and extension lecturers have depicted a countryside dotted with farms of moderate size, each subjected to a semi-intensive, diversified culture by its owner, who with his family occupies a modern dwelling, sends his children over good roads to a consolidated, vocationalized school, himself eagerly motoring to "short courses" and indulging his passion for scientific farming. Under this system the farmer acquires a truly American independence, alike apparently of city people and of his own neighborhood; he offers a striking contrast to the urbanite who is wholly, almost abjectly, dependent upon his complicated environment. Of late the rural picture has been modified by the introduction of many co-operative features in which the earlier independence has been almost magically transformed into an idyllic community consciousness. It is needless to say that children reared in this atmosphere display an unswerving loyalty to country life, and an edifying indifference to the lures of the city.

It is a rude awakening from this bucolic dream to be told that as an industry farming pays the average farmer less than day wages; that only increase in land values gives him a delusive sense of prospering from agriculture; that tenancy is increasing disconcertingly even in the best farming regions, such as Iowa and Illinois; that with the approaching occupation of the last of the cheap government lands, opportunities for men without capital will grow rapidly less; that, owing to the character of land tenure, the rural population is increasingly foot-loose and migratory; and that, by reason of these conditions, education, social life, political responsibility, moral standards, and religious sanctions are being alarmingly neglected or undermined. These are summary and possibly extreme assertions. If they are in the main true, they raise this question:

When farming ceases to depend on land speculation, and becomes wholly an industry, what will be the method of providing and controlling the increasing amount of capital which will be required for the proper development of the agricultural resources of the United States? Upon the answer to this question will depend the future, not only of farming as a business, but of rural life as a source of character, ideals, and citizenship.

It is probable that no one uniform type of agricultural industry will be worked out. Adaptations will take place to a variety of conditions of soil, climate, access to markets. It is hard to imagine precisely the same unit of organization in the market-garden area of Long Island, the corn belt of Illinois and Iowa, the wheat sections of Montana and California, the apple valleys of Washington, and the cotton fields of Georgia. Nevertheless, there will develop a prevailing or characteristic method of exploiting the arable land of this country. If the nation is to survive, this method must be efficient and must contribute more than crops to the common welfare. No suspension of the laws of nature, physical and human, is to be counted upon. Even Congress cannot protect the countryside against the consequences of ignoring these processes. To discover and to utilize purposefully the principles of the natural sciences, of economics, and of the other social sciences is the opportunity and duty of statesmanship.

Even when frontier conditions with cheap land and rapidly rising values have passed, the moderate-sized, one-family farm managed by its owner with acquired or hereditary capital will undoubtedly persist. But will it be the prevailing, efficient, dominant type? No; as a small, isolated, producing unit, dependent upon market conditions over which it has no control, this good, old-fashioned farm, managed in the traditional spirit of truculent individualism, is doomed. Its capital is threatened by uneconomic management and by the distribution of inheritances. The remorseless increase of tenancy records the passing of such family farms into the hands of men who possess and conserve capital or the retention of them by persons who have moved to village or town. The isolated individualistic farm cannot provide the conditions which will insure a succession of generations in satisfied possession of the family property. There seems no escape from this dilemma: sons and daughters with

limited capacity cannot successfully manage a farm in this way; children of imagination and ability find no sufficient rewards for undertaking the enterprise. If the country is dependent upon an agricultural industry dominated by the frontier spirit, then the national house has a quaking foundation. Robust, assertive individualism which "paddles its own canoe," "looks out for number one," "minds its own business," and engages even in "log-rolling" reluctantly has had its day. It is moving gradually into town in the persons of retired farmers who oppose the wasteful extravagance of public schools and other collective calls upon the taxpayers.

Is, then, the history of imperial Rome and of pre-revolutionary France to be repeated in the United States? Is agricultural land to pass into the hands of a relatively small number of individuals, firms, and corporations? Is the tenant farmer to become the American type? Already 37 per cent of the farms in this country are rented or worked on shares by the men in immediate charge. How far a slight decline in the percentage of tenancy in the North Atlantic division is due to the purchase of farms for summer homes or to be merged into country estates there is no way of knowing. The high tenancy rate in the cotton belt reflects the familiar facts about the exploitation of the negro farmer by high interest rates, profits on provisions advanced as capital, manipulation of sales, etc. That in the best agricultural states of the upper Mississippi Valley tenancy should be steadily gaining ground is ominous. It may be said that this is a passing phase due to the purchase of land, not for investment, but for speculative purposes. Granted that this be true, when something like stability in values has been reached, how are individuals with little or no capital to become owners of farms? Are they not doomed to be renters or wage-earners if they are to have any part in agricultural industry?

It may be that tenancy is a blessing in disguise. The most obvious effects of it are: losses of soil fertility, under-production, inefficient management, weakening of initiative and responsibility, impairing of community spirit, a consequent undermining of local institutions, and a deterioration of character. There are hopeful people who believe that under wisely drawn leases the soil will be protected, that by profit-sharing and expert supervision production will be stimulated, and that a kind of sublimated peasantry will come into existence which will add to the old American rural virtues a grateful docility and a respect for the owners of land and their views of the public weal. These regenerated renters are counted upon also to display an aversion to granges, farmers' alliances, leagues, and other sources of unrest! One must be an invincible optimist to have a faith like this. If we are drifting toward a tenant-farmer system, we must face the inevitable consequences. The nation cannot have confidence in a future which includes such a prospect. For this system involves all the disadvantages, with none of the efficiency, of large-scale capitalistic management.

There is another possibility. Why may not the factory system, which has invaded almost every other field, extend itself to agricultural industry? When mining, lumbering, transforming industries, transportation, public utilities, commerce have been put upon a stable basis with minimized returns on investment, capital may seek

other resources to develop. The land lies waiting for really efficient exploitation. One can picture an agricultural corporation village in the center of a great estate. Every mechanical appliance is available. Overhead trolleys and grain chutes center in the barns and elevators. Railway spur and motor road link up the farm with the markets. Farm factories utilize spare labor on rainy days and in the off season. Manager and foremen are trained agricultural experts. Every efficiency device is employed. The farm laborers live in company cottages, heated and lighted from a central plant. A school, club-house, common laundry, etc., are provided. Even the eight-hour system might be introduced. Two shifts could meet the situation created by the dairy-cow's refusal to join society in the recognition of the modern labor day. There is no doubt that such a system could be made efficient, if market and labor conditions permitted a sure and adequate return. But for the increased efficiency, the creation of a class of farm wage-earners would be a heavy price to pay. When we are seeking a solution for the labor problem in other industries it would be a misfortune gradually to extend the number of wage-earners until practically all small owners are eliminated. But unless some other plan will secure the same efficiency in production without the sacrifice of individual initiative and independence, what reason is there to suppose that, given the necessary economic conditions, corporate management will not take over the industry of agriculture?

Is there hope of a substitute which might give the nation efficient agriculture and greater political and social stability? A suggestion comes from Denmark and elsewhere of a co-operatively organized countryside. Here is a plan which seems to combine much of the strength of corporate management with the stimulus, initiative, and character-training that accompany individual ownership. The story of Danish farming and marketing success is an inspiring chapter in the history of industry. The result is not an economic service only; it is a patriotic achievement. The essentials of the plan are familiar: credit associations, long-term amortizing bond issues, co-operative dairies, creameries, power-plants, on the productive side; collecting and shipping facilities and direct selling at home and in foreign countries, on the marketing side. The effects of this general participation in collective enterprises are said to be noteworthy in personal character, political responsibility, social solidarity, and occupational pride and loyalty. Leadership finds full scope for its best abilities, which are challenged by problems of real moment. Country life gains in attractiveness and dignity. Its institutions, educational, recreative, social, religious, flourish. Some of the reasons for this success are clear: homogeneous, stable communities close-knit by family ties and tradition, an intensive agriculture made possible by inexpensive labor and near-by markets, a basis for credit extending over long periods -at low interest rates, sturdiness of individual and group character. To these should be added the dogged purpose which grew out of the disasters of 1866 to show the world that a nation may be small in area but great in spirit.

We look a little wistfully across the sea as we think of the average American farming region, with its careless cultivation, its shifting population, too often divided by racial and religious antagonisms, its irresponsible tenancy, its atomistic individualism, its crude, frontier means of education, its social isolation, and its formalistic, devitalized

churches. Is there any hope, we ask, of reorganizing rural life in the United States on the model of Denmark? Certainly there is little chance of transplanting unchanged the institutions of one society to an alien soil. But enough has already been accomplished in American communities to give encouragement. This type of country life adapted to changing American conditions is worth fighting for. It seems to offer the chief, if not the sole, means of escaping the consequences of landlordism and corporate management. In the long run the test here as elsewhere will be that of economic efficiency. Unless the co-operative system can occupy the ground and produce, not only personal character and community solidarity, but copious crops and well-bred cattle, one or both of the other forms of agricultural industry will do the work, achieving economic success at the expense, it is to be feared, of ultimate national solidarity.

The nation may not safely suffer the rural problem to drift. There must be a carefully worked-out purpose and policy. The federal government is adopting a plan of subsidy. The land-grant colleges have long received aid. Agricultural extension funds are now being supplied through these same agencies. Congress is being asked to support several other types of education and experiment. Subsidy without careful control is a serious danger. We are threatened with a pedagogic pork-barrel which will dissipate federal funds. The problem of the countryside is only one of several situations which challenge the attention of the nation. The government at Washington is called upon to assert the national point of view with respect to all of them. A beginning has been made with regard to the reorganization of the farming industry. Rural credits is a much more complicated problem than has been generally supposed, but it is of vital importance. Until recently stress has been laid on production; now marketing is being emphasized. Land tenure is beginning to be recognized as fundamental. We are so used to the idea that there is plenty of land to be had almost for the asking that we come slowly to realize that the laws that have been at work in every other country are becoming manifest here also. With all these duties to perform, the federal government must provide the statesmanship to deal with these questions in a large, imaginative way. There is little hope in a merely industrious, conventional bureaucracy.

But it is not the American way to trust wholly to governmental action. Not only are the United States Department of Agriculture, agricultural colleges and stations, and extension divisions at work upon this problem, but individuals and voluntary associations are enlisted in the cause of the countryside. Farmers' organizations of many kinds are becoming aggressive. Unfortunately group antagonisms are all too manifest. Farmers' clubs and local merchants come into collision; bankers are suspicious of new plans for rural credits; farmers' alliances and leagues are at war with elevator companies and middlemen generally. It is a time to insist upon the national point of view as opposed to that of narrower group interests. There should be no talk of coddling the farmer, or of governmental paternalism, or of outside interference with private business.

What is to be the future of the American countryside? Shall it be peopled by the tenants of a landowning class? Shall it be filled with wage-earners employed by great corporations? Or shall it be preponderantly the home of co-operating individual owners banded together under competent leadership for a satisfying life, and for efficient service to the nation? Who can dogmatically predict? Who doubts which goal should be set up for the American nation?