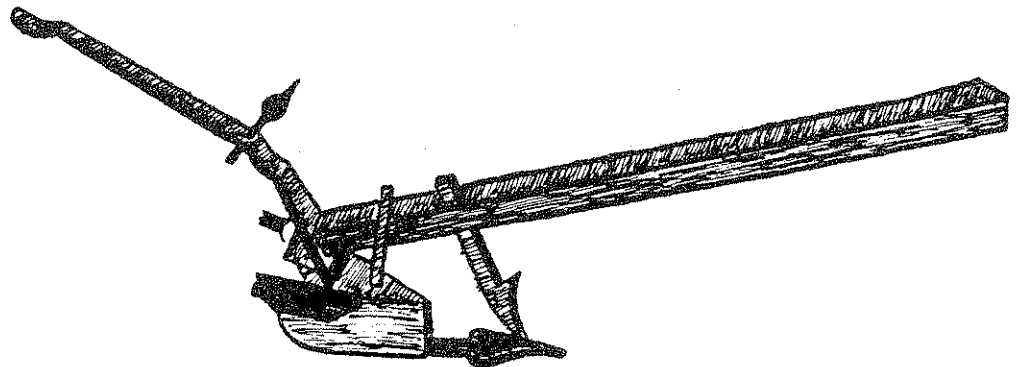


Notes on the State of Virginia

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, in their soil and industry as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . . While we have land to labour then, let us never have to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff . . . for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials, and with them their manners and their principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to strength of the human body. It is the manners and the spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.⁶

Reconstuction of an Ancient Plow



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Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Ed. William Peden (New York, 1972) 164-165.

A Return to the Plow: Ancient and Modern Agrarian Idealism

Both ancient Romans and Early Americans celebrated an agrarian ideology which shaped their identities and self-images. For members of both societies, the agrarian ideal symbolized the great virtues toward which they strived. Frugality, simplicity, hard work, honesty, and freedom were virtues which they identified as antithetical to cities but endemic to the agrarian life. Unlike urban dwellers, the farmer was self-sufficient, independent, and free from the corruptive influences of trade and commerce.

Yet the celebration of the agricultural ideal was more than the creation of an ethical paradigm. It also had political connotations. Early Americans celebrated the agrarian ideal as a basis of political culture. The founding fathers saw in the abundance of available land the cradle of liberty and stability. A man who owned a piece of property, worked the land, and supported his family would make the best citizen. He would not only provide for himself, but for the nation as well. And, content in his life that was free from vice, the farmer would make a content and productive citizen.

The agrarian ideal among early Americans was manifest in the myth of the frontier. For "easterners" living in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, the disappearance of available land spelled both a real and imagined problem. In reality, younger generations, raised in an agricultural tradition, found that old opportunities no longer existed. The family farm, repeatedly divided into smaller parts over generations, could no longer support a family, and opportunity had to be found in the frontier to the West. In the seventeenth century, for example, young males in Massachusetts began to move further and further west in search of land and opportunity.

While the need to move was often very real, the West also offered much for the young imagination. Untapped natural resources promised wealth beyond one's wildest dreams. Millions of acres of farmland and forest promised security and stability for the economically displaced easterner. The challenge of confronting a hostile and uncivilized wilderness also promised adventure for the aggressive and pretentious individual.

The frontier myth in America echoes the ancient myth of the Elysian fields which was first written down by Homer. According to Homer, the Elysian fields were a special place to the West of Greece, reserved for heroes after they died. Over the centuries the myth of the Elysian fields was transformed into an ideal alternative to the harsh realities of contemporary life. Instead of a paradise reserved only for heroes, Roman poets and writers talked of beautiful virgin lands to the west where one could go to escape the immorality and filth of the city. The "West" was transformed into a place of opportunity, security, and reward.

Like the Americans who escaped the debasement of London and the other great cities of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ancient Romans had escaped to Italy from Greece in the 8th century BC. And, like Americans in the nineteenth century who sought opportunity on the American frontier, Roman writers such as Horace, Pliny, and Plutarch wrote of wondrous paradises to the West of Imperial Rome. And always, the west promised an escape from the city to the country, to a place of morality, simplicity, and stability. In describing the fascination of early Americans with the agrarian myth, Richard Hofstadter could also have been describing the reasons for an agrarian myth among ancients:

While early American society was agrarian society it was fast becoming more commercial, and commercial goals made their way among its agricultural classes almost as rapidly as elsewhere. The more commercial this society became, however, the more reason it found to cling in imagination to the non-commercial agrarian values. The more farming as a self-sufficient way of life was abandoned for farming as a business, the more merit men found in what was being left behind. And the more rapidly the farmers' sons moved into towns, the more nostalgic the whole culture became about its rural past.¹

¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1968) 23-24.