

Perspectives on how land has shaped the American character

The desire to own land is fundamental to the American character and to the American political system.

America began as a “classless” society because land was not already staked out and individuals did not have a place in the society based on their relationship to the land, as was the case in Europe. As a result, everyone had an equal opportunity to acquire land and the power attached to land ownership. Historians, political philosophers, and other observers of American society have commented on how the availability of land, access to ownership, and the perception of open space and wilderness have shaped the American character. What follows is a sampling of some of this thinking about land and the American character.

Agrarianism

DeTocqueville, Democracy in America

“In Europe, people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the American’s themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the might forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight.... the...march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature. Democracy in America, ed. Phillips Bradley (2 volumes, New York: 1945) 2, 74.

Jefferson’s yeoman farmer – closeness to the land produces moral virtue

The creation of the United States of America coincided with a time when European intellectuals were reassessing the place of agriculture in society. The concept of farming (and the farmer) was taking on a new, elevated status in the minds of the day. This notion of the noble cultivator became a part of the foundation of the new democracy. The Garden would be tilled by free citizens, possessing all the virtues bestowed by the Creator upon the husbandman.

The yeoman became a feature in American politics very early. The Federalist and Agrarian forces in government were divided in opinion just following the Revolution. The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, were in favor of a strong central government with most power in the hands the landed few, and looked to commercial and industrial expansion. The Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, believed in the primacy of local government and a mainly agrarian national economy, based on small independent farmers.

The American yeoman farmer had become a symbol of the Agrarian philosophy articulated by Thomas Jefferson and later embraced by "The Farmer's Calling" Horace Greeley writes that above all professions, he would recommend farming to a son. Among his reasons is that farming is "that vocation which conduces most directly to a reverence for Honesty and Truth."

Tenets of agrarianism

In his introduction to *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge defines "agrarianism" by the following basic tenets.

* Cultivation of the soil "has within it a positive spiritual good" and from it the cultivator acquires the virtues of "honor, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality." These result from a direct contact with nature, and through nature a closer relationship to God. The agrarian is blessed in that he follows the example of God in creating order out of chaos.

* Farming is the sole occupation, which offers total independence and self-sufficiency.

* The farmer has a solid, stable position in the world order. He "has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region, which are psychologically and culturally beneficial." The harmony of his life checks the encroachments of a fragmented, alienated modern society.

* Urban life, capitalism, and technology destroy independence and dignity while fostering vice and weakness.

* The agricultural community, with its fellowship of labor and cooperation is the model society.

The agrarian myth (from Ralph Brown, "Agrarian myth" in *Encyclopedia of Community: From the village to the virtual world* edited by Karen Christensen and David Levinson. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2003:27-29

"The agrarian myth is the belief that the most desirable form of community is found in rural, specifically agrarian, village life. In the agrarian village, fundamental Western values such as a strong work ethic, independence, and integrity are supposedly fostered and passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, declines in the value of agrarian life and agrarian villages are seen as signals of an even larger decline of society itself. For those who

believe in the agrarian myth, community type and morality become inseparably connected in the rural agricultural village.”

“Thomas Jefferson, who opposed Alexander Hamilton’s support for industrialization...Jeffersonian agrarianism became one of the primary ingredients in the emerging American sense of identity. The yeoman farmer became the symbolic moral backbone of U.S. society.”

**Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Revised edition, 1973
Yale University Press**

Roderick Nash’s work is considered the most influential analysis of the role of wilderness in American thought, literature, politics and life. Nash’s book charts our journey from fear and hatred of wilderness to recognition of the uniqueness of America’s unsettled lands to a belief in the spiritual and redemptive value of wilderness to our current ambivalence as to the value of wilderness and open space vis-à-vis growth and development.

“In the morality play of westward expansion, wilderness was the villain, and the pioneer, as hero, relished its destruction. The transformation of a wilderness into civilization was the reward for his sacrifices, the definition of his achievement, and the source of his pride.” Pg24-25

“As early as 1784 Daniel Boone’s alleged ‘autobiography’ (it was mostly the work of a fellow Kentuckian, John Filson) revealed a new motif alongside the usual condemnation of wild country. It began with the standard references to a ‘howling wilderness’ suitable only for conversion into a ‘fruitful field.’ But the account also revealed Boone’s ‘astonishing delight’ in wild scenery. The view from one ridge turned pioneer into primitivistic philosopher. ‘No populous city,’ Boone declared, ‘with all the varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here.’” Even when Boone concluded his narrative with a reference to himself as ‘an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness,’ he left the impression that he performed this role somewhat reluctantly.” Pg65

“Americans sensed that their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World. Seizing on this distinction and adding to it deistic and romantic assumptions about the value of wild country, nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset.... by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national esteem.” Pg67

“In 1851, Henry David Thoreau presented a lecture in which he said, “In

Wilderness is the preservation of the World.” Pg 84

“Emerson wrote: `in the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages.... in the woods we return to reason and faith.” Pg 86 (Emerson, “Nature” in Works 1, pg 15, 16)

“By mid-century (mid 1800's) American life had acquired a bustling tempo and materialistic tone that left Thoreau and many of his contemporaries vaguely disturbed and insecure. To be sure, the official faith in progress ran strong. Yet the idea that a technological civilization and the pursuit of progress was disrupting older, better patterns of living could not be entirely set aside. A mechanized way of life seemed on the verge of overwhelming innocence, simplicity, and good taste. `Things are in the saddle,” quipped Emerson, `and ride mankind.’ Thoreau...at the Harvard commencement of 1837...spoke about the `commercial spirit’ as a virus infecting his age.” Pg 86-87

“At the end of the nineteenth century, cities were regarded with a hostility once reserved for wild forests.... Too much civilization, not too little, seemed at the root of the nation’s difficulties.” Pg143

“With a considerable sense of shock, Americans of the late nineteenth century realized that many of the forces which had shaped their national character were disappearing. Primary among these were the frontier and the frontier way of life.” Pg145

[Frederick Jackson] Turner argued “that the wilderness of the country was its most basic ingredient and the essential formative influence on the national character. `The frontier,’ he declared, `is...determined by the reactions between wilderness and the edge of expanding settlement.” Pg 146

For [Frederick Jackson] Turner a key theme was “the transforming influence of the American wilderness” and he devoted most of his work to `assessing the effect on American ideals and institutions of contact with a primitive environment.’...Living in the wilderness...fostered individualism, independence, and confidence in the common man that encouraged self government.” Pg 146

“The bitter succession of controversies that began with Echo Park Dam and proceeded through Glen Canyon Dam, the National Wilderness Preservation System and the Grand Canyon dams, suggested that the recent American discussion of wilderness was the result of clear-cut, opposing factions rallying behind the banner of either the civilized or the wild. The participants in these political and intellectual skirmishes frequently gave the impression that an entire philosophy of the good life, if not the definition of good itself, divided them from their opponents.....Something precious seemed to be at stake, an uncompromisable matter of right and wrong, good and bad.” Pg 238

“Robert Wernick asked impatiently in the Saturday Evening Post in 1965 (Nov 6, 1965: “Speaking Out: Let’s Spoil the Wilderness) “*Why shouldn’t we spoil the wilderness?*” Everything good, in his opinion, depended on spoiling it – and advancing civilization. As for wilderness lovers, ‘they affect old rumpled clothes, unshaved jaws, salty language; they spit and sweat and boast of their friendship with aborigines.’ Underneath this backwoods veneer, however, Wernick found ‘decadents, aristocrats and snobs.’ Fortunately, in his opinion, they would soon be obliged to give up their elitist wilderness preserves just as the kings of England had to abandon the royal forests. The ‘tides of civilization’ would not be denied.” Pg239

[Nearly all the opponents of the national Wilderness Preservation System stated the value they attached to wilderness while at the same time opposing enactment of the Wilderness Bill] “ It is possible to conclude that such statements signified that a person was for the wilderness as long as it didn’t affect him economically. But the more profound explanation may well be rooted in the inevitable perplexity that arises from simultaneous subscription to two opposing sets of values.” Pg241

“Of course the problem with this mutual affirmation of civilization and wilderness is that it works only so long as roads and dams can be built in other than wild places....In these situations a decision had to be made between preservation and development. And given the ambivalence of modern Americans, the choice is agonizing. It involves the sacrifice of one “good” to another...National pride comes from both *having* and *destroying* wilderness.” Pg 242

“Thus, for Douglas (Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas (My Wilderness: The Pacific West, 1960; A Wilderness Bill of Rights, 1965) as for Frederick Jackson Turner, the American wilderness is the ultimate source of American liberal and democratic traditions. Without it, he told the Sierra Club’s Biennial Wilderness Conference, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness recede further from the grasp of man.” Pg249

“It remained for novelist Wallace Stegner, a veteran of the battle over Echo Park Dam, to write the classic statement of the relationship of wilderness to man’s spirit. On December 3, 1960, Stegner directed a letter to David E. Pesonen of the University of California’s Wildland Research Center, as a contribution to that organization’s preparation of a report on wilderness to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. Stegner began by declaring that his defense of wilderness values would not concern recreation at all. Instead, he would concentrate on the ‘wilderness idea’ as an intangible, spiritual resource. The American, Stegner reflected, is new and different among men insofar as he is a “civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild.” Ideals of human liberty and human dignity became “something more than an abstract dream” in America because of the influence of wilderness on three centuries of

American history....Turning to the future, he expressed his conviction that “without any...wilderness we are committed wholly...to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life, the Brave New World of a completely controlled environment.” Whether one visits wild country or not, Stegner added, just knowing that it is there, that civilization is not all-embracing, fortifies man’s spirit. ...When Stegner termed the nation’s remaining wilderness “part of the geography of hope” he had these things in mind.” Pg 250-251

(See also the writings of Thomas Jefferson (Notes on the State of Virginia), James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Walt Whitman Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, John McPhee (Encounters with the Archdruid, 1971), Wallace Stegner (The Sound of Mountain Water, 1969) and the writings of Edward Abbey, David Brower. See also the paintings of Thomas Cole, Frederic E. Church and Albert Bierstadt)