

Back to the Land

The part of Peter Maurin's three point program that usually gets the least amount of attention is what he called "Agronomic Universities" – or, roughly, farming communes. It is certainly true that these have had a checkered history of success in the movement, and yet this does not mean their place in Catholic Worker philosophy – or Catholic Social Teaching for that matter – is peripheral. Life on the land – agrarian life – in many ways undergirds both a Catholic critique of our world and our hope for it.

We have seen lots of ways that our modern lives, and in particular *city* lives, are destructive. It now is worth highlighting the fact that these are largely, of course, *industrial* lives. None of the evils we have cataloged in these pages would have been possible if the last 200 years had not been a machine age, and had not every part of our culture – including what we do, how we think, and what we value – been changed by these machines. Catholics and non-Catholics of all stripes have written about this change, none perhaps more simply and convincingly than Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry, who notes that, today, we like to talk about all kinds of revolutions:

the fossil-fuel revolution, the automotive revolution, the assembly-line revolution, the antibiotic revolution, the sexual revolution, the computer revolution, the "green revolution," the genomic revolution, and so on. But these revolutions...are all mere episodes of the one truly revolutionary revolution perhaps in the history of the human race, the Industrial Revolution (from "The Melancholy of Anatomy", *Harpers Magazine*, 2015).

Yet Berry is not alone in contending that some of the most lamentable parts of our modern world – broken families, divorce, war, famine, depression, oppressive work, environmental degradation, apostasy – are the result of the Industrial Revolution. This also happens to be the official position of the Catholic Church. As early as 1891, Pope Leo XIII had begun to detail the ways that such mass production had uprooted and reorganized so many features of the world – and often not in a good way.

At the broadest level Leo and his successors contended that such upheaval had forced governments the world over to reorganize society in one of two problematic ways. They either opted for free trade and capitalism, thinking that more liberty would eventually smooth out the negative wrinkles, or for communism (or socialism), thinking that it would take a strong state to organize trade effectively. So both modern capitalism and communism, which, obviously, are still with us to this day, were responses to industrialism – they did not exist in anything like the same form prior to it.

Against capitalism, the Church charged that it is always unjust not to pay a worker, not just a living wage, but a *family* wage. In other words, full time employment must be compensated sufficiently to provide fully not just for the worker, but also for his entire family's subsistence, *and* provide them a little extra for savings. Anything less is contrary to divine law, and defrauds the worker of his just wages. This was obviously directed against the capitalist tendency to pay workers as little as possible. So the Church reaffirmed its teaching, stretching back to the Fathers of the Church, that the world is meant for everyone, and it is sinful for some to hold so much while so many have so little.

Against communism, which organizes society entirely around its material outputs, and denies the holding of private property, since everything is held by the state, the Pope held that private property, though it can be abused and unequally distributed, is itself a natural right of every person. Because we are made in the image of God, we all ought to be able to freely choose to “press” that image into some creative work, which then becomes “ours” because it has our stamp on it. Compulsory factory work (for instance) is the opposite of this free creativity. It makes the human being into a mere cog in a society that is reduced to a machine, thinking only in terms of what it can produce.

Moreover, said the Church, *both* low-wage-capitalism and communism, over time, concentrate the means of production and its wealth into the hands of an elite few: either to a few capitalist entrepreneurs or to the leaders of a communist government. They both, also, tend towards a strongly centralized state, and create a high degree dependence of each individual on that state. But these developments are contrary to the human person’s nature, demonstrated before industrialism, as relatively independent and self-sustaining. When most of the population lived on small farms, they governed themselves, not with a central state, but with small, local organizations. This arrangement facilitated a more equitable distribution of wealth, not least because most people were able to rely on their own labor for their necessities, rather than competing for wages.

So, said the Popes, neither capitalism nor communism are adequate responses to industrialism. The positive vision that the Church set was neither one of these nor something halfway in between (such as you have in some democratic socialist countries in Europe today). All three of those options, while disagreeing on much, agree that life is best run by a centralized state (even capitalists need a strong state to make it work). The vision of Catholic Social Teaching was that the functions of the state would be better if they were *distributed* among smaller social bodies. Prior to industrialism, and for most of history, government in most places consisted of an almost unlimited variety of local councils, regional customs, provincial traditions, trade guilds, landlords and local rulers. These governed much more independently of any higher authority than any governor or mayor does today. The bureaucratic apparatus that connected them all to one large central government simply did not exist. You might call this view “distributivism”.

And distributivism is a polity that will always have a large portion of the population living directly off the land. This is because industrial capitalism has always tended to a large state, and also to an unequal distribution of wealth. So it follows that to avoid these evils, we will have to be both local and non-industrial. If independence is enabled by people tending their own land, the sources of production, especially food, will have to be unbound from its industrial sources in the factory, the market, and the state. It will mean doing it with (at least) less machinery, and so living off the land, or (at least) much closer to it.

Small farming, then, is an alternative (maybe the only one) to the centralized industrialisms of our political left and right. (It’s worth noticing that we do not have a non-industrial option on our conventional political spectrum.) So it’s important at this point to say that we should be open minded about what getting back to the land might look like. Here as elsewhere, Maurin was giving us not so much a vision he thought everyone must follow (though he thought that sooner or later we would all be *forced* to follow it), as a vision of what was

possible. Nor did he think everyone had to get a plot of land and try to get off the grid. For not only does distributivism require farms, it also requires crafts, cooperatives, workers-guilds, middle-men of all kinds, sympathetic lawyers and businessmen, teachers, and of course, people to buy the products this decentralized economy produces. Furthermore, the *way* that this economy would take shape *within* (as it must) the dominant industrial capitalisms would necessarily make the project an open-ended adventure that doesn't come with detailed instructions. This means that the sky is the limit, and necessarily so, since what is by definition local will by definition vary from place to place. There can be no blueprints.

And this is good, because the exercise of creativity and independence is part of the point. Industrial life stifles both of these, and this opens up perhaps the Church's central concern in all of this – the moral dimension. That is, there is a formation of character that takes place when you live close to the land – a certain cultivation of virtue. It's important to explain what I mean, for I have in mind nothing romantic or mystical. I mean that in approaching the land – even if it's just having a backyard garden – the most practical relationships between the earth, body, and neighbors are re-forged, and that, as in our “projects” above, these connections can make us different people.

For instance, farmers have to get up in the morning and milk the cows, every day, whether they want to or not. In Minnesota, they have to change the water in the chicken coop in the winter every day, or it will freeze. They have to know their animals and their habitat well enough to know when something is wrong, and that only comes with time and attention. They have to know what part of their fields can be planted with what, and which animals should graze on it when, when it should be tilled in the spring, and how each field is best protected in the winter. All this is intimate knowledge of a place, which cannot be learned from books because it is the knowledge of a *place* that is not every place. Coming to this knowledge is necessary to be a farmer at all (and, to a lesser extent, a gardener), and it requires patience, care, attentiveness, courage, trust, resignation, persistence, wisdom, intelligence, and a sense of humor. It requires that one, in a certain way, *fit* your body, and therefore your mind, to the requirements of the land. In other words, being a small farmer (which I am not) requires that one be a certain kind of moral person. If you lacked these virtues, you might starve. Being *embedded* in the earth changes us.

And so what Catholic Social Teaching is pointing out is that there is a sort of natural fit between the human body and the earth. We come from the earth, and we will return to it. Gardening, moreover, says the first chapter of the Bible, is what we were all originally made for. The work itself produces, not saints, but a solid base upon which sainthood can be built. The peasant puts himself, his life, into his earth – he puts his stamp on it, and his earth puts its stamp on him; he draws his life from it – he eats, drinks, enjoys, creates. He even raises up a family out of it, which is bound to that same spot of earth in the same ways. Farmers are motivated by necessity to take scrupulous care for their plot of earth, and to pass on traditions to their neighbors and children relaying the kinds of people and practices it takes to live, and live well. Moral, physical, environmental and social life are all bound up together through the soil.

Notice that industrial farming does away with these connections. Its attempt to remove the limits and dependency that comes from drawing life from the soil also, ironically, eliminates the independence and creativity that go with it. For the two are inseparable facts of creation. Remove the limits that bind humans to the earth and you remove the moral foundation that is

meant to be the normal inheritance – by the toil of each individual – of most of mankind. And this is to remove, at the same time, of course, the local traditions and communities that make such a life possible. Without them, the retreat of the Church from heart and society was inevitable. Secularization, as the Popes said, was *industrial* in origin.

A hundred concessions could be added at this point. Yes, lots of farmers have been terrible people. Of course, there are other ways to form natural virtues. Many saints have been city folk. Rural communities are sometimes train wrecks too. Yet it remains the case that life without a close connection to the land has been much more predictably ugly than with it. Doing away with farming as a normal way of life is not just a technical change which makes things easier for us. It is a change that has all but eliminated a culture that has literally existed from the beginning of human time. This is why it is the only revolution that matters. It is also why Berry calls the ecological crisis brought on by industrial methods, a crisis of character.

These moral concerns were grave. Yet for Peter and many concerned citizens during the Great Depression, there were even more urgent, if ultimately less important, reasons for a return to the land: people have to eat. And it was looking in 1933 for all the world that industrial capitalism was failing exactly at this point. Recently, activist groups have made it evident that, though we have gotten better at disguising the problem, the situation is not much different today. For 200 years this economic arrangement (for whatever reasons) has shown itself to produce not only vast amounts of wealth, but poverty, homelessness, hunger, stress, disease, and violence on a scale previously unknown, while continuing to assure us that it is “just about” to eliminate these small glitches.

We have come to this point over two centuries, from a time where most people (about 90-95%) were small farmers of some sort, and where employment and housing was nearly full. Only slowly did the population move, for a variety of reasons, into the cities, so that now farmers make up only about 5% of us. There may be no more significant cultural shift in history. But, Peter and others saw, if it was possible to leave the land, it is possible to go back to it. There is always work, shelter, and food available there. So, ironically, the part of the Catholic Worker vision that has appeared most idealistic and far-fetched was in fact the most simple and practical in intent. The vast hordes that wandered the streets of New York City day and night looking for food, shelter, and (usually degrading factory) work might find what they needed on the land.

It is true that this “simple solution” has proven difficult in practice. There are lots of obstacles to actually getting out on the land. The first is the catch-22 of the wage system, which means that those who need the land most are least able to afford any. The second is of course that few of us know how to farm, or even garden, anymore. Millennia of practical knowledge have been forgotten almost overnight. Yet this is why Maurin called for “agronomic *universities*” and not just farming communes. Here the scholars like me could learn to be workers from those few who still knew how to work. Here again he was just being practical. The great agrarian tradition will simply *have* to be reignited, either before or after society destroys itself.

But, in another way, currents in the broader society have vindicated Peter’s call to the land. There *are* Catholic Worker farms and some of them are very good. But since Peter’s time we have seen the emergence of farmers’ markets, grocery co-ops, urban gardening, community supported agriculture (CSA’s), local craft industries, and countless other attempts at alternative economies. These movements are at least large enough to prompt conventional industrial markets

to respond: “local” and “organic” are now selling points. This represents a growing recognition of the legitimacy of some of Peter’s central concerns about the way we relate to the earth.

Still, no sane person thinks a distributivist revolution, or President, is right around the corner. But here as elsewhere, the point is not to change the world, but to start with what you can do with what’s right in front of you. We have already noted a variety of ways that solidarity with the land movement is possible. And many Catholics have found small ways to put it into practice in their own lives. Simple steps can be taken to shorten the industrial supply lines that separate us from the earth. Every little link we can take out of that chain – by tending a garden or preparing our own meals – can open up for us new moral and communal horizons. When we start from zero, every little step can be an enriching experience. We might even begin to uncover small ways to be human again.