

# AGRICULTURE AND MONEYCULTURE

VIRGIL JORDAN

**T**HE woes of our own Western farmers are nothing new, in the eyes of Mr. Jordan. Their predecessors, who tilled their fields to feed the city mobs of ancient Rome, had essentially the same problems to face, and so did the farmers of classical Attica. The returns of agriculture are not to be measured wholly in terms of money and by urban standards. Farming is a business, — yes, but it is also a way of life. Do we really want to throw away our rural heritage? And what will happen to us if we do?

degeneration". As many historians have traced the fall of Rome to the decline of her agriculture as to her malaria, her militarism, and her vice, and possibly all four are connected. But even before the days of Pliny's celebrated lament, *latifundia perdidere Italiani*, etc., and in every Western nation since, down to Goldsmith and Lloyd George, the same cry has been heard, and always too late or in vain.

In his *Ancient Greece at Work*, Gustave Glotz tells us that long before the Persian Wars, the Attic farmers were complaining about the discrepancy between the price of farm and city product, high interest rates, land speculation, and the growth of tenancy. Describing the changes in agricultural conditions in the sixth and fifth centuries, he says, "Since all values are assessed in money, the scale of prices is set up to the disadvantage of the countryman, in consequence of his ignorance on the subject and of the extension of the market to new lands. Natural products are assessed very low. . . . So the peasant needs money and he cannot get it. Suppose he thinks of increasing his returns by improving his land. Then he must have a large sum. How is he to borrow it? Interest is enormous, because it is reckoned on the profits of overseas trade. For the same reason loans are short-date transactions. It is impossible to make up by intensive cultivation for the constant diminution of property and the low price of farm

**T**HE lamentations of the Jeremiahs and the Spenglers about nearly everything are much the same in every age; but concern over the decay of agriculture and rural life under the vicious influence of the flourishing and wicked city seems to be more persistent and uniform in the history of gawdsaking than almost any other worry, — except possibly the shameful behaviour of what might be called "the younger

products. There is no remedy; the peasant is condemned to drag out a mean existence on a piece of land which is too small and gives an indifferent yield. . . . Once in the toils of usury the peasant is lost. The best that can befall him is that his creditor should be content with his land as security.

This, with little change, might be a quotation from the "Congressional Record" of to-day. These conditions which Solon sought to remedy by forbidding loans on the person differ little from that with which our own Solons are struggling now in trying to ease the mortgage burden on the farmer. Yet these problems continued to perplex the statesmen of Athens in the golden age of Pericles, — as they do those of Washington in the golden age of Calvin, — until it finally came to pass that none would voluntarily assume the burdens of the farmer, and Greeks had to be conscripted or forced to cultivate the soil. "Agrarian pauperism," says Glotz, "was the cancer of Greece in Hellenistic times. . . . Greece went down in a whirlwind, and her last defenders fell with promises of sharing land and abolishing debts on their lips."

Nor, since those days, has any nation seemed able to solve the problem of preserving its agriculture and its rural civilization against the virus of easy money engendered by the recurrent rise of urban industry, trade, and finance. In the golden age of every cycle of civilization there comes the time when the fruits of prosperity seem to rot on the branch before they are ripe or before they can be harvested, because the soil and its tillers lose their strength.

Is this to be the fatality of this age of ours, to which the term golden may be more literally applied than to any other before it? Is it impossible to-day, as it has been heretofore, for the country to enjoy the fruits of urban industrial, financial, and commercial development except at the cost of the ultimate destruction of rural life? Nobody knows how much there is of truth in the ancient warnings and lamentations and their modern interpretation. Henry Ford would probably lay the downfall of Greece to the fact that finance, business, and munitions manufacture eventually fell into the control of the metics, whom he would surely take for Semitics. We do not know for certain whether the decline of our agriculture under the weight of our industrialism and urbanism is the thing that is going to bring us eventually to the dogs, but

we can at least recognize, understand, and frankly face the questions that the current agricultural unrest and the situation of which it is a symptom put to us.

For it has become clear that, since the beginning of the century and the ascendancy of our urban culture, with all that it implies by way of life, work, and thought, something vital has happened to American agriculture, something that each man will welcome or deplore according to his temperament and character, but the effects of which no one can either escape or foresee. It is clear that the farmer has fallen more and more out of step with the urban prosperity parade, that both he and everybody else has become at last clearly aware of it; but that its jazz rhythm has at last caught him, and that he is determined henceforth to take his place willy-nilly in the plutonic procession, to step to the business band and follow the gonfalons of finance behind the captains of industry. And it is equally clear that the current and impending legislation, born of political persuasion or panic, as well as all the projects and proposals which the friends of the farmer proffer, will not only fail to arrest this procession, but will hasten it till rural life is left far behind, forgotten except as a sentimental fancy. For there is no way and never has been in which agriculture could be maintained on urban standards and keep step with the city without ceasing to be agriculture and becoming something quite different,— whether something equally good is a matter of taste, opinion, ideal, or temperament, or whatever it is that makes men choose what they consider worth while in life.

There is no need at this late date to demonstrate the decline in the relative economic position of farming as a business, industry, or investment. Farming does not pay as a business, it is not a success as an industry, and it is unprofitable as an investment. This has been proved up to the hilt not only by the farm leaders and the agricultural economists but now, significantly, by industry itself. It has been true at least since the beginning of the century. The farmer has suspected it in a vague way and has been instinctively but slowly seeking his fortune elsewhere, and in consequence our agricultural production has fallen behind our population growth since 1900.

No issue in our time has been less sanely understood or more misconceived and misrepresented than this; and of all those who

have been misled the farmer is not the worst sufferer. For, let it be said fearlessly, this economic disparity has been the farmer's security, his real advantage, his least perishable asset and, — if translated into the finer and more enduring values of life, regarded in the eye of eternity, — it is a priceless boon to the nation, however much the city may now fear and deplore it. It has been the source and distinctive quality of the rural culture in an age of useless getting and aimless spending.

The gap between the moneyculture and agriculture cannot be bridged without destroying one or the other, and there is no doubt which is the weaker. Farming has never been and cannot be more than a home and a job, — a way of living and a noble occupation in which men could live and work in freedom of spirit and integrity of mind and preserve and strengthen their souls in peace by constant contact with the real, simple, and ultimate things of life. It is not, and cannot be, leveled to a basis of equality with other ways of living and other occupations without ceasing to be itself. It has not, under whatever conditions or artificial aids, the economic potentialities of sustaining urban standards of expenditure. The demand for such equality is an expression not so much of financial as of spiritual bankruptcy. It means simply that those who demand it no longer value the way of living and the occupation that is agriculture and prefer to surrender their freedom and integrity and peace for the sake of the things which the city man has bought thereby. The essence of the farm problem is not that the farmer has no money, but that he now needs it.

We are told that his inequality must be corrected by forcing our surplus farmers to the city and leaving the land to the efficient and businesslike grubbers, or by bringing the city to them by organizing agriculture as a successful business. But if we can keep our people on our farms only by bringing the city to them, or them to the city, only by destroying the essence of independent rural life, the spirit of the culture of the soil, what problem have we solved and what have we gained? In either case the farm relief movement is a reflection of nothing but the hunger of the city for more victims and a mere satisfaction of the fatal yearning for self-immolation before the urban idols which it has stirred in the rustic heart. We have not solved the

farm problem; we have merely temporarily solved the much more urgent problem of the city. We have gained customers!

It has thundered in the West before now, but the agrarian agitations of the past, to the real gain of the nation, always failed in what they sought. The oppressed, at the last, preferred their inequality to the wheels of the Juggernaut, or the priests of Prosperity did not so keenly feel the need of new sacrifices to their gods. The great danger in the present storm, whose thunderheads hang over Washington, is that it is almost certain to do what it threatens. But if the farmers get what they have been made to want this time, it will mark the beginning of the end of American rural life.

That the end has already begun, that our agriculture has already succumbed to the moneyculture, is easily read in the signs of the times. The farm prophets have turned their peoples' eyes from the cornfield to the cooperative, from the plowshare to the tractor, and finally from the tractor to the Treasury; and its doors have been oiled to open more easily than ever before at the sound of the trump of political doom. The Administration and the business interests have ceased to reckon the agricultural income in terms of the cash value of the fresh air of the countryside, the beauties of the sunsets, and the matutinal twittering of the birds, and have begun to estimate the farmers' purchasing power for radios, gasoline, and moving pictures, which sing as sweetly, smell as fragrant, and look as well, — and besides bring comfort to the cash registers of commerce and incense to the industrial idols.

What, indeed, do they want, — these Joshuas who are tuning their trumps to blow down the tariff wall, the Isaiahs who are attacking the usury that eats up the agricultural income, the Ezekiels who are demanding "equality" for agriculture, the Lowdens who lament the growth of tenancy and the lack of business organization among the farmers, the captains of industry and the brigadiers of business who are sounding the reveille to awaken the country to the agricultural crisis? What do these friends of the farmer want him to want? In simplest terms, this:

To abolish for good the distinctions of thought and desire, of ideals and purposes that have hitherto separated our rural from our urban culture; to reduce farm and city values, in every sense,

including the spiritual, to a single level, and to measure them all in the common criterion of cold cash; to make agriculture an industry; to make the farm a factory; to bring business into the barnyard, install a cash register in the corncrib; to change a way of life into a system of selling, snatching and spending, a game of grub, grab, get, and gain, a business of beg, borrow, buy, and blow in.

Whatever attitude we may take toward this, we must recognize it as inevitable and prepare ourselves for its consequences. The farm has been the last and the greatest stronghold of that sense of natural, long-time values, of independence and integrity of spirit, and of that capacity of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis* which to-day passes for stupidity, rusticity, or yokelism. It was so primarily by reason of its isolation, its self-sufficiency, its pecuniary improsperity, and its hard labor; for it has always been true that the poor man, the solitary man, the free man, and the tired man know best what things are really worth, no matter what they cost or on what easy terms they may be bought. Farm life has been based upon moderation and real valuation of material desires. When, in the past, the farmer has been exiled or seduced to the city he has sighed, like Aristophanes's Dicaeopolis, "Oh, how I miss my village! It never said to me, 'Buy coal or vinegar or oil.' It did not know the word buy; it produced everything itself."

But the growth of our industrial system, and particularly its situation since the war, has made it impossible for any large part of the community to remain apart from the mass in any such state of mind. This form of Puritanism is out of date and economically "unsound"; it has been replaced by that Prohibition which is epicureanism and profligacy in disguise, — the substitution of gasoline for alcohol as a source of exhilaration, the substitution of the distant voices from WJZ for the inner voice as a source of inspiration and solace, the revelation of radio for that of rum. It has been necessary to subdue this rustic retreat of indifference to the unimportant, to carry the gospel of "Iwanna" and "Gimme" into the hinterland, — in other words, to raise the standard of living and rally the simple-minded round it so that the standard of living in the city may not have to be lowered. The war, with its stimulation of every kind of efficiency, including



that of murdering domestic and foreign consumers, so expanded our industrial capacity, so increased our power of producing the useless in large quantities, that it has become imperative to let no living consumer or his purchasing power escape un-index-numbered. The urban consumer is reaching his saturation point. The hope of adding an inch to every Chinaman's shirt has gone glimmering.

But is not the third of our population who live on farms closer to our hearts than the breech-clothed hordes of the Orient? They, too, are living in relative ignorance and poverty, without benefit of plumbing, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, or radios and have only enough to eat, quiet homes, fresh air, and freedom. Brother Farmer, we say, let's forget the "free intangibles" of country life we used to tell you about. Parsnips and poetry butter no bonds. Get thee a safety razor, some hair shine, and a white collar, and we'll lead thee to the top of the Woolworth Building and show thee the wonders of the world. And if thou hesitate to cast thyself down and get into the swim with us, we'll fix it to let thee down easily with parachutes of public subsidies, export bounties, equalization fees, and what not. The city folk have more money than they can spend; we'll loan you some to buy things they have no more room for.

In such a situation it was impossible that the farmer could withstand the wishing and wanting wave that washed over him from the city. The mail order catalogues and reams of sales matter that had hitherto been a vulgar utility and the diversion of an idle half-hour told a tale of temptation impossible to resist. It was easy to make him feel that radios were superior to robins or rural delivery, that Buicks were better than buggies, gasoline cheaper to buy than grass is to grow, and a tractor more tractable than a team. He has inevitably been forced into the magic circle of exchange, ensnared in the spells of salesmanship, and caught helplessly in the curve of the dollar sign. Every step in the development of agricultural life in the past twenty-five years has involved him more deeply in moneyculture. The inflation of land values and the cost of building roads forced him out of his self-sufficiency and made him a chaser of cash. The coming of the automobile made him a suburbanite, — almost a commuter, and delivered him over daily from the monotony of mail order cata-

logues to the metropolitan magic of the movies and the charm of the chain-store; from the irksome calisthenics of the kitchen cabbage patch to the easy exercise of the can-opener. The coming of the tractor has opened vast acreage for market production formerly used to feed livestock and replaced the comforting confessional of stable and stall with the gasoline fount and the garage man.

And as for the radio, the isolation, introspection, insipidity, innocence, and ineptness of farm life have surrendered to the inspiration and intelligence of the announcer of station NGNG, the argument of the aerial advertiser, the chaste charm of the Charleston, the art of the Oskaloosa Ironworks Quartette, the brilliancy of Betty Beanpot's bedtime stories, and the wisdom, sweetness, and light of William Stork's weekly lecture on Life and Leadership. This would not harm the happy hayseed if it were not that the radio has also dispelled his ignorance of ways in which he might get more cash as well as spend more, by helping him with hunches as to what to plant and when to sell and how much to hold out for. It has turned him into a money maker by first making him a money wantner.

The whole problem of agricultural unrest has arisen out of this vicious circle: The iridescent bauble of urban life has been dangled before the farmers' eyes; he has been brought to pant for better roads, quicker motion, more amusement, better clothes, innumerable contraptions; he goes into debt to the bank and to the state to get them; he has to have cash to pay for them and he can't get it because the earth does not and never did grow money.

And why should he not have them? Are not ease and plenty the ends of life, and the incense most pleasing to the gods of the time? Who dares to whisper the suspicion in Gath or Gotham or advertise it in Askalon or Oshkosh that these things have not brought happiness to the hordes that have harnessed themselves for their sake to the cars of the industrial idols? They have certainly already made farm work more easy and farm life more pleasant, but they have just as certainly destroyed some of the economic, — and through them the cultural, — peculiarities that have distinguished the culture of the soil from that of the city. They altered the very soul of the tiller and delivered him over in pocketbook and spirit to forces which he must either



learn to control, as we others have not, or submit to abjectly, as we others have.

In the first place, they have shifted the focus of his attention from himself to other people and to other things, and from his farm and farm home to other concerns. The isolated landsman of the past was doubtless no encyclopedia of information, but what he did not know did not hurt him so much as what he does know to-day, and usually it made him richer in fundamental wisdom than his city cousin.

And in this process, too, the close-knit spiritual integration, the labor-links, of the family life give way, the children scatter, the farm collapses as a home and becomes a drab asylum for the aged, unfit or shiftless, or a caravanserai for the transient tenant with his eye on the distant town. At best, though he stay, the farmer really lives elsewhere; his farm becomes his workplace, somebody else his employer.

But the subversion of rural culture by the pecuniary virus goes deeper still and promises to alter not only what the farmer wants but the very way in which he gets it. It is tacitly recognized that, even with subsidies and credit and special aid of any sort, farming itself and alone will not provide the purchasing power necessary to fulfill the new desires that have been implanted and cultivated in the ruralist. It is recognized, too, that the congestion of workers in the cities threatens rapidly to reduce the urban purchasing power, not only because wages cannot be kept at high levels but because rent and overhead costs of distribution and merchandising of necessities eat into the workers' income so as to reduce his ability to throw his money away on other things. On the two horns of this dilemma the industrialist has sounded a new note of hope. By bringing the city and its jobs to the farmer, we can make farming pay as a business and kill two birds of consumer resistance with one stone. Whatever else may be killed in the process does not matter. There is no power of our people worth saving but Purchasing Power.

Inevitably, once the farmer shifts his hand from the plowshare to the wheel of his sedan and looks behind him to see who is getting his dust, he becomes in a hurry to "get there", he doesn't care where or how. The bank, the state, the garage man, the grocer, all call for cash, more cash, and care not how it is got.

Few of the farmers' organizations or their leaders have the vision to see that the current agrarian agitation is not an effort to save agriculture and the country so much as an effort to help industry and the city. Few have the courage to say that the long run interest of the nation and of the farmer himself are more important than the immediate difficulties that our industrial elephantiasis has led us into. These few know that the only solution of the farm problem is not to devise ways by which the farmer can get more money, but to free him from the bonds of artificial debt and desire which have made him want it at all.

These few are silent because they see that the farm question is only part, though a vital part, of the question that all American life presents to us to-day, — the problem of economic ends. We need our iron slaves of industry and our genii of gold to work for us, to clothe our nakedness, to shelter us, to make toys for our delight, and to coddle our ceaseless cravings; and we shall not free them. But shall we supplicate their services with our spirits, surrender to them our souls, and feed them with our freedom? Or can we control them for the creative purposes of life, coax them back into the bottle from which our curiosity and our craving released them, so as to retain our integrity and peace when they shall have done their work? Or shall we, to gain a little respite before they demand their ultimate forfeit, turn them loose to rob our rural life of its material and spiritual riches? For the land is not only our ultimate natural resource so long as we have to raise food, but it is our ultimate human spiritual resource so long as we wish to raise men. The problem of its cultivation is primarily a problem of culture and only then a problem of economics. It is whether we shall cultivate soil and souls or dollars and desires, whether we shall have men or mere consumers on our farms.

We must not forget what Xenophon put in the mouth of Socrates long ago: "Agriculture gives strength to the body and hardihood to the soul and teaches the free man justice and solidarity. It is the most honored profession because it gives the community the best citizens. Agriculture is the mother and nurse of the other arts; when Agriculture thrives all the others thrive with her; wherever the land is left untilled all the other arts perish, on land and on sea."

# IS IT RIGHT TO BREAK UNJUST LAWS?

*YES, says Miss Mary Badger Wilson. The issue is to define what makes a law unjust. Laws have two just functions: to protect life and property, and to increase the general convenience of human relations. When laws exceed these functions, they are unjust. Citizens who break them perform a public service by opposing a cancerous growth.*

*NO, says Miss Winifred Kirkland. In a democracy all laws theoretically express the will of the majority. "The only way to prove a law unjust is the laboratory test of keeping it." A law that cannot be enforced does not represent the will of the people and is, therefore, unjust. Even so, it is not right to disobey it so long as it remains on the statute books. Repeal is the proper course. To break unjust laws is to disregard the form in which the will of the majority must be expressed, weaken this safeguard of democracy, and pave the way for a dictatorship.*

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*The prize-winning answers to this question were published in the February issue of THE FORUM. Herewith are printed the two papers adjudged second best on each side.*

## I—THE SANCTION OF HISTORY

BY MARY BADGER WILSON

**T**HE root of this debate is imbedded in the adjective "unjust". Adjectives are great trouble makers. Most of us can get together on a verb and we are willing to concede the fact of a noun, but once introduce an adjective into a sentence and the quarrel is on.

As to this adjective "unjust",—if we could agree on our definition of that one moral modifier, there would probably be no debate on the propriety of breaking laws. In asserting, then, that it is right to break unjust laws, I would rest my argument on a definition of the term "unjust", as applied to civil laws.

One who conceives the state to be organized for the good of the individual and for the promotion of human progress will recognize the necessity for two sorts of laws. First, protective laws, laws which protect human life and property. Such statutes, while they leave a man free in the enjoyment of his own life and the possession of his own goods, estop him from threatening the