

# Virginia Viewpoint

July 2002 • No. 2002-15

## Agrarianism.com

By Ted J. Smith III, Ph.D.

### Summary

Agrarianism, and the communities and culture it fosters, flourished because of the economic realities of the twentieth century. The information age economic transformation that is occurring today, however, may make possible a return to agrarian ideals. The implications for individual freedom, self-government, and the leviathan state are enormous.

Main text word count: 788

***Given the demise of most constraints on government power, we may well be witnessing the formation of an entirely new kind of society, a totalitarian democracy in which nearly every aspect of human existence is subject to government oversight and control.***

At this time of year it's useful to recall what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they declared our independence. Almost all of them were committed to some form of agrarianism.

Agrarians believe that the best society is one composed largely of farmers who work their own land, local tradesmen and independent artisans, bound together in stable, harmonious communities in which citizens know one another as persons, not just roles. Under a regime of self-government, this arrangement offers both the greatest possible scope for the exercise of individual freedom, and the greatest possible incentive to exercise that freedom responsibly.

Agrarian ideals were dominant in America through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in much of the South, Midwest, and West until well into the 20<sup>th</sup>. But they were gradually forced from the scene by the inexorable spread of industrialism, modernism, and the leviathan state.

At each stage of the descent, passionate voices called for a return to the old ideals. The most eloquent were the Southern Agrarians, who mounted a brilliant but futile defense against the rise of the modern, commercialized New South in the 1930s and 1940s. They were followed thirty years later by the Hippie movement which, despite its infatuation with sex, drugs, and rock and roll, was partially motivated by a longing to recreate authentic communities in response to the crass materialism of the postwar consumer society. Today, as we adjust to the post-modern global economy, new voices (most recently at a UVA conference in April) are again pleading for a reconsideration of the agrarian alternative.

Critics have long derided such pleas as hopelessly nostalgic. And it's true that never in our history has the scope of meaningful freedom and self-government been narrower.

The last seventy years have produced an exponential expansion of government control. For example, the *Federal Register*, which publishes official notices and the text of rules and regulations proposed and enacted by federal executive agencies, routinely tops 70,000 pages a year; in 2000, it almost reached 84,000. Given the demise of most constraints on government power, we may well be witnessing the formation of an entirely new kind of society, a totalitarian democracy in which nearly every aspect of human

*continued*

existence is subject to government oversight and control.

This process has been aided greatly by the treason of the “intellectuals.” Far more liberal and secular than the rest of us, and increasingly hostile to traditional American values and the heritage of the West, they enjoy near-monolithic control of the major organs of culture, including education, the news media, entertainment, and the arts. From this position of power, they have worked assiduously to indoctrinate us all in the necessity of replacing our flawed and oppressive society with the highly centralized, rationalistic, therapeutic system they prefer.

Finally, while a quarter of the population is still classified as “rural,” only a few million families make their living from the land, small towns wither, and commerce is dominated by huge national and global corporations.

This may seem to present a bleak prospect, but just the opposite is true. Agrarianism foundered on the rocks of economic change: over the last century it became impossible for large numbers of people to make a decent living by farming. Good jobs—in manufacturing and associated service industries—were concentrated in the cities and their anonymous suburbs, so that’s where people moved. But globalization and the Internet have wrought another change.

A great many jobs today consist of processing information, and the number will increase as manufacturing moves overseas. But information does not have to be processed in an urban office; the work can be done just as well from home, and home can be anywhere with reliable Internet access. The result is the growing phenomenon of telecommuting: eleven million salaried employees already do most or all of their work from remote locations, and that number could grow to fifty million over the next twenty years.

Similarly, e-commerce and the Internet make it possible to buy and sell in a burgeoning global market from almost any location in the country with minimal investment and little overhead. Internet auction pioneer eBay now has so many sellers working full-time from their homes that it has plans to offer them group health insurance.

For the first time in a century it is possible for large numbers of people to leave the cities and suburbs to live and work in the countryside. Once there, they will have the chance to rebuild the stable, authentic communities that are at the heart of the agrarian ideal. And given enough of those communities, it might just be possible to wrest control of our lives from the state. It is a precious opportunity, and probably our last.

#####

(Ted J. Smith, III is an associate professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University, and a member of the Board of Scholars of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

***For the first time in a century it is possible for large numbers of people to leave the cities and suburbs to live and work in the countryside. Once there, they will have the chance to rebuild the stable, authentic communities that are at the heart of the agrarian ideal. And given enough of those communities, it might just be possible to wrest control of our lives from the state.***

#### **Attention Editors and Producers**

*Virginia Viewpoint* commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available at [www.VirginiaInstitute.org](http://www.VirginiaInstitute.org) or on disk. Please contact:

John Taylor  
Virginia Institute for Public Policy  
20461 Tappahannock Place  
Potomac Falls, Virginia  
20165-4791

Phone: (703) 421-8635  
Fax: (703) 421-8631

[www.VirginiaInstitute.org](http://www.VirginiaInstitute.org)  
[JTaylor@VirginiaInstitute.org](mailto:JTaylor@VirginiaInstitute.org)

**Virginia  
Institute**  
for Public Policy