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**Land! The Case for an Agrarian Economy**[<< Previous Article](#)[>> Next Article](#)

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## Book Reviews

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 Introduction by Jay T. Collier.  
 University of Notre Dame Press:  
 Notre Dame [IN], 2017  
 ISBN: 978-0-268-10193-0

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The volume consists of a critique of capitalism and advocacy of what a group of Southern intellectuals at Vanderbilt University called "agrarianism." It was written during the Great Depression when unemployment was rampant. How is capitalism criticised? Many economists might say, in a *naïve* way. In Ransom's view, capitalism's fundamental fault lies in that capitalists strive to enlarge their capital holdings by continuously investing their spare cash in new instruments of production and by increasing efficiency of old factories or personnel without regard for limited demand for the goods they produce. At some point the supply begins to exceed the demand and workers have to be laid off. This begins a spiral of unemployment that affects all strata of society. Ransom notes that one of his neighbours in Gambier, Ohio, was an undertaker afraid of losing his house because he had too

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177

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few customers. Does that mean that people stopped dying? No, there were just too many undertakers: another one lived a few blocks away and competition between them was fierce because people requested only the cheapest and simplest funerals. Ransom claims that “overcapitalisation” leads to overproduction not only of goods but also of professions. Yet competition forces the capitalists to overcapitalise the market until the crash comes, unemployment soars, and society’s fabric breaks down. Ransom also states that “technology has resulted in unemployment” (43) echoing, perhaps unwittingly, the Luddites of nineteenth-century England who destroyed machinery because (they so believed) it deprived them of jobs.

Is there a remedy? Before proposing a solution Ransom looks over various means used to alleviate the problems of capitalism. In a chapter titled “Some Proposed Extinguishers” he discusses launching new industries, (and points out that they too will eventually suffer from overcapitalisation); expanding foreign trade (but foreign nations themselves may suffer from overcapitalisation, and so this is a temporary solution); better planning

(however, he stops short of calling for world planning, or for the totalitarian solution); labour unionism (again, a partial and temporary solution); “humanitarian levies upon capitalist income,” or taxation and charity writ large—not effective in practice; and, finally, socialism: he casually invokes the Soviet Union and its ostensible goals but stops halfway between approval and condemnation. In other words, in his opinion all these remedies do not fulfill their initial promises. He proposes instead a solution of his own: subsistence farming. He does not call it this way: what he tries to sketch out is a community of family farmers who produce most of the means they need to live well and who live as wise stewards of nature. He points out that unlike Europe, the United States does not suffer from land shortage: the unemployed could obtain from the government a plot of land (Ransom does not say how much, but forty acres and a mule comes to mind) and begin homesteading. There is enough land to give each unemployed person an acreage sufficient to maintain his family. The expression “the amphibian farmer” appears frequently in his text, indicating that a small farmer

## *Book Reviews*

can more easily adjust to changing economic conditions than the capitalist mass producer of consumer goods. Ransom conjures up an attractive image of farmers producing and consuming organic foods grown in their own garden, drinking milk from their own cows and so on. Eating locally would cut down on cost of transportation and eliminate the necessity of using food preservatives. Ransom leaves open the possibility of raising some cash crops so that the family could obtain money for the few necessities that cannot be produced on the farm. He also dangles before the reader the idea of a mixed economy: some people may engage in capitalism, others may prefer agrarianism with its absence of great depressions, mass unemployment, and mass suffering. In his view, the American South is in an excellent position to turn to agrarianism as *the* way of life, while the North is more suited for capitalism.

So much for the summary. The critique instantly suggests itself: only those who have never toiled on the farm can speak of what amounts to subsistence farming as *the* answer to the woes of capitalism. While it is possible to daydream about a society in

which every family has its little house and a plot of land, and lives peacefully and harmoniously tending livestock and ploughing the soil in perfect health, it does not take much imagination to realise that the original sin has made this solution unworkable. There will always arise envy, greed, and pride: John's plot of land may be better than Bill's and Bill might take action—to start with the obvious. Human imperfections will eventually wreck every utopian plan, no matter how attractive it looks to its creators. While Ransom's text makes a persuasive case for a pastoral way of life, it hardly provides long-term solutions to the woes of capitalism. Practice indicates that under capitalism the man in the street emerges faster from extreme poverty than under any other economic system, and this is a key issue. Economists have long argued about what causes recession and depression. Over-capitalisation does not seem to be the culprit; closer to the mark is a complicated problem of fake capital and printing more money than the supply can absorb. It seems that Ransom himself was not utterly convinced that the solution he proffered was a panacea for the ills of society: as mentioned before, shortly

after writing *Land!* he dedicated himself to literary matters and became a major contributor to the theory of literature.

There are three additional comments I would like to make about this book. The first concerns Soviet Russia invoked by Ransom twice. While it is not proffered as a glorious example of a correct solution, the weight of its misdeeds is treated lightly in this text. I miss in Ransom's remark that note of condemnation and dismay that should accompany informed references to what was going on in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. At the time when Ransom wrote this long essay there were enough books available on the various genocidal actions undertaken by the Russian "socialists" under the guise of fighting enemies of the counterrevolution. But Ransom, whose conservative views can hardly be contested, calls "the Russian experiment" "the most thrilling economic adventure ever undertaken" (86). We are, he continues, "skeptical" of its final success, but "hundreds of economists have dwelt upon [it]." One hears here a subliminal suggestion that perhaps it could somehow become successful in Russia, even though in Britain it certainly

could not, and even more so in America which is by its very nature antisocialist. In trivialising the dangers and horrors of the Soviet "solution" Ransom was perfectly in tune with the spirit of the times: American intellectuals tended not to treat seriously the dangers that did not threaten their own country, to the point where, as Walter Duranty famously demonstrated, they did not notice millions of people dying of hunger in Ukraine in the winter of 1932/1933—which coincides with the date Ransom's work was published.

These passages in Ransom's book remind me of my early days in American academia when I made the acquaintance of a very nice and cultured chairperson of the English Department at what seemed to be a fairly conservative university. The said chairperson was a good scholar and an ardent conservative who cherished his ties to the Southern Agrarians. It was during his tenure that the English Department hired all the assistant professors who decades later threw away Shakespeare and the English Middle Ages, replacing them with gender studies and Marxist-inspired victimology, and who have taught their students that the search for truth is

## *Book Reviews*

not only futile but that the whole notion of truth should be relegated to the realm of jokes. Instead, we should be on guard against “hate speech,” racism, nationalism, and other assorted criminal emotions and their manifestations. I perceive in Ransom’s genteel rejection of Soviet socialism (as presenting no danger to the English-speaking world) the same nonchalant belief in being immune to history’s most horrible turns that I saw in my friend’s from the English Department. He passed away long before the fruits of his politically correct hirings ripened for all to see.

The second reflection concerns an issue that bothers me because of its conspicuous absence in Ransom’s text. It may be a bit tactless to mention it here, but the land Ransom is speaking about—specifically, the state of Tennessee where he was born—joined the Union in 1796. To put it differently, European settlers wrestled it away from native tribes six or seven generations earlier. While this is a long time by any count, it is not long enough to obliterate the memory of “they who lost” and who, as Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert wrote in a poem under this title, “now dance with bells on their ankles/fettered

in funny clothes in feathers of a dead eagle/the dust of compassion rises up from a little square ... they gave up history and fell into the sloth of showcases.”<sup>1</sup> A gentlemanly salute to the defeated might have been in order, yet Ransom seems completely oblivious of this aspect of the land he speaks so passionately about. The Apache leader Geronimo, who toward the end of his life appeared at country fairs and sold Indian souvenirs might have inspired Herbert to write this bitter poem.

However, after all the objections have been stated and irony poured on Ransom’s misinterpretations, there remains his conviction that Land matters, that it is the key to our dignity as human beings. Ransom believes in that “contact with the soil” of which Yeats wrote and which is perhaps the most fundamental contact human beings have had with the Creation. This contact is not necessarily limited to the land of one’s birth—most land on earth has been subject to contradictory claims and only a few of us can boast of never having left our native town or village. It is the contact with the physicality of the earth and it includes a recognition of man’s unique position as a

being both spiritual and physical. While modern technology has facilitated human divorce from the land, for most people this divorce can only be consummated at their peril.

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Poems*, tr. Alissa Valles, (Ecco Press, 2007), p. 297.

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*Rethinking G. K. Chesterton  
and Literary Modernism: Parity,  
Performance, and Popular  
Culture*

Michael Shallcross  
Routledge: Taylor & Francis  
Group, 2018  
ISBN: 13. 9781138678736

Because Chesterton cuts such a large figure he must be apporportioned. This dense, comparative study does so by basically confining itself to the earlier years of Chesterton's career (the decades on each side of the turn-of-the-century), and by approaching

Chesterton by literary methodology (is as a Ph.D. in the English Department at Durham University, UK), and by looking at the exchanges Chesterton had with prominent representatives of modernism, especially E. C. Bentley, T. S. Elliott, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis (with brief appearances by Oscar Wilde, G. B. Shaw, Max Beerbohm, and others).

Chesterton's relationship to such characters is often presented as a duel. He, himself, may be responsible for that metaphor, referring to his lifelong engagement with Shaw as a "salute to the duelist." Shallcross notes that this has resulted in a contemporary mythology of mutual hostility and incomprehension, in which we believe that "the targets of Chesterton's disdain met his nugatory grasp of modernist aesthetics with haughty disregard, and an unbridgeable impasse was permanently established."<sup>(1)</sup> "In the binary terms of this narrative, the leading exponents of 'high modernism' formed and aesthetically radical, though culturally elitist, vanguard, while Chesterton led a culturally democratic, if aesthetically retrograde, counterinsurgency."<sup>(2)</sup> This Shallcross sets out to nuance and even reverse