

Land! The Case for an Agrarian Economy**John Crowe Ransom****Publication Date**

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*“Fortunately for us this brilliant study,
only recently discovered, has survived.”*—GEORGE CORE

JOHN CROWE RANSOM



LAND!

THE CASE FOR AN
AGRARIAN ECONOMY

EDITED BY JASON PETERS
INTRODUCTION BY JAY T. COLLIER

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The Case for an Agrarian Economy

JOHN CROWE RANSOM

Edited by Jason Peters

Introduction by Jay T. Collier

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana



A Front Porch Republic Book
Place. Limits. Liberty

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EDITOR'S NOTE

A few years ago I was approached by two men previously unknown to me, Jay Collier and Chris Hanna, who, acting upon the advice of my friend Jeremy Beer, asked me if I knew anything about *Land!*, an unpublished manuscript by John Crowe Ransom, the figurehead of the Southern Agrarians. Collier and Hanna had been made aware of the manuscript in a serendipitous meeting with Paul Murphy, who in *The Rebuke of History* had called it “an economic primer promoting subsistence agriculture.”

I read the manuscript at a peculiar but fitting moment: in the false peace following a federal economic stimulus program that put more people on the road when it might have returned them to the land. The time seemed as good as any to bring Ransom’s manuscript out of obscurity and make it available to a world caught in what appeared then and still appears to be irremediable economic confusion.

Ransom, noting in his day the “sad experience of capitalism” and “the stealthy approach of a rescuer who is only socialism,” objected to a false dilemma; he thought it injurious not to be able to recognize any other option. So he proposed one, which he (and others) called “agrarianism.” “We have not canvassed our situation thoroughly,” he said, “if we fail to attend to that possibility. We have scarcely been in a position to appreciate its excellencies until

now.” Ransom wrote those words without the benefit of our vantage point: a century of prodigality and the arrival of constraints sternly telling us that we had better be capable of greater economic subtlety than we have so far been capable of.

Intending to publish *Land!* under the Front Porch Republic imprint, I went to work preparing a clean manuscript and, where appropriate, annotating it. (All the footnotes in *Land!* are mine.) Jay Collier, meanwhile, having recently finished his doctorate, put his shoulder to the task of writing an introduction.

I then thought to approach Steve Wrinn at the University of Notre Dame Press with the idea of publishing the book jointly, and we decided finally, with the blessing of Jim Tedrick at Wipf & Stock, that Notre Dame would publish *Land!* as a Front Porch Republic book. *Land!* suffers, no doubt, from the kinds of weaknesses that inevitably attend a book that has been in hiding for nearly a century. Ransom might eventually have learned from the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association that overproduction isn’t inevitable, just as he might have learned from his agrarian heirs not to underestimate the knowledge and intelligence of ordinary farmers. He might have been more cautious about speaking of farming as an “industry.” But I intend no rehearsal of faults here. I mean only to say how a stone got rolled away from the book’s archival tomb—and maybe to place a wager, as the twilight of industrial agriculture approaches, that the resurrection will be salutary.

So it is that this book comes before the public after a long neglect. *Land!* is the title Ransom gave it; the subtitle *The Case for an Agrarian Economy* is my addition.

In preparing this for press I received helpful suggestions from Wendell Berry and Mark Mitchell. MaryJane Letendre, Shannon Leyva, Ginny Aumann, and Sam Dunklau transcribed the manuscript. Emma Peters helped me compare their transcription to the original. Molly Dohrmann in Special Collections and Archives at

Vanderbilt University Library helped clarify a few obscurities in the manuscript. Jay Collier and Chris Hanna deserve thanks for recognizing the importance of the book they stumbled upon and for their advice and friendship. We all received kind encouragement along the way from Ransom's granddaughters, Liz Forman and Robb Forman Dew. A grant from Augustana College provided me with release time to devote to this project, and friendship with Steve Wrinn at the University of Notre Dame Press provided me with everything else.

JASON PETERS

Williamston, Michigan
Winter 2016

INTRODUCTION

It All Turns on Sentiment: John Crowe Ransom,
Aesthetics, and Agrarian Economics

JAY T. COLLIER

In the 1930s, the United States witnessed the worst economic crisis in its history. We refer to this as the Great Depression. Along with episodes of drastic panic, the crisis produced a host of economic plans for rescuing and restructuring the economic systems in place, including all the programs rolled out by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as he sought to strike a New Deal with his fellow Americans and address the mounting unemployment problem. It was in this context that John Crowe Ransom's short economic treatise, *Land!*, was written.

But Ransom was no economist. He was a poet and literary critic. A man of letters, he taught in Vanderbilt University's English department from 1914 to 1937. From there he went to Kenyon College, where he was installed as professor of poetry and became the founding editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one of the most distinguished literary journals of the twentieth century. These are

impressive credentials indeed, but not for publishing a book on economics.

How, one might ask, did Ransom ever come to write such a book? Ransom was sensitive to this question himself. In the preface to *Land!* he admitted his own limitations, but he also believed that “the amateur with all his disabilities may quite conceivably have a certain advantage over the professional; he may sometimes be able to make out a wood when the professional, who lives in it, can see only some trees.”¹ Experts working within a system depend on the system for their livelihoods, which leaves them in a bad position to question the validity of the system itself. As one standing outside the guild, however, Ransom felt he was in a position to question it. He was also confident he was right.

But where did Ransom get the confidence to challenge the economic system? In order to answer that question we must know the larger story of which *Land!* is a small yet significant part. We must know the book’s background, development, and eventual dissolution. We must also understand the impulse behind it and how the impulse lived on in spite of its never being published in Ransom’s lifetime.

The story suggests that Ransom’s experience as a poet actually conditioned him for his venture into economics. For Ransom, the higher values of life turned on sentiment, and his aesthetic commitments helped him to see the limits of the intellectual habits ascendant in his day, among them the practical and applied sciences in general and the dismal science in particular, which in Ransom’s view did not keep honest ledgers.

BACKGROUND

Land! was a product of Ransom’s agrarian vision for the South, which he cultivated in close company with several like-minded colleagues. In the 1920s, Ransom joined a group of faculty and stu-

1. See the preface to *Land!*, 5.

dents associated with Vanderbilt University who would become known as the Fugitives. Their primary interest was neither politics nor economics but poetry and criticism.² It was a group that produced several important twentieth-century literary figures—Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Merrill Moore—and became the seedbed for what would become known as the New Criticism. Yet out of this tightly knit group evolved a growing concern for a Southern way of life.

During his Fugitive years, Ransom developed as a literary critic and expressed concerns about the demise of the arts. As he put it, poetry had “felt the fatal irritant of Modernity.”³ Several of his essays express his frustration with this irritant.⁴ He argued that works of art “constitute the formidable reproach which a disillusioned humanity has had to cast at the scientific way of life.”⁵ This “scientific way of life” was more than just the ascendancy of the practical sciences over the traditional liberal arts. It was a pervasive way of approaching life that disturbed Ransom and his colleagues. For all the technological advances and conveniences of the modern era, Ransom recognized the limited ability of science to account fully for the way we experience the world. Whereas the practical bent of science focused on efficiency and production, “the experience we have when we appreciate a work of art, or when we worship God, is quite different from the scientific experience, and often it seems preferable for that very reason.”⁶ Yet Ransom and other Fugitives feared that science had achieved an unwarranted

2. They published a magazine called *The Fugitive* from 1922 to 1925.

3. John Crowe Ransom, “The Future of Poetry,” *The Fugitive* (February 1924); also in *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 27.

4. See, for instance, John Crowe Ransom, “Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent,” *The Fugitive* (June 1925), or in *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, 29–32; John Crowe Ransom, “Prose: A Doctrine of Relativity,” *The Fugitive* (September 1925), or in *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, 32–34.

5. John Crowe Ransom, “Classical and Romantic,” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, September 14, 1929, 125.

6. *Ibid.*, 125.

place of honor, not only in the modern mind but in all areas of modern life.

Concerned with the limits of science, Ransom devoted the greater part of his studies to aesthetics. He intended to write a book on the topic, the writing and rewriting of which ran on for several years. In it he sought to distinguish between, on the one hand, our scientific impulse to conceptualize and quantify our experiences for practical use and, on the other, the aesthetic reflex that attempts to appreciate the experience for uses that are not practical at all. Not wanting to deny the importance of science, Ransom was careful to point out its deficiency and the need for religion and the arts to help us come to terms more fully with our experiences.⁷

Ransom's book on aesthetics was never published, though he used the material in different ways. He was able to publish what he referred to as "an abridgement of some very central chapters in my aesthetic system" in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, under the title "Classical and Romantic."⁸ Various themes of his study were also carried out in subsequent projects and reflected in the essays collected in *The World's Body*. One such essay, "Sentimental Exercises," examined the difference between scientific and aesthetic knowledge and the pivot that holds the two together. Whereas science prizes knowledge for efficiency, aesthetic knowledge is formed by sentimental attachments whereby we appreciate objects for the sake of their own individuality. In this essay, Ransom obviously asserted the importance of the arts for cultivating this aesthetic knowledge. Yet it is also apparent that he desired a mature

7. A synopsis of this work is given in a letter from Ransom to Tate, September 5 [1926], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 154–57. He called it "The Third Moment," reflecting what he saw as an order of experience: the initial moment of experience, the scientific moment of conceptualization, and the aesthetic moment of reconciliation. He contemplated the title "Studies in the Post-Scientific Function" in a letter to James A. Kirkland, October 1, 1928; see *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 178–79.

8. Ransom to Tate, July 4, 1929, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 181. Ransom, "Classical and Romantic," 125–27.

society that would encourage people to form attachments to the objects of quotidian life, rather than a society in which people are hurried along merely for the sake of production.⁹

For Ransom, the aesthetic life was developed regionally—that is, with respect for place. This was clearly his approach to writing poetry and to the other arts, an approach that could adequately be described as provincial in the proper rather than in the pejorative sense of that word. Yet it became increasingly clear that he also took a regional approach to religion, politics, economics, and other aspects of life. As his aesthetic sensibilities detected the detrimental effects of modern science on culture, he also perceived that the progressive ideals of modernism were at odds with traditional principles and ways of life in the South. In the wake of the famous Scopes trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, many Southerners felt increasingly belittled in the public eye of the nation at large. Davidson reflected years later: “For John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century.”¹⁰ Tapping in to a long-standing current of Southern pride and resentment since the War between the States and the era of Reconstruction, Ransom and his colleagues sounded the trumpet of sectionalism and embarked on a campaign for the Southern way of life that they affectionately knew as *the cause*. These Fugitive poets would soon be known as the Southern Agrarians.

Writing sometime in the spring of 1927 to Tate, who had moved to New York to write and work as an editor, Ransom described a transition that was occurring within the group:

9. John Crowe Ransom, “Sentimental Exercise,” in *The World’s Body* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 212–32; first published as “Sentimental Exercise,” *The Yale Review* 26 (December 1936): 353–68.

10. Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 40. Though Ransom was not a religious fundamentalist, he defended fundamentalists in the aftermath of the Scopes trial. He continued to reflect on the assault of science upon religion in Ransom, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930).

The Fugitives met last night. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced of the excellence and the enduring vitality of our common cause. Here at Vanderbilt, which draws a lot of Old South talent, we have a very workable mine of young poets and fresh minds; always some one or two or more just clamoring for the right food and drink and society. We've got to keep on working that field; we have some perpetuals for the carry-over, like Don and me; and our cause is, we all have sensed this at about the same moment, the Old South.¹¹

They pursued the idea of writing a book on Southern matters, though it was unclear what direction the book would take.¹² Tate seems to have initially envisioned a book on Southern literature, but Ransom leaned more to addressing a principled way of life. Ransom wrote to Tate in early April:

I am delighted with your idea of a book on the Old South, but have had little time to think closely upon it—our difficulty is just this: there's so little in Southern literature to point the principle. I subordinate always art to the aesthetic of life; its function is to initiate us into the aesthetic life, it is not for us the final end. In the Old South the life aesthetic was actually realized, and there are fewer object-lessons in its specific art. The old bird in the bluejeans sitting on the stump with the hound-dog at his feet knew this aesthetic, even. Our symposium of authors would be more concerned, seems to me, with making this principle clear than with exhibiting the Southern artists, who were frequently quite inferior to their Southern public in real aesthetic capacity. But

11. Ransom to Tate [Spring 1927], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 166.

12. Davidson first made mention of a Southern symposium in a letter to Tate, March 17, 1927; see *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 95.

there are performances surely, to which we can point with pride, if you believe the book should be one mainly of literary criticism.¹³

Ransom had already been working on an essay that he called “Pioneering on Principle,” which he passed along to Tate as an example of the sort of material he felt would best fit their symposium.¹⁴ He would use this article several times over the next few years in order to forward the cause. For instance, Ransom “reduced and compressed it to a rather provocative belligerent form” and tried to get it published as “The South—Old or New?” *The Nation* declined to publish it in the spring of 1927, but Ransom was finally able to get it published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1928.¹⁵ An expanded version of the article was published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* in 1929 under the title “The South Defends Its Heritage.”¹⁶ There was talk of an offer to have an even further expanded version published in the Today and Tomorrow series of booklets, though such a piece never materialized.¹⁷ And when the group’s idea for a symposium finally came together, Ransom adapted the essay yet again. It ran as “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” in *I’ll Take My Stand*.¹⁸

The group book project did not take off immediately. Though there was initial interest on the part of Ransom, Tate, and

13. Ransom to Tate, April 3 and 13, 1927, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 173.

14. *Ibid.*, 174.

15. Ransom to Tate, June 25 [1927], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 175. John Crowe Ransom, “The South—Old or New?” *Sewanee Review* (April 1928): 139–47.

16. John Crowe Ransom, “The South Defends Its Heritage,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, June 1929, 108–18. Ransom was not happy with the title *Harper’s* had given it, preferring instead the title “Reconstructed but Unregenerate.” See Ransom to Tate, July 4, 1929, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 182.

17. Ransom to Tate, July 4, 1929, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 182.

18. Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930).

Davidson, it soon fell neglected in 1927 and 1928. But in February 1929, Davidson wrote a letter to Tate, who was now in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship, seeking for the group to redouble its efforts. He not only solicited Tate's help in reviving the book project, but he also cast a larger vision of influence with a dream of starting a Southern magazine. Yet in the midst of his visionary efforts, Davidson voiced his pessimism about the whole scheme. "Economics, government, politics, machinery—all such forces are against us. With the issue of prosperity before everybody's eyes, Southerners get excited about nothing else—except religion."¹⁹

Over the next few months, the trio renewed the cause with vigor. They discussed matters of organization, contributors, and publishers. They also deliberated greater structural concerns for the cause, such as starting an academic society, placing essays in various journals, starting a magazine or newspaper, and connecting with young literary groups at colleges.²⁰ The Agrarians had a renewed sense of focus, a plan, and plenty of energy. But was that enough to overcome Davidson's concern about the soporific effect of prosperity? By fall the economic scene underwent a noticeable change that would alleviate some of that pessimism. Davidson wrote to Tate on October 26, 1929: "The terrific industrial 'crises' now occurring almost daily in North Carolina give present point to all the line of thinking and argument that we propose to do. I don't know whether you have read of these or not. It is enough to say that hell has pretty well broken loose, and the old story of labor fights is being repeated. It all means more ammunition for us."²¹ On October 29, 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed, and the country found itself reeling under what would become known

19. Davidson to Tate, February 5, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 221.

20. Davidson to Tate, July 29, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 226–29; Tate to Davidson, August 10, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 229–33; Davidson to Tate, August 20, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 233–34.

21. Davidson to Tate, October 26, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 235.

as the Great Depression. By the end of the year, Davidson declared that “the time is ripe.”²²

The Agrarians hurried to finish the book, secured Harper & Brothers as a publisher, and rejoiced to see the book published in the fall of 1930. Under the title *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, the book distinguished between what its contributors saw as agrarian and industrial ways of life. *I'll Take My Stand* received wide recognition upon publication, though many of the reviews were negative. It was received unfavorably by such Northern critics as the influential H. L. Mencken.²³ Yet from the beginning Ransom had recognized that their greatest battles would be against progressive-leaning Southerners. As he had written to Tate in the spring of 1927, “Our fight is for survival; and it's got to be waged not so much against the Yankees as against the exponents of the New South.”²⁴ And, as predicted, opposition came from their fellow Southerners. Over the next year, Ransom engaged in a number of debates to defend the Southern way of life advanced in the book.²⁵ Although they received significant opposition to their cause, the Agrarians had developed a platform and were being heard.

LAND!

In the wake of *I'll Take My Stand*, economics became a main source of tension between Ransom and his New South opponents. Ransom's agrarianism stood opposed to the capitalism of a predominantly industrialized society. But whereas *I'll Take My Stand* addressed the multifaceted cultural problems related to indus-

22. Davidson to Tate, December 29, 1929, *Literary Correspondence*, 246.

23. H. L. Mencken, “Uprising in the Confederacy,” *American Mercury*, March 1931, 379–81.

24. Ransom to Tate [Spring 1927], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 166.

25. See Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, 46–50.

trialism, Ransom thought the book lacked a significant economic argument for an agrarian return. As he says in the preface to *Land!*, he saw the need for an “economic sequel to the group-book.”²⁶ *Land!* would be that sequel, and its purpose would be to assess the unemployment crisis and to name its principal cause: the problem of overcapitalization. As Ransom observed, the percentage of farmers had severely dropped over the years as people vacated the countryside for jobs in the cities. With the unemployment crisis underway, he proposed that people return to the land: there was plenty of work to do on the farm. The book would also review commonly proposed solutions to the Great Depression, ranging from capitalist fixes to socialist schemes. Yet it would distinguish the agrarian program from both capitalism and socialism, arguing for the existence of a completely different economic option from the two prevailing systems. It was a system that would promote self-sufficiency and local interests, prioritizing farm life over manufacturing.

Inasmuch as he “debated and discussed and even wrote that topic” during the winter of 1931, Ransom concluded, “I might as well ‘capitalize’ my efforts into a book and get it behind me.” Ransom had been awarded a Guggenheim scholarship for the 1931–32 academic year, so bringing a bit of closure to his foray into economics would allow him better focus on his poetic calling. He proposed the book idea to Harcourt under the title “Capitalism and the Land” and hoped to finish writing it that summer before going overseas.²⁷

Summer ended and the book was not complete. Once in England, Ransom continued to work on the book, and he recruited Tate to serve as his stateside literary agent. Harcourt had declined his proposal, and, as appears from a letter to Tate, Scribner’s had

26. Preface to *Land!*, 4. Shortly after the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, Ransom’s attempt to get the group to sign on to a positive economic project apparently did not succeed; see Ransom to Tate [December, 1930], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 201.

27. Ransom to Louis Untermeyer, July 7, 1931, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 203.

too. With two rejections on the proposal, Ransom submitted part of the manuscript to Harper & Brothers with an offer to have a complete manuscript by January 15, 1932. Ransom instructed Harper & Brothers to send it to Tate if they decided not to publish it, with the idea that Tate could help pitch it to other publishers.²⁸ Harper declined the manuscript.

As the New Year rolled around, Ransom continued to work diligently on his economic project. A small light of hope began to shine when *The New Republic* published an article from his labors under the title “The State and the Land.”²⁹ With a little wind in his sail, Ransom approached Harcourt once again with a reworked book manuscript, to be titled simply *Land!* In May 1932 Ransom received a rejection letter from Harcourt. Discouraged, he let Tate know of his reticence to send it to any other publishers. He wanted Tate to see the manuscript in its present form, which he felt was much stronger than earlier versions, and he even considered having Tate propose the book to Macmillan. However, Ransom started to weary under the strain of negotiating the manuscript from overseas, and his confidence as a lay economist became shaky. Ransom lamented,

the economic subject matter shifts so rapidly that an utterance becomes an anachronism before it can get to print. Don’t peddle it any further, therefore. It may be that in the fall I can take it up again profitably. But it may be, on the other hand, that my kind of economics won’t do, and that I’d better stick to poetry and aesthetics. I’ve learned a lot of economics lately, too! But I must confess I haven’t the economist’s air, flair, style, method, or whatnot.³⁰

28. Ransom to Tate, November 23 [1931], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 206.

29. John Crowe Ransom, “The State and the Land,” *The New Republic*, February 17, 1932, 8–10. See appendix herein.

30. Ransom to Tate, May 19 [1932], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 208.

Nevertheless, not all was lost. Whereas Harper & Brothers had also declined the book at an earlier stage, they now agreed to publish part of his work as an article in the July issue of *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. It was given the title "Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem."³¹

When Ransom returned to the United States in the fall, his hopes of recovering the book project came to a decisive end. Writing of his dissatisfaction, Ransom told Tate:

My poor book is nearly a total loss—I don't like it. It would have been a passable book published a year ago. Several publishers nearly took it. Within these next ten days I will have kicked it into the incinerator or else taken a grand new start and started over on a new outline together. The latter course would relieve my system, and I am getting a little bit gone on my new (hypothetical) approach.³²

As a book project, *Land!* had come to an end. Ransom gave up on publishing it. And his saying that in a few days he would have "kicked it into the incinerator" caused many later scholars to believe he had in fact destroyed the manuscript altogether.³³ Ransom seems to have had a penchant for feeding the fire with old unwanted materials. For instance, in the preface to *The World's Body*, he tells of how he had recently "consigned to the flames" his rejected manuscript on the aesthetics of poetry, which he had

31. John Crowe Ransom, "Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, July 1932, 216–24. This essay consists of most of chapter 1, four paragraphs from chapter 4, and some additional material that is not a part of *Land!*

32. Ransom to Tate, October 25 [1932], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 210–11.

33. Thomas Daniel Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 241; Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 128; see *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 211n6; Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 101.

worked on so hard before and alongside the agrarian project.³⁴ So it is reasonable that his remark to Tate led people to assume the manuscript no longer existed. But although Ransom's plans for publishing *Land!* had gone up in metaphorical smoke, the manuscript itself evaded the literal flames.

And although *Land!* was aborted as a book project, Ransom's comments to Tate indicated an alternative approach that would allow him to address the topic in a new way. He did not spell out that new way in the letter to Tate, but his publishing efforts over the next five years demonstrated that he was not quite finished addressing agrarian economic concerns. Rather than write a book, Ransom wrote a number of articles for various publications. These articles were not excerpted material from the book but fresh pieces that addressed the issues in different ways. However, rather than sticking to strict economics, as he had in *Land!*, Ransom infused these essays with aesthetic and regionalist concerns. The original book project might have been abandoned, but it took several years of publishing articles to clear his system of his agrarian fervor.³⁵

THE RESIGNED POET

By 1936, Ransom expressed concern over his involvement in the agrarian cause. All during the years of advocating agrarianism, he had simultaneously maintained his interest in writing poetry and criticism. For a while his agrarian and poetic output served as complementary projects in his defense of the humane tradition against a modernist society. But he came to a point at which he feared the

34. Ransom, *The World's Body*, vii.

35. See "Happy Farmers," *American Review* 1, no. 5 (October 1933): 513–35; "A Capital for the New Deal," *American Review* 2, no. 2 (December 1933): 129–42; "The Aesthetic of Regionalism," *American Review* 2, no. 3 (January 1934): 290–310; "Regionalism in the South," *New Mexico Quarterly* (May 1934): 108–13; "The South Is a Bulwark," *Scribner's Magazine*, May 1936, 299–303; "What Does the South Want?" *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 1936): 180–94; "The Unequal Sections," *The Saturday Review*, December, 18, 1937, 6–7.

agrarian cause was subverting his calling as a poet. Not that the two projects were antithetical. But he was being emotionally consumed by the project in a way that was compromising his literary aims. Ransom wrote to Tate about how “*patriotism* is eating at *lyricism*”; “*patriotism* has nearly eaten me up,” he said, “and I’ve got to get out of it.”³⁶ A few years earlier Ransom thought he recognized a similar problem in Davidson, though he could not see at that time how it would come to eat him up as well. He once wrote to Tate, “You know, our rebel doctrines are good for all [of] us but Don, and very doubtful there, because they are flames to his tinder.”³⁷ Now he found himself eaten up and burned out. There had been in Ransom an aesthetic impulse that carried him into his venture in agrarian economics, but when he sensed that the extended project began to compromise his commitments to poetry, he chose to regroup and concentrate solely on his artistic calling.

Ransom struggled with his patriotic dilemma over the next year. For the sake of his sanity and career he looked for projects that would keep his mind and hands busy with literary concerns. For instance, he discussed with Tate the idea of starting an American academy of letters.³⁸ And writing to Edwin Mims, chair of the English department at Vanderbilt, Ransom gave assurance that he had lately “gone almost entirely into pure literary work.”³⁹ Making that transition was not easy. Ransom confessed to Tate that he found himself “lapsing occasionally” back into the agrarian project because there were still things he felt he had to get off his chest.⁴⁰ He was working on an article that took the agrarian project in a more political direction. He told Tate that he was “signing off

36. Ransom to Tate, September 17, 1936, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 217 (emphasis in original).

37. Ransom to Tate, October 25 [1932], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 209.

38. Ransom to Tate, September 17, 1936, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 217–19.

39. Ransom to Edwin Mims, June 8, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 223.

40. Ransom to Tate, March 11, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 221.

but a little by degrees” and described the article as his “last act of patriotism.”⁴¹ Ransom sent the article to Seward Collins for publication in the *American Review*, which went defunct a few months later, and Ransom’s article never appeared. But the agrarian fever proved persistent. At one point Ransom remarked to Tate that “there’ll never be complete immunity for any good man from patriotism” and that they might better commit to “keep out of a *repetitive* patriotism at least.”⁴² But as much as the fire burned within him, its dying seemed inevitable. His final published agrarian piece appeared at the end of 1937. It was a review for the *Saturday Review* of Walter Prescott Webb’s *Divided We Stand*. He used the piece as a platform to encourage the southern and western regions of the United States to take a political stand against the “economic dominion of the North.”⁴³

What made the year 1937 a decisive break is that Ransom had indeed diverted his attention to significant literary concerns that would solidify his career as a leading literary critic. That year he wrote an important article entitled “Criticism, Inc.,” which called for a more precise and systematic practice of literary criticism.⁴⁴ He worked this article and a number of his previous articles on poetry into a book, *The World’s Body*, one purpose of which was to set down precisely what it is that poetry does for us that the sciences cannot. Also in 1937, Ransom relocated to Gambier, Ohio, taking the job of professor of poetry at Kenyon College. Removed from Nashville and expected to lead Kenyon’s English department to distinction, Ransom found little to no incentive for delving back into the Southern agrarian project.

Having retreated from the front lines of the agrarian cause, Ransom sought to maintain his fight against modernity’s ill

41. Ransom to Tate, April 6, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 222.

42. Ransom to Tate, June 17, 1937, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, 224.

43. Ransom, “The Unequal Sections,” 7.

44. John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 4 (1937): 586–602.

influence but focused it more singularly in the arena of literary criticism. He came to accept the agrarian program as a lost cause, but he never lost the aesthetic concerns that carried him into it. In “Art and the Human Economy” he reproached those who still proposed agrarianism, but he also spoke of an “agrarian nostalgia” as “a mode of repentance not itself to be repented.”⁴⁵ The project allowed the Fugitives to recognize something that was being lost in the rapid progress of industrialization. And although witnessing a return to an agrarian way of life that preserved aesthetic values within its very economic system no longer seemed possible, Ransom concluded that they were better suited to infusing into the modern world, by means of the arts, as much aesthetic sensibility as was possible. It was a retreat from agrarianism as an economic program, but not from the sentiments that had given rise to it.

This publication of *Land!*, after all these years, resurrects for us the story of a poet temporarily turned lay economist. Ransom was acutely aware of the way that a modern progressive spirit was revolutionizing the South. All of the emphasis on a scientific push for efficiency had altered an older, more traditional agrarian economic system—a system with a simple aesthetic quality built into it. As Ransom and his colleagues challenged the industrial way of life by advocating agrarianism, and as the economic crisis of the Great Depression gave them a greater platform for their cause, they also recognized that their agrarian proposal would have to stand up under economic scrutiny if Southern society were to consider such a return a viable option. Thus, *Land!* was a strictly economic justification for a Southern agrarianism. Feeling out of his element in ever-changing economic times, Ransom failed to bring *Land!* to publication. Instead, he lobbied agrarian economics from the vantage point of the critic, touting its aesthetic advantage and its greater ability to preserve human dignity. Finally, when that

45. John Crow Ransom, “Art and the Human Economy,” *The Kenyon Review* 7, no. 4 (1945): 687.

cause seemed completely lost, he resigned himself to the life of a diligent literary critic, hoping that the arts would preserve the aesthetic life he longed to see maintained.

In this story we can see that the very thing that drove Ransom to even attempt writing an economic treatise was his ever abiding concern for developing the aesthetic side of life. This is what explains the oddity—if “oddity” is the right word, for Ransom *was* a man of letters in the old sense—of the poet-turned-economist. He ventured outside of his expertise in order to give an economic justification for a more aesthetically responsible way of life. At that moment in American history everything seemed to turn on economics. Ransom recognized this, but his foray into economics was not for the love of it as an economist. Rather, his stint as an economist turned on the fact that he valued a society where daily production allowed people to form local attachments and enjoy the everyday aspects of a life well lived. The advantage of a self-sufficient farm, he wrote in *Land!*, is that “it offers expression to Man Thinking as well as to Man Laboring.”⁴⁶ He could not expect economists of his day to articulate the economic sense of agrarianism, for they could not see the forest through the trees, so he sought to learn enough economics to do the job himself. And what led him to do it? One could say that it all turned on sentiment.

46. See chapter 4 herein, 105.

LAND!

The Case for an Agrarian Economy

PREFACE

I have undertaken in this book to show the economic import of an agrarian movement. But to what movement do I refer? Alas, I am justifying a movement that does not yet exist on any conscious or concerted scale. It is my belief that such a movement must now be recommended by anybody who is sensitive to the logic of economic events, and perhaps that it is even to be predicted; that is about all.

It is not quite all. In the fall of 1930 appeared a book entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.¹ It had twelve authors, of whom I was one. The essays, as was natural, repeated each other to some extent, so that the book's real content may have been less than its volume would indicate. Perhaps its chief significance lay in the fact that here were twelve men of presumptive intelligence standing together on some principles rather at variance with the orthodox doctrines of the American economic society. And their peculiar variation was not in the direction of something that was new but of something that was old. They

1. First published by Harper & Brothers (New York) in what Louis D. Rubin, Jr., called "a modest edition that was subsequently permitted to go out of print." See Rubin's introduction to the edition published by Louisiana State University Press (Baton Rouge, 1977), xi.

named it the “agrarian tradition.” They were aware that this had nearly passed out of effective existence, but they believed in recovering it.

How it could be recovered was not, naturally, set forth in much detail. Everybody rather indicated that there was economic reason for an agrarian return and almost nobody elaborated the argument with any circumstance. The book consisted in so many overtures to the spirit of man, so many appeals to his taste.

So I have written the present little book. I have not applied for an imprimatur from the group, which is neither an ecclesiastical nor a political organization. But I shall be happy if my colleagues or the public find in it a sort of economic sequel to the group-book.

A book about a reform must have a villain, a *bête noire*. In our symposium the beast’s name was “industrialism.” It was the right name for the character playing opposite agrarianism, which was defined both as a way of laboring and as a way of enjoying life. For industrialism connotes both our now highly specialized jobs and positions, and also those pretty mechanisms and packaged commodities that give us our joy as consumers.

In the present book the villain is generally called “capitalism,” but he is the same character. Industrial with respect to the way he appeals to our senses and touches our spirits, capitalistic with respect to the source of his power and revenues. Capitalism is the economic organization, industrialism is the kind of culture which it supports. In this book I am talking economics and not culture.

I might add that the piece is not a tragedy. I would not want to put my villain to death if I knew how. I propose to rescue some unfortunate people from his clutches and then leave him to his own devices.

I feel the same embarrassment that I felt in contributing to the other book: do I write as a Southerner or as an American? I hope it is possible to be both at the same time, though some of our critics have told us to the contrary. I write as an economist of some

sort believing that we are now obliged to rebuild in a decent fashion our agrarian communities. But I cannot help observing that the agrarian communities of the South, though they have declined sadly, are still the best-preserved specimens to be found in the Union. Those blocs of States usually designated as the South Atlantic, the South Central, and the Southwestern contain a larger farming population than do all the other States put together. In the South there is still a sectional pride attaching to its old agrarian traditions, and this deserves to be used rather than abused. I hope for an agrarian revival in the South, but that is not nearly good enough: I would like to see the rehabilitation of an agrarian theory in our national thinking, and a Southern agrarianism will depend on it for success just as much as that of any other region.

Nothing of importance in this book applies solely or peculiarly to the South.

I am not professionally or technically an economist. In saying this I shall be anticipating a good many of my critics. Nevertheless I shall not pretend to be prostrated when I say it with a sense of my incompetence. The amateur with all his disabilities may quite conceivably have a certain advantage over the professional; he may sometimes be able to make out a wood when the professional, who lives in it, can see only some trees.

I am indebted to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for the leisure in which, as a Guggenheim Fellow staying in England, I have done a large part of the writing of this book.

I also owe acknowledgements to *Harper's Magazine* and the *New Republic* for the use of material which I have already published under their copyright.²

2. "Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1932, 216–24; "The State and the Land," *New Republic*, February 17, 1932, 8–10.

And now for a quick impressionistic picture of our economic landscape.

Something dreadful is happening to the Western world, and that includes even America, once locally known as God's own country. We have wealth, yet we are materially distressed, and what is more we are panicky at heart. It is said that we suffer from a "depression," but what does that mean? It is like the names that have been given to some of the diseases of the body; they do not define the condition, they do not tell anybody specifically what virus to attack. We were apparently enjoying a gorgeous state of health and now suddenly we are sick. Yet the regime of our economic life seemed sound; the theory behind it was perfect.

Here was the theory. Every one of us was providentially equipped with a special service which he could perform for others and in return for which he could expect to obtain their services. It was as if we were so many atoms of humanity who yet were not meant exactly for the solitary state but for a communicating fellowship. The butcher swapped wares with the baker. The atoms assisted one another; they were economic atoms.

But that does not begin to describe the intricacy of our economic pattern. There was not only the simple order of uncompounded services, such as the loaf baked in the one-man bake-shop. There were services that were performed, and could only be performed, by large numbers of atoms in concert; that is, by molecules. The wares put up for exchange were mass-products or molecular products strictly. They were the work of companies, corporations, cartels, and came out of factories and industrial plants. The picture of the world in 1929, so far as Americans could see it, was not the picture of so many separate point-like economic atoms but the picture of congeries of atoms, or molecules, which were already big and growing always bigger. The atoms had gone molecular.

What was the molecular organization like? A factory was a marvel of ingenuity for turning out wares, and at the same time it was somebody's large physical property. It had an owner-atom

who was responsible for the ingenuity, and it was just as much a private possession as a bake-shop. Ownership had been secured by a series of private transactions, and that again was the way it was operated. The owner-atom invited into it many worker-atoms who consented each to work according to his directions. Then by other private transactions he took the factory's products and exchanged them. The worker-atoms had not flown by some mechanical compulsion into place within the molecules; they had elected the place.

The molecules were not organized for fun, nor in order to be aesthetic objects. Out of the molecule came services which were proportionately at least as large as the services of the uncompounded atoms, and in fact much larger; and then there came back services for the sustenance of the member atoms in their turn. The real living creatures in the world were still only the atoms. They grouped into molecules for the sake of their own convenience and at the bright suggestion of the owner-atoms; in doing which they conferred no life on the molecules, nor did they cease to be themselves constitutionally atoms and nothing but atoms. If the advantage of the molecular grouping disappeared, the molecule dissolved, for the atoms naturally returned to their separateness; and probably soon decided to enter some molecules somewhere else. And as for the smartness of the owner-atoms who discovered and applied the theory of molecularity, it could scarcely stray off after fantastic and unprofitable objectives altogether. The owner-atom had at least two checks upon his imagination: he had to satisfy the consumer-atoms with the services that his molecule issued, and he had to satisfy the worker-atoms with a fair share of the services that came back in return. If he failed in either particular, he failed altogether, he had to drop out of the molecular game, his great name as the founder of a molecular establishment was forgotten, and somebody else took his place who could make himself more useful.

The more familiar name of the molecular structure is capitalism. The terms I have used are perhaps crude ones but I think they will do for sketching in outline. Capitalism means plants and factories with owners and employers; but it rests everywhere on

private consent, and its benefits if it has any are to private persons. The capitalistic enterprises are molecules, and in theory it would seem that they cannot operate to the hurt of the atoms, that they cannot really go wrong.

But they have gone wrong. The novelty is that they have gone wrong in great numbers, and all at the same time. They are at a stand-still, waiting to see whether they will disintegrate or pick up again. And in the meantime every private atom connected with them is involved in their distress. The capitalistic or molecular order is threatened with extinction. The worker-atoms are beginning to shout, Down with the owner-atoms, who have managed our molecules so badly; let us run the molecules ourselves!

Strangely enough, I have not heard of them shouting, though this too might not be a bad piece of logic: Away with molecules, they are too dangerous! Doubtless worker-atoms have grown so habituated to working within molecules that they can scarcely conceive of any other way of working; and so fond of the peculiar services rendered by molecules that they cannot imagine themselves doing without them.

But is it not possible that our atoms have simply gone too deeply into molecularity? Possibly they overestimated the benefits, seeing that they certainly underestimated the dangers. After all, atoms were living in good health before molecules were ever heard of. It is clearly going to be hard for the atoms to save themselves now by saving the molecules in any form. It may also be hard for them to revert to the condition of being un-compounded atoms. But they might be interested in the proposition that this latter course is easier than they have been led to suppose, and that it is worth a try.

Of fundamental importance of any age is the way it tries to secure the economic welfare of its atoms. There has just been conducted a long experiment with molecularity under which they fared more and more brilliantly, till suddenly now they find themselves coming more and more to grief. Perhaps the issue for the new age to determine is: Molecularity or Atomicity?

At any rate, something will have to be done; or so I have heard. The Governor of the Bank of England is said to have told

the Governor of the Bank of France: “Unless drastic measures are taken to save it, the capitalistic system throughout the civilized world will be wrecked within a year. I should like that prediction to be filed for future reference.”³ What did he mean by drastic? Since he spoke these words, Mr. Hoover has declared a moratorium on international settlements, and Britain has gone off gold and put in a Tory government and a tariff. The year has passed, and the capitalistic system is thought to be breathing a little easier but one is not sure. Were these remedies enough?

—*John Crowe Ransom*

3. Montagu Collet Norman in a letter to Clément Moret, which appeared in the press in the summer of 1931. For a brief discussion, see Liaquat Ahamed, *Lords of Finance* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 5.

HOMELESS PEOPLE AND VACANT LAND

Man's inhumanity to man—resounding and portentous phrase—need not, I imagine, describe our inevitable or usual human relations, as Malthus¹ might have thought it did if he had been asked to pass judgment. But it is terrifyingly apt at describing our present ones. A certain economic practice has brought us to a condition where we are competing with each other for survival. We are in business, and there is not enough business to go round. All must take part in this game of economic competition, not merrily but perforce, and nobody can win until somebody loses. The stakes are no longer the naive delights of power, glory, finery, and sumptuary extravagance, but the means of bare subsistence. The competitive condition is not less dreary because it is universal. Nor is our conduct the less murderous because we do not mean any harm, and bear no particular malice against our competitors. We are engaged in a kind of civil war, though hostilities have not been declared, and scarcely even intended.

1. Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834), English cleric and economist, author of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which argued that population would outpace the earth's capacity to sustain it.

I suppose this way of putting it is hardly too strong in April of 1932. But I can be much more specific, and recount some commonplace bits of fact.

I live in a moderately well-to-do residential section of a fair-sized city. At the top of my street lives an undertaker, who has a "mortuary establishment" downtown. His business is doing badly, and he cannot hold out much longer. But it is not because people are not dying at a due and healthy rate; it is because there are suddenly far too many undertakers, and they could not support themselves on a normal death rate; they would require a series of plagues.

Very quick would be the answer which some earlier society, with its simpler ideas, would make to the undertaker's complaint: Why does he not then try some other business? But since he himself has not been long an undertaker, it is certain that he must have thought of that, that his mind is open to the idea of changing his occupation again. As he looks over our neighborhood, however, or even our city, he cannot find that the men in the other businesses are doing particularly better than he is. *All the businesses seem to be overmanned and overproductive, and there is no business for him to turn to.* It is a new condition in American life, the rather tragic culmination of an economic development that has been vaster and more rapid than anything like it in history.

The undertaker is only a sample. An insurance salesman lives near; he has almost gone out of business, and is living on his "renewals." Insurance is still being bought, though not on the scale of five years ago; but five years ago, and previously, there were coming into being too many insurance companies with too many salesmen, and there is simply not the trade to accommodate them all. Then there are several merchants, unanimous in reporting that they are not getting business, and times are very hard. They are the victims of an economy that has set up too many mercantile establishments, and allocated to their personnel too many shrewd, capable, honest men. There are also several sorts of salaried men in our community: managers, travelling salesmen,

department heads, technicians. All are worrying. They do not know when they will be laid off. They are miserably aware that their service is scarcely paying for itself, that their employers have lost too much business under the condition of overcompetition and oversupply.

I myself am a college teacher, and I still have my job, but doubtless it is at the expense of a good many threadbare and desperate scholars who would like to take it from me. I know such men. There are far too many of us trying to make scholarship pay. And as for school-teachers, the teacher-training institutions of my State have been turning them out for the last ten years in impossible numbers. There cannot be found positions for them all unless the present teachers who did not go to college are discharged for their benefit; and when it comes to the question whether the old teachers or the new teachers are to become the supernumeraries of the economic order and retire into economic darkness, the political economist has no preference whatever.

There are other professional men in our section—doctors, a dentist, lawyers, preachers. All are trying to cut the throats of their competitors. Or trying to strangle them, I had better say; for they are rarely bloodthirsty by nature. Many of them preferred professional life to business precisely because they assumed that the competitive technique would not have to be so ruthless. But the professions are just as overcrowded as the businesses, and the alternative before their members is to fight for a man's share of the limited patronage or waste away of inanition.

Beyond my section is the suburb where reside the big men who run big business. Their story is like our story but on a grander scale. The manufacturer is manufacturing only by fits and starts. His plant is like nearly half the plants in his industry: superfluous. The banker lives in fear of his economic life. Banking is a pretty business, and it is not strange that too many men, carrying too many capital funds, have entered it. Unfortunately it has been the recent fashion for banks which were having a hard struggle individually to merge, and to cut down their personnel, and some of them have not quite lasted until the merger could be completed. And what of the *rentiers*—the privileged ones who live on Easy

Street itself, and whose economic function consists in clipping coupons from gilt-edged securities?² The securities have too often turned out to be of no better composition than the edges. So these folk are retrenching from their former scale of living as their incomes have dropped off, and some of them are barely intact, economically speaking. For the *rentier* has his enemies too, though not mean-spirited personal ones. I hope; he has competitors, who are all the *rentiers* everywhere that have poured capital into productive investment until none of it produces as it should. As the tradesman and the manufacturer and the banker suffer so he must suffer, because it is his money that has set them up, and his money that must be lost when the business goes to pieces.

In the opposite direction from this rich-man's suburb, toward the city, is the shabby district where the large families of day-to-day laborers lead their hand-to-mouth existence. Nobody can now find any gloss to spread over that picture! The laborers want labor, but the labor is insufficient, and so the hand of each is in effect raised against his neighbor. The laborer's distress is cruder and more obvious than that of other members of the economic community. His position is exactly the same in the respect that, when his own particular occupation fails him, there is no other for him to enter.

Surplus of production, fierce competition, crowded occupations: the condition is so prevalent that it forms for us a sort of economic atmosphere; we feel it and breathe it everywhere we go. In such a situation there might be the makings of revolution and violence but for one consideration: all the ranks suffer alike, and there is no particular direction in which to attack. There is no villain nor set of villains in this drama. There are not even any great fools, for it is hard to smell out precisely where the folly lies, and it is evidently a kind of folly that has infected us all about the same.

2. From the French, *rentier*: "A person who derives his or her income from property or investment" (OED).

But we are loath to accept that as a picture of our “normal” economic condition and, without knowing precisely what is the matter, we are inclined to believe that it will give place sooner or possibly later to a picture which is bright and pleasant. To an uncertain extent that must be true. Let us hope it as hard as we can. Evidently our hope is mainly the not very rational one that, since good times and bad times seem to succeed each other in alternation, good times are coming back.

Good times consist in occupation for all; an economic function for everybody; it is the first desideratum of sound political economy. It is entirely too possible that we shall not see it realized again in our time. We look forward in fear, and we look backward in fondness, and ask ourselves, Why should it not obtain again as it obtained before? It is necessary to see how it obtained the last time, and what was really happening to make it obtain then, and to make it unapt to obtain quickly again.

The abundant occupation which offered itself in the flush times just before the crash was not an entirely sound condition. The event proves it, and a little economic logic will explain it. The occupation was abundant, but some of it was of a sort that could not last and must soon be withdrawn. This precarious or temporary occupation fell into at least three large groups.

(1) There was first the occupation of those who were working for businesses that were really on the point of breaking but did not dare to stop and see. They were producing goods that were increasingly failing to get sold, and cluttering up the market. They kept going in the hope that things would be better for them tomorrow. Monetary conditions helped them to keep going. Prices were rising, and tended to reimburse them each season for the costs of production in the previous season; these costs had been incurred on a lower price scale but they were nevertheless heavy because they had to cover wasted or unused production. If the businesses required to make loans to continue operation, they could probably do it, for credit was plentiful. But the longer they

kept going the further they were getting behind and the greater would be the crash when they stopped.

These businesses were the weaker or “marginal” businesses in industries which on the whole were overproductive; and in being overproductive it is to be understood that they were simply producing more goods than the existing market could absorb. How there can be theoretically an overproduction in goods which are really desirable is still a great mystery to economists; but it is not denied that there is such a thing as an effective overproduction, and that it is a common thing.

The market by September of 1929 was so flooded with goods of all kinds, or at least so threatened with the flood of goods that managed barely to be held back from production by plants capable of producing and yearning to produce them, that advertising and salesmanship became aggressive as never before in the effort to move the consumers. But this resource failed in the degree that consumers were not willfully withholding their patronage but really had not the means to buy. Schemes of purchase by installment succeeded in selling many bills of goods; but they strained the credit of houses still further; and these transactions were often going to turn out not to represent sales at all because the purchase was never going to be completed.

(2) Another kind of occupation that could not last was that of the builders—almost the most sensitive and precarious of occupations. It was a period of prodigious building. It had to be, because it was an age when fresh money out of the profits of a business whose volume had never been equaled[,] increased by credit which was readily available, was pouring into investment; and investment means fundamentally the erection of plant.³ A boom period wears the look of feverish occupation largely because those who are not employed in the existing plant are being employed as builders of new plant. But the new plant is going to increase the existing volume of production, which is already an overproduction, and the building of the builders becomes a dangerous liability and not a

3. Ransom frequently uses “plant” and “plants” in this way—without the use of a preceding definite or indefinite article.

source of strength. If only there might have been a series of well-planned earthquakes, or cyclones, which might have destroyed the new buildings as fast as they went up! Then no harm would have been done by the attempt to make extravagant additions to productive plant, and an age of building could have continued to be an age of building. But no such thing happened. The thing that did happen was inevitable. A season later, or a few seasons later, when the new plant was put to producing in its turn, it became apparent to everybody that it had no real economic function to serve, but was excessive plant. Then the building stopped, and the personnel engaged in it was no longer in receipt of wages and in a position to patronize the producers, so that even their old rate of production was now excessive. The units began to cease operations one by one. Each stoppage of a payroll cut down the market for the other units that were still producing, and the depression gathered head like a snowball. It was in this style that late 1929 passed drearily into 1930, into 1931, and even, to the general amazement, into 1932.

(3) The third group of perishable occupations was that of employees who were going to be superseded by technology—by labor-saving machinery, and by economies in organization and processes of production. Efficiency in production is admirable in principle, and sometimes the release of laborers from an industry whose new equipment enables it to spare them permits them to go into new industries that are waiting for manpower. Unfortunately it does not lie in the nature of business ownership to wait and see that this is going to happen before turning the laborers out. And when once the crisis has come, and the boom has turned into the depression, the productive plants must redouble their efforts to keep afloat by saving costs, and to save costs by devising fresh economies at the expense of payroll. Invention and management never work so hard to cut down the labor requirement as during hard times. And this reduction is in each case permanent. Labor is forever dispossessed⁴ of that much of its specific

4. The original reads “dispossed.” “Disposed” seems unlikely as the intended word.

occupation, and can only live in hope that some other need for it will turn up.

What then is the “normal” figure of production to which we may reasonably expect to return, and under which our productive plant, heavily reduced by that scrapping of plant which takes place through bankruptcies and forced liquidations, may expect to flourish once more? It seems reasonable to say that it will be a figure which will hardly re-engage soon all those who are now without occupation. We used to think we needed immigration to get the manpower for our promising industries. Is it possible that we need now to start emigration, in order to dispose painlessly of the superfluous citizens who have no economic function in our economic society?

Humanitarians are much concerned today with relieving the unemployed, in the sense of finding money and handing it to them to live on. That is the least we can do for them at the moment. But economists are concerned with restoring them to livelihood, and making it unnecessary to resort to philanthropic drives for their relief. More employment for the unemployed, less employment for the humanitarians.

Let us conceive the economic problem of our society in its simplest sense as an occupational problem: how to find occupation for those who have none, and how to find remunerative occupation for those whose occupation has become only a formal or waiting one. The chief demand upon our statesmen at this moment, or it may be the chief demand upon our private but leading political economists[,] is to place every member of our society into some permanent economic position.

I suggest that one occupation is quite available for those of us who need it, and that, in fact, it is where we are least likely to look for it, or right under our noses.

Before naming it precisely, I should like to ask the question, From where did all these superfluous men, now squeezed out of their nominal occupations, originally come? The number of them is large, but they are the excess of workers in a plant that is huge. This plant produced in 1928, the last full year of our prosperity, something like five times as much as its nearest competitor. It had expanded to these proportions rather rapidly, and though the increase of productivity per capita through technology made much of it possible, it was obliged to make tremendous drafts upon a fresh source of manpower somewhere or other in order to operate. It recruited from several sources. There was first of all the “natural increase” in the given industrial population. But this was far behind the rate of increase which the expanding plant demanded. There was immigration, which took from the European populations on a very large scale. Even so, the immigrants who entered the American labor market were not, after a certain point, the chief source of supply, and as a matter of fact they finally ceased to be wanted. After the world war we legislated immigration nearly out of existence. Already we were feeling crowded, and the problem of occupation was presenting itself. Another accession of personnel was that made by the negro. In increasing numbers the negroes left the South and entered the industrial occupations in the East and Middle West. They made a considerable item.

But the chief source of manpower for our scheme of production was unquestionably the native American population that had been living quietly and a little bit primitively on the farms.⁵ The accession made by the negroes belongs really under this head, for they came out of a country life. It was because the old-fashioned farmers of America went industrial, and migrated in an accelerating stream to the towns, that the capitalistic community was swamped beneath a personnel greater than it could assimilate solidly into its economy. That is at least the meaning of our overproduction on the side of the productive personnel. The fact is

5. Ransom did not capitalize “native” and did not mean “indigenous” or “Indian.”

worth pondering when we study the grievous breakdown of occupation today. The date of the migration from the farm is of course a little indeterminate. It began when the industrial revolution first gathered head in America in the Nineteenth Century, but it evidently did not proceed very much too fast till about the late war time. Then there was a boom in production that promised to occupy profitably all the capital and all the personnel that would engage in it. It persisted even after the war. The soldiers themselves when they were demobilized looked about them as a matter of course for positions within the industrial plant. It was as if America had decided to move to town. The farm population went down faster than ever.

In theory the farmers were well within economic logic in making the move. It promised to increase their personal fortunes, and incidentally the wealth of the nation at large. Industry is more productive than old-fashioned farming. But unfortunately it sometimes proves too productive; it steps up production before it has developed the necessary market. Capitalistic society has not learned how to operate its productive plant smoothly, but is subject to dislocations and stoppages that cost the economic lives of many of its members. The old-fashioned farmers in joining this society were risking a secure if modest living for a precarious prospect of wealth, and for some of them it now definitely turns out to have been a poor gamble. There was room in the productive plant for some, but not for all that crowded suddenly into it. They might well have come in more gradually, and hoped thereby to make their tenure of industrial citizenship a little firmer.

But let bygones be bygones. The question [is], What will these unwanted industrialists, who are largely ex-farmers, do next?

It is only on its present scale, of course, that the occupational problem is a new one. It used to be easy for the man whose occupation failed him to fall back upon another one which made all comers welcome and which he could reasonably count upon to support him. What was the admirable occupation which was always ready

in this manner to save the economic society from its own mistakes? Nothing more nor less than agriculture; the common occupation, or the staple one, even in a society that had developed many; and by long odds the most reliable one, or the stable one.

Let us think back for a moment upon an economic era that is past, and that was quite different in its principles from the era of today. The difference was, perhaps chiefly, that the economic organization was not vast and close as it is today. The ruling unit of organization was not a whole national system of production and trade; it was the country community, largely sufficient unto itself; unless indeed it was the country household, which was organized as a little independent system going mostly if not completely on its own. That economic era was dominated by local or even household autonomy; decidedly by little business, not by big business.

Let us imagine the old-fashioned country community acting as a fairly self-contained economic unit. The bulk of its population consisted of farmers, who took their necessities from the land for immediate use. They found it too laborious, however, to practice a perfect self-sufficiency, and so they had their county town, to which they sold some of their produce, and from which in turn they bought the services necessary to complement their own labors.

(I shall make much use of the phrase *self-sufficient farmers*, but it must be conceded that never in American history since the earliest colonial days, or nowhere except out on the farthest frontier, have the farmers been quite self-sufficient. Nobody wanted them to be. In addition to feeding themselves they have always fed the industrial and professional population in the towns. Let it be assumed that every time the word *self-sufficient* occurs in this book it is to mean *nearly self-sufficient*.)

The farmers made the staples of their own living, but they made some money crops besides and sold them. They took their stuff to town and with the proceeds of sale secured their law and government, their professional needs, their tools and machine-made articles, the sugar and spices and coffee and tea and other primary products which they could not take from their own soil; and they even made exchanges with each other in the native

products of the region. Some of these services had to come of course from larger towns elsewhere and from remote countries, and they implied the existence of a national and even an international economic order, which was a money-using order. But the national and international orders were fairly subordinate to the agrarian or community order, in that the main reliance of the citizens was upon their own home-made products, and in a pinch they could manage with these alone.

Suppose now that a bright farmer felt it to his taste to stop farming and set up as a merchant in the town. He would be abandoning his self-sufficiency in favor of an economy in which he must live by trade and patronage rather than by the direct fruit of his labors; he would have to become a social creature and his individual independence would be gone. But at least the town was not entirely foreign to him; it was only a country town in the midst of a farming county. It had no Chamber of Commerce asking the farmers to crowd into it to live, and hoping that a national economy would send a factory to the spot to give them some occupation. But it let him come in if he liked, and in coming he was not throwing himself upon the mercies of a great impersonal society, but a small homely one in which he could see precisely what he was doing. Nevertheless, the town might not really need another merchant; in which case he would struggle for a time, doing damage meanwhile to the other merchants, but eventually might have to admit defeat and give up his business. Where would he go? There is no doubt that the community would expect him, and if necessary assist him, to go back to farming; and the land, when the prodigal returned to it, would be as kind as if he had never left it. So far as America is concerned, there always was land enough for him to till. There was no such problem as overpopulation. The sons of the landed aristocrats, who were sometimes numerous, might not inherit as much land as they wanted, and some of them were rather expected to go into business and the professions. But when they failed, they could always return to the land in some sort of capacity; they could go to the frontier and take up large areas of free or cheap land if they felt so ambitious; but it was not necessary to feel too sorry for them if they went home into a

humbler status. Many professional men played both ends of the economic game, and did not know whether they were professional men and retainers of society or independent planters. The commonest kind of intuition, reinforced by the voice of tradition, told them they had better not get too far from the land. It was a landed community.

The country towns of an older generation—the English used to refer to them very accurately as “market” towns—have changed beyond knowing, which is to say that they have about vanished from the American scene, as an incident of the great economic “advance.” The farmer who would now go to town to start in business does not set up his own store so often as he accepts employment with a national chain, or a big concern whose business is national though its plant may be situated in the town. Big business has succeeded little business, and the town is caught up into the cycle of the national economy, prospering as it prospers and going down when it has a depression. The marks of this deterioration are written all over the face of the town, and registered in the atmosphere which one feels in the town, but I shall not stop to record them. The town scarcely has any control over its own economic life. It is only an outpost of empire. No farmer moving to town today therefore is making himself a member of a small, autonomous, shock-proof society. He will fail in business when every one else is failing, and the day when the failures came one at a time and could be absorbed by the community has gone, apparently forever. Let us not take the time to mourn for the lost town.

But the land is with us still, as patient and nearly as capable as ever. Which brings us to the query: Why is not the land perfectly available today for its ancient use as a refuge individually for those who have failed in the business economy, when that refuge is needed as never before?

It is still available. That is the answer, but it is so simple that nobody is prepared to believe it. We no longer think kindly of the land when we think as economists, and we would prefer to look

almost anywhere else for our economic salvation. That is because we have seen the landed life in our time degraded and its incomparable economic advantage disused and almost forgotten. There is just one thing that town men know for certain about the contemporary farmer: that he is in the most unpaid occupation in our whole society. The farm owners stagger under mortgages, and often produce crops in spite of the fact that the prices they receive will not pay the cost of production. Their employees are lower than the robots of the cheapest factories in the wage scale, lower than the women in the sweatshops. But behind this condition is a piece of ruinous economic folly.

The American farmers in “going productive” did a thorough job of it; they went in more senses than one. Some of them, as we have seen, made a clean break with the land and went into the factories and offices of the towns. But even those who stayed at home ceased to farm in the old self-sufficient way, by which they had made a living first and a money crop second; now they began to devote themselves exclusively to their money crops, expecting to take the money and buy themselves a better living out of the stores than they could have made with their own hands. Think of farmers buying hams and bacon, butter and milk and eggs, jams and pickles and preserves, and labor to whitewash their fences, prop up their porches, and prettify their lawns! Townspeople have always bought of such things, but it is a novelty for farmers. Nothing less than an economic revolution swept over the American farms. It consisted in the substitution of the capitalistic or money economy for the self-sufficient or agrarian economy. The change, like the migration to town, required a period rather than a single date; it was under way when the war began, and it was virtually complete when the world settled down to peace.

The capitalistic or money economy is “efficient” on the farm, almost as much as in the factory. It implies specialization of function rather than the completeness and independence of the individual; each function contributing to the whole and taking its remuneration in money. When applied to farming, it assigns to each piece of land its special use, equips the farmer with the best tools to work it regardless of expense, and expects him to devote

himself with perfect concentration to obtaining maximum output in the specified product. If a nation is rather short in its supply of land, capitalistic farming will make the most of what there is, and the old-fashioned agrarian farming cannot be tolerated because it is wasteful. The old farmer, whose object was to supply himself before he catered to a market, was a sort of Jack-at-all-trades, like some strange producer who had elected to run a one-man factory and consume its production himself. That is not the scientific or modern theory of business, which is essentially big business, and is based on the willingness of everybody to forgo producing his own living and to produce something strictly for sale, even at the risk of disaster when his particular product cannot be sold. The difference in efficiency between the two economies of the land is such that the following is scarcely an exaggeration of facts already made manifest: the same land might support a million self-sufficient farmers, or it might support a working society of twice the number if farmed properly for money, and yet require only five hundred thousand of them to live and work on the land, leaving the other million and a half to perform the more industrial functions in the towns; and the latter society would be not only richer in the aggregate but richer in per capita wealth. That is a familiar type of argument, and lies either as an intuition or as an open theory behind our whole capitalistic development.

But it would be miraculous if every new member of the capitalistic society should fly unerringly to his proper station and live and function and prosper there forever. Many mistakes must be made in assigning the occupations in so intricate and large a society, and a great many people must get hurt. The ex-farmers who went to town know all about that. But what happens now to the farm population that is left, reduced though it may be, when it repudiates the old way of farming for independence and security and applies the money economy rigorously, and finally, to the land itself?

Farming exhibits now a greater percentage of failures, or a greater excess of personnel, than any other large American occupation. Farmers are not able to go to the stores with money jingling in their pockets to buy freely of the comforts and decencies

of life. Their houses are falling down in a manner which would have mortified their grandfathers, because with all their money-cropping they have not made the money to hire the carpenter and the painter. They set their tables in a style quite unworthy of the tradition of farmer's plenty. They worry themselves to death over their unhappy relations with the bank or the loan company that holds the mortgage, the hardware firm that equipped the farm with its modern machinery. And all this was true in 1928 as well as in 1931. Ever since the farmers became money-makers they have had nothing but unsucess. We were reading about the farmer's sufferings long before the papers began to fill up with news about a depression for everybody. The farmers have complained of their situation, naturally, and there is plenty of sympathy for them, or was before we all had troubles of our own. But every reform movement which they advocate, or which their political patrons advocate for them, seems to be only another artificial and privileged way to make more money than they can possibly make under the natural operation of economic law.

There is a simple reason why farming as money-making cannot flourish in America, either now or soon. There is too much land for that, and too many farmers on the land. When it produces it overproduces. The total productive capacity of land and personnel under these circumstances is certainly two or three times greater than its market. Money-making, so far as the American farmers are concerned, is like the grace of God: it cannot be pursued successfully as an end in itself.

The capitalistic doctrine, nevertheless, swept all before it in this country, including at last the farmers. It was perhaps not so strange if farmers grew envious of the quick wealth it created, tired of their home-made security, and trekked in ever larger numbers to the city; or even if, where they stayed on the farm, they applied to it at last the capitalistic technique and farmed it exclusively for money. But it was also not strange if, when they had made a capital instrument out of their land, they found it so unprofitable that their migration cityward was accelerated; economic compulsion was behind that. Almost any other occupation looked better than farming to the amateur capitalistic economist.

At this moment, however, an alteration has come over the economic landscape. The money-making farmers, who are making no money, are looking as usual at the other occupations to see if there is no room for them there, while the other occupations are looking back at the farmer and wondering if there is really no chance on the farm, with neither party finding the slightest ground for encouragement. There is no migration from the farm to the city because the city has no more occupation to spare. And there is a little enough migration in the opposite sense; yet there is a little. Some eccentric persons move to the country to escape from an over-competitive society and make a primitive living in comparative peace; the Thoreaus of our time. More important than that, proposals are heard now and again in America for the relief of some local unemployment by colonizing the unemployed on the nearest unoccupied land; precisely the thing which the Austrian government is said to be doing, and some of the unemployment committees in the German municipalities, though land is scarce in Germany.

In just such a movement as this lies, I think, our readiest and surest deliverance provided we will conceive it on a large scale and work it hard. We shall not be making much use of it so long as we think of it as a makeshift measure which for the time being will furnish the needy with some wretched and uncomfortable kind of subsistence that is better than starvation. I am afraid it is felt that a man reduced to raising his own potatoes and chickens has about the rating of the cow turned into the pasture; but we might question this feeling when we consider the generations of men who, till quite recently in the world's history, lived in what they often regarded as comfort and dignity on the soil without the use of a great deal of money for purchasing goods upon the market. I cannot imagine why a serious application of the old economy to the farm today would not produce at least as much comfort and dignity as it ever did.

We have unsuccessful men of business today, but we have always had them. We have more of them, for reasons that are not

subject to their determination, but that does not matter. Such men used to go back and be reabsorbed in the landed occupation they had come from. It is precisely what they should do today. It is hard to say why they do not, in numbers sufficient to constitute a movement, except that they, and we who might be helping them, now understand the landed occupation in an improper sense. But that misunderstanding, though it is general, can be remedied.

I venture to suggest to the patriots and economists that they try to re-establish self-sufficiency as the proper economy for the American farm, and thus save the present farmers; and at the same time that they try to get back into this economy as many as possible of the derelicts of the capitalistic economy who are now stranded in the city. I suggest an agrarian agitation, sponsored by people who may speak with authority, and leading to action on the part of people who are on the land now and people who may return there.

I shall not now go into any detail about the conditions and method of such a movement. But I remark that the new agrarian farmers will be the most innocent and esteemed members in the economic society because they alone will not injure each other through competition. If there is land for all, they cut nobody's throat by farming it in this manner; and there is land for all. Any man today who temperamentally cannot bear to hurt his needy neighbor had better take to the agrarian way of living, and any political economist who deplores the inevitable inhumanity of the competitive scramble might well approve a movement which is capable of enlisting an indefinite fraction of the crowded capitalistic society and planting it in an economy which is not mainly competitive. By agrarianism we may restore to our economic life some of the humanity which it lacks today.

This is an occupational prescription for an occupational problem. The difficulty in the way of taking it is mainly an impediment in our habit of economic thought: we have subscribed too

heartily to the doctrine of the higher productivity of the capitalistic economy.

But here is a very broad consideration which has to do with America and economic destiny. Is there no relation between the economic life of these States and their peculiar natural resources? We have a large population, but an area more than large enough for it, and well blessed in soil and climate. The acreage in fact is excessive if we intend to put it to work producing foodstuffs and raw materials scientifically and capitalistically like a factory; on that basis the country population which tends it is overproductive and the victim of insufficient occupation in the strictest economic sense. But nothing could be more absurd to the bird's-eye view of some old-fashioned economic realist than the phenomenon of men actually sitting down to unemployment in the country; though he might expect some unemployment in our cities, which have grown like mushrooms.

A foreigner touring for some thousands of miles through America remarked that he was struck by the contrast between the unkempt, neglected, uninhabited aspect of our countryside and the state of swarming congestion in our cities. That remark was made in the middle 20's; what would he say today, now that so many thousands of the city multitudes are jobless men walking the streets, and sometimes making "demonstrations," while the countryside is more vacant and untidy than ever? What, after all, is our land thought to be good for? Is the bulk of it only for picnics and camping parties, is it for scenery? Is it for the entertainment of the Boy Scouts? It used to be thought good for homes. Unfit for intensive money-making, because of its very excellence and abundance, it is ideal for home-making. That happens to be the very thought which inspired the fathers to found the colonies, then the Union, then one by one the successive new States. It is remarkable that an admirable and obvious thought like that should ever have slipped out of our notice, but it will be as good as ever if we will entertain it again. There is nothing the matter with it.

Perhaps we shall like it better when we set it beside the thought that not all the nations have such a brilliant opportunity

as we do. In Britain, for example, they cannot afford agrarianism, they have not the land to provide homes for all that need them; and I, and most people, are sorry. In America we may realize an economic destiny much kinder and more secure than has generally been allotted to the peoples of this earth.