When used in discussions of contemporary food issues, the term *agrarianism* most commonly refers to a cumulative mix of philosophy and ethics, political platform and critique, the social critique of industrialization, the environmental critique of industrial farming, and a prescribed normative way of life. It takes as its central premise that humans are inherently tillers of soil and that they need to produce and thus consume products of photosynthesis and their derivatives, including especially livestock, in order to survive. Given this human role and the 10,000-year history of humans as agriculturalists, agrarians believe that the healthiest way to produce food for land, soil, and culture, and the healthiest way to structure society, is as self-sufficient, internally reliant farming communities that are built around the art of agriculture. For contemporary agrarians, this art should ideally employ sustainable farming practices, and there is an implicit recognition that scale—of farm acreage, of human settlement patterns, and of consumptive lifeways—matters ecologically, politically, aesthetically, and culturally. Thus, ideal agrarian communities are smaller in scale, largely independent, and based on face-to-face interaction and sharing, and they cultivate the virtues of thrift, fidelity to place, ingenuity, independence, holism, and frugality. In its most recent manifestation, agrarianism criticizes industrial agriculture, industrial culture, and the politics of consumption and perceived corporate takeover of food supplies and politics that such industrial lifeways generate.

**Evolution of the Concept**

The term *agrarianism* itself is derived from *lex agraria*, an ancient Roman law that mandated the equal sharing and division of lands that were conquered by and thus belonged to the Roman Empire. This history hints of socialism, so that when the concept entered into mainstream political and cultural discourse in the 1700s and 1800s in the United States and Europe, there was concern about governmental interference with land ownership. A concern with land ownership is found in contemporary agrarianism, but it focuses on the perceived takeover of farmland by corporate agribusiness interests. Yet the larger point remains and has been present since the onset of agrarianism: shared ownership, and thus shared responsibility, in undertaking agriculture and in having farming act as the bedrock of civilization and society.
Hinted above is the recognition that the term has had varied meanings throughout Western history. These meanings have ranged from social and political opprobrium, especially in parts of the United States in the 1700s and 1800s, to being a synonym for the term agricultural (German agrarisch and French agrarian, derived from the Latin agrarius, which stems from ager/agr-, “field”), to being used to refer to political and economic land disputes and issues about land tenure. The latter disputes arose with the onset of European mercantile capitalism, land clearances, and industrialization. The term can also refer to disputes that arose with the agrarian economy of the southern states in the United States, as well as farming and land disputes in colonial and postcolonial countries around the world. Scholars who have attempted to trace the intellectual and historical linage of the term all comment on its contested, polysemous use. The way the term is used in contemporary food movements and discussions about food only adds to this varied history. For example, James Montmarquet (1989) argues that the term has had associations with concepts of nobility and landed gentry, or what he calls “aristocratic agrarianism”; with yeomanry middle-class family farming, as seen in the works of Hesiod, Virgil, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson; with the perceived ameliorative impacts of farm labor on physical and societal health; with rebellions fomented by the rural poor during the shift from European feudalism to market economies; and with agrarian radicalism, as seen in the Diggers and Thomas Paine. According to Montmarquet, agrarianism has also been a recurring motif in the romantic tradition, such as in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and in the linage of pastoralism, especially exemplified in the Southern Agrarians, also known as the Vanderbilt Agrarians. It has also been used in connection with a unique American agrarianism that encompasses Henry David Thoreau, Liberty Hyde Bailey, the Vanderbilt Agrarians, and especially, Wendell Berry.

**New Agrarianism**

Berry is seen as the contemporary agrarian par excellence and is often credited as single-handedly birthing what is referred to as “new agrarianism.” New agrarianism is the grafting of traditional agrarian virtues onto contemporary agricultural values, ideals, and embodied practices, where the concern is creating sustainable communities that both shape and are shaped by agricultural places. It is also the flourishing of
sophisticated agrarian treatises, poetry, literature, films, and other cultural productions, all of which criticize industrial society and its perceived lack of humility and restraint in relations with the natural world, and the perceived crushing of human creativity and spirit that occurs due to industrialized lifeways.

The University Press of Kentucky publishes the Culture of the Land series of books dealing with the new agrarianism. The contemporary agrarian theologian Norman Wirzba, the series editor, describes it on the series website as follows:

This series is devoted to the exploration and articulation of a new agrarianism that considers the health of habitats and human communities together. ... It demonstrates how agrarian insights and responsibilities can be worked out in diverse fields of learning and living: history, science, art, politics, economics, literature, philosophy, religion, urban planning, education, and public policy. Agrarianism is a comprehensive worldview that appreciates the intimate and practical connections that exist between humans and the Earth.

Overall, the normative claims of new agrarianism are based on the larger history of agrarianism, where a healthy society and culture are seen as being deeply grounded in citizen-led agriculture. New agrarianism builds on various traditional agrarian values and can be divided into the following interrelated categories: ecological agrarianism, urban agrarianism, religious agrarianism, and literary agrarianism. All four branches rest on two key insights: (1) that “in most of the primary choices we make in our everyday lives, we are implicated in the fate of agriculture” (Major, 2011, p. 1) and (2) that “farming has been from the beginning one of the most demanding intellectual exercises ever to employ the human mind” (Holthaus, 2009, p. 177). New agrarianism takes farming to be a [p. 14 ↓] noble art, but only farming of a certain kind, based on stewardship of farmlands and, thus, stewardship of farming cultures. These cultures are based on the cultivation and development of sophisticated knowledge that is related to food and culture: food rituals, food production, and food consumption. Such knowledge contributes to agrarian practices that result in cultural flourishing where such flourishing is seen as being deeply dependent on and intimately connected with sustainable farming and healthy food activities.
New agrarianism is at odds with the dominant view of agriculture and farming that has developed in the United States and parts of Europe over the past 100 years. This dominant view has been aided by the mechanization and corporatization of industrialized agriculture and by successes in yields resulting from technologies of the Green Revolution. It is a view in which large sections of American, Canadian, and European cultures see farming as backward, quaintly rural, anachronistic, without much value intellectually, and peripheral to the healthy functioning of modern democracy. Such views, broadly held, are seemingly reinforced by demographics in the United States, where less than 1% of the population is engaged in agriculture and agriculture-related activities.

Ecological Agrarianism

The environmental studies scholar Kim Smith argues that Berry has contributed the most to bridging the gap between democratic and traditional agrarianism, on the one hand, and the new agrarianism of today, on the other. Without Berry and his corpus of work—nonfiction, fiction, essays, and poems—there might not be a contemporary agrarianism, nor would the sustainable food movement be nearly as vibrant. Berry is a literary scholar, essayist, and accomplished farmer. He uses traditional husbandry and sustainable agriculture practices to farm his family’s land in rural Kentucky. This intimate connection to his local land deeply influences his written work and his understanding of agrarianism, as does his own study of Western literature, from the Bible to 19th- and 20th-century agrarians such as Liberty Hyde Bailey and Sir Albert Howard. His ability to synthesize and comprehend the past 50 years of the ecological sciences further influences his understanding of agrarianism. Berry thus combines sensibilities that reflect his membership in a farming culture, his training and study of Western literature, and his understanding of ecology into a unique, modern-day ecological agrarianism. It is on Berry’s ecological agrarianism that the other forms of new agrarianism are grafted.

Motifs that consistently emerge in Berry’s corpus include critiques of the industrial and globalized economy, industrial agriculture, and mechanistic and reductionist science; a lament over the passing of rural farming communities and the knowledge they held; the pivotal role farming plays in maintaining a functioning democracy; and the need
for humans to practice restraint and thrift in their interactions with the natural world. As Smith (2003) explains,

> For much of American history agrarians had little interest in environmental issues, and environmentalists for their part have had little good to say about farming. Berry’s importance to the evolution of these traditions lies precisely in his ability to resolve their fundamental ideological differences. (p. 7)

For Berry, and thus for ecological agrarians, the land is the locus of ultimate value, so that culture and the production of food are derivatives. Cultural flourishing depends on land, so the land must be kept healthy for culture to be healthy. Healthy land results from sustainable stewardship and farming, occurring in such a way that wilderness areas and biodiversity are maintained and freshwater is not depleted. Last for Berry comes the recognition that there is no such thing as a postagrarian economy. Rather, a healthy human economy is one that resides within the natural limits and rhythms of the land on which it is based. This is seen in a common motif found in new agrarian writing: “nature as measure.” Ecological agrarianism therefore fuses together environmental concerns that have emerged since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, insights from ecological economics, and the agrarian tradition of valuing farming knowledge and the farming economy.

While Berry is seen as the key figure in new agrarianism, other ecological agrarians have had a huge influence in the development of ecological agrarian themes that have emerged since the 1970s. Second in influence is Berry’s longtime friend and collaborator, Wes Jackson. Jackson is a plant geneticist who founded the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. He and his research team are endeavoring to breed perennial polycultures—diverse plantings of grain, seed, and grass crops, such as mixed fruit and nut orchards and perennial grains—that they hope will become a sustainable foundation for America’s breadbasket. Their vision is that good farming practices and animal husbandry will make it possible to repopulate and reform agrarian communities throughout the Midwest. A motivating concern of the Land Institute is the recognition that the global community has reached the peak of oil production. According to the Land Institute, peak oil, coupled with dwindling natural gas stocks used to provide cheap fertilizer, will make it necessary for Americans to migrate away from the coasts and
return to food production. Like Berry, Jackson’s agrarian vision is also informed by the ecological sciences, and he too is deeply critical of reductionist, mechanistic science and industrial agriculture.

Other leading ecological agrarian voices include the philosopher Paul Thompson of Michigan State University; the organic farmer and philosopher Fred Kirschenmann, who is a Distinguished Fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Ames, Iowa; and the physicist and food activist Vandana Shiva, who runs Navdanya, a farm and teaching center in rural India. There exist a variety of ecological agrarian farming practices, which have as their goal the production of healthy, nutritious food that is good for the land, good for human and animal bodies, and good for the economy. These practices include, but are not limited to, growing methods such as biodynamic agriculture, permaculture, certified organic agriculture, natural systems farming, and natural farming. They also include animal husbandry, the use of animals for traction, and selective breeding of animals for specific landscapes. There is also a strong push to preserve species of domesticated farm animals and to use and preserve heirloom seeds, as ecological agrarians are concerned with the loss of genetic diversity of traditional food sources. Ecological agrarians may also participate in agroforestry and develop sustainable timber products on their lands. There has also been a rebirth of interest among ecological agrarians about foraging wild edibles for food, canning, and utilizing all animal parts in food production rather than just a few choice cuts. Last, there is a slow but steady interest among those younger than 40 years in learning ecological agrarian practices, with many young agrarians willingly walking away from urban jobs to participate in agrarian lifeways. Those younger than 30 years also learn by participating in internship programs and the programs offered through WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

Urban Agrarianism

While agrarianism tends to romanticize and hold as its ideal self-sustaining rural farm communities of thrift and conviviality, the reality is that most people in industrialized countries live in suburban or urban areas. Given environmental and public health trends, how these people can access nutritious, sustainably grown food is an emerging issue. New agrarians recognize that most citizens will not leave urban areas to begin
farming. Instead, what is occurring is the emergence of urban agrarianism, which is the attempt to embody agrarian virtues and to follow ecological agrarian philosophies while living in population dense regions. A variety of urban agrarian practices have been developed in the past 20 years, including vertical farming and rooftop gardening, exchanging and saving heirloom seeds, canning, and fermenting. Urban agrarian practices also include vermiculture and backyard composting. Many urban agrarians are now participating in community supported agriculture programs, where members can buy shares of produce, bread, meat, and/or seafood. More and more urban residents are also buying many of their seasonal food items from farmers’ markets. Urban residents and food retailers are equally becoming more familiar with concepts such as farm-to-table and food miles. There are also a growing number of edible school gardens and place-based curricula that emphasize relationships between food, land, and the community. Such efforts are intended to cultivate new agrarian sensibilities in urban residents, especially youth who attend public and private schools. Many communities are also seeking to begin or expand already existing community gardens, which are also learning centers where food and farm workshops occur. Last, there is a growth in agritourism, with urban residents vacationing and sometimes working at sustainable farms located in rural areas.

Religious Agrarianism

Berry’s corpus covers themes about ecological sustainability and integrity, philosophy of science, literary agrarianism, political critique, and religion. As a lifelong Baptist, Berry willingly brings his Christian views about creation, food, and human nature into his writings. He does not make normative claims about what religion someone should follow, but he does freely discuss how, as social creatures shaped by culture, we are influenced by religious story, myth, and custom. Other new agrarians have taken this opening and pushed it wider, building on Berry’s own nascent religious agrarianism. Theologians such as Norman Wirzba and Ellen Davis are at the forefront of developing an agrarian hermeneutics of the Bible, while issues of food justice, sustainable agriculture, and dietary health are increasingly coming to be taught at seminaries and considered in communities of faith, from the institutional to the individual level. More faith communities, from multiple religious traditions, are beginning to
develop gardens at their meeting houses, are volunteering at food banks and shelters, are donating produce to shelters, are joining community supported agriculture programs for religious reasons, and are active in the political realm in terms of advocating for sustainable agriculture. Religious agrarians are motivated to engage in these new agrarian practices in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and they do so because of their respective religious teachings, ethics, and commandments as these relate to food and also ecological issues.

**Literary Agrarianism**

New agrarian, and especially ecological agrarian, motifs have recently proliferated in popular culture venues. Best-selling books, award-winning documentaries, art exhibits, websites, culinary shows, and blogs with new agrarian themes and content have all been produced in the past 10 years. Some of the best known authors include Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, and Wendell Berry. Many new agrarian-themed films have attracted wide audiences. These include *Dirt! The Movie, Food Inc, Super Size Me, Fresh, and The Future of Food*. Magazines related to new agrarianism, new agrarian ecocriticism and ecoliterature, and the development of a homesteading genre have also influenced popular and academic realms of literary culture and the popular press. Such trends are likely to continue to grow in popularity and influence, in large part because the new agrarian criticisms of industrial agriculture and the industrial economy, coupled with mounting evidence about the ill-effects industrial agriculture has on planetary, soil, animal, and human health, have gained traction in the popular imagination.

**Limitations of Agrarianism**

No discussion of agrarianism is complete without a mention of some of its dangers and shortcomings. For new agrarianism to continue to flourish, these should be addressed and worked through, and many new agrarians recognize the following limitations and take them seriously.

One critique of agrarianism focuses on elements of nativism and provincialism; indeed, some of the most prominent agrarian voices exhibit Eurocentric (and Caucasian/male)
tendencies, and there has been inadequate attention to the real and/or perceived [p. 17 ↓ ] lack of cultural diversity and more diverse options within the new agrarian milieu. Some new agrarian thinkers themselves have acknowledged that the movement needs to recognize the relevance of race and gender in articulating the agrarian vision. Other shortcomings lie in the movement’s failure to adequately address socioeconomic inequalities and its romanticization of agriculture and agrarian communities. As a result, agrarians may find it difficult to balance agrarian ideals and the realities of living in industrial society—an issue that can be especially challenging for young agrarians with minimal income, high student debt, or both. For these youth, and for lower income people generally, agrarianism may be considered a fad relevant only to the upper and upper middle classes. New agrarianism must deal with race/gender/economic disparities and navigate the balance between agrarian ideals and the realities of living in industrial society. There is also a need for more concrete programs to promote the learning of agrarian skills.

Given these concerns, future research on agrarianisms must include research on indigenous agrarianism, feminist/womanist agrarianism, and agrarianism from the perspectives of people of color and the global South.

See also Agritourism; Community Gardens; Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), Consumers’ Perspective; Family Farms and Rural Depopulation; Food Justice; Food Sovereignty; Migrant Labor; Multifunctionality in Agriculture; Sustainable Agrifood Systems

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Further Readings


