

Agrarianism and the Counterrevolution: The Ideology of Illusion and Modernity

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In Anton Chekhov's nearly unread masterpiece, *The Black Monk*, the anti-hero, Kovrin, is told by an apparition that he is a genius, that, through his knowledge of science and philosophy, he is bringing humanity to its proper purpose thousands of years earlier than evolution, unaided, would have done. Chekhov himself was a prophet of the "scientific" modern age and a strong student of Nietzsche. However, this short novel brings the problems of modernity and the worship of science into sharp relief.

Though it is unclear in the novel, what Kovrin is being told is that, through science, the coming age of plenty is soon to be at hand. In fact, the promises made to Kovrin by the apparition that is without question a demon, are shockingly similar to the self-definition of the anti-Christ in Vladimir Solovyev's famous *A Brief Tale of Antichrist*; that is, "God" has chosen people on this earth to move evolution forward, to create an order based on knowledge, held by an oligarchy of science,¹ which will solve the problems of this temporal life.

In *The Black Monk*, Kovrin is convinced by the demonic apparition that he is a scientific genius, and that the world—the herd—does not understand him or people like him. His obvious mental illness, admitted throughout, is merely the product of not being part of the herd, and is the mere outer coating of a life of greatness and "service to humanity," or so he's told.

Kovrin marries a young, frail and pious girl named Tania. Tania is representative of old Russia, agrarian and Orthodox (in Russian literature, Russia is usually represented in a simple girl of some kind, usually one who ends up rejected). She marries our anti-hero because she is convinced he is destined for greatness, and, though it is left unsaid, he makes up for what is lacking in her rather meaningless life.

Kovrin, possessed by the apparition, proceeds to torture her to divorce, mocking her and her father. Believing that Tania is her inferior, he drives her to despair, and eventually, he takes up with an older woman. Developing a hemorrhage in the throat, Kovrin dies in a pool of blood, and is told by his apparition that this death is necessary because even his body cannot stand being controlled by a spirit of such genius.

It is a shame that Chekhov remains largely unread by all but specialists, and few have even heard of *The Black Monk*. What is significant here, of course, is that this book, in many respects, sums up the criticisms of modernity made by agrarians and agrarianism. For Chekhov's alleged lack of philosophical acumen, stories such as *Ward #6* and *The Black Monk* strongly argue for an anti-modernist view of the world. *The Black Monk* is an excellent illustration of man demanding the elimination of all boundaries for the sake of ego. Only a constantly renewed world of illusion can maintain it.

Agribusiness, that is, the systematic mechanization of agriculture into massive megafarms usually specializing in one or two crops and organized for export and mass production, has created for itself the image that it is legitimate because thought such mechanization the likes of

1 It should be clear that a "scientific establishment" is not "science" as such.

ConAgra and ADM will soon feed the world, and, though genetic engineering and other applications of technology, agribusiness will be able to create cheap food for the entire planet. Agrarianism takes exception to this, and the essays found in works such as *The Essential Agrarian Reader* are most commonly grouped around the various aspects of this critique.

There are two models of social organization governing the agrarian life. The first is the world of agribusiness, or at least, the world typified by agribusiness. Here, massive, vertically integrated and scientifically sanctioned organizations of agricultural industry seek increasing markets at home and abroad. The land is used to its maximum, and, as the soils deplete, increasing amounts of chemicals are used to maintain its fecundity. With this, of course, comes a host of what economists esoterically call externalizations: a monumental infrastructure of roads, transport, warehouses, chain stores, and a host of other artifacts that create the substructure for international trade and transport.

The second model is one roughly called agrarian: a rustic landscape made up of small farms largely created and maintained for the local market, requiring little investment in national and international infrastructure. These smaller farms are owned by families or local cooperatives, and are structured according to the boundaries of the local climate, landscape and, of course, the needs of the local community.

The former model justifies itself according to the common theory of utilitarianism: such industries can create more food at a cheaper price, free of parasites and diseases. In this regard, the justification here is not essentially distinct from gigantism in other areas. Colossal food producing conglomerates are capable, with sufficient technology, to end hunger and made certain the consumer has a steady supply of inexpensive food, comprising an array of choices for every taste. The time of the family farm is over, so it was claimed, and the drudgery of farm life will give way to a much more rewarding form of service labor in the sanitized suburbs.

Agrarianism counters by challenging, among other things, the validity of the utilitarian argument. Agrarians point to the failures of monocultures and the endless supply of diseases that accompany such unnatural strategies. Various works over the years have strongly disputed the claim that large, corporately owned farms can produce food and other products cheaper and more plentifully than smaller units. The first class essay, "All Flesh is Grass: A Hopeful Look at the Future of Agrarianism," by Gene Logsdon,² spends a great deal of time explaining the mechanics of farming with a minimum of work, relying on herds of cattle to maintain the integrity of the land rather than the specific acts of cultivation. Even among farmers, the strategies of Logsdon, proven on his own farm as well as such well known figures as Bob Evans, are little known. The fact is, as explained in such books as *Front Porch Farmer*, that the use of cattle herds can perform many of the tasks normally taken collectively as "cultivation." Manuring, weed control and many other aspects of the "drudgery" of farming can easily be taken care of by cattle herds. The fact is that nature herself can take care of many tasks unthinkingly taken up by men.

Agrarians take issue with the nature of integration, where several companies control the whole structure of production and distribution, from seed to dinner table. Far beyond the natural revulsion brought about by the realization that a handful of investors control much of the world's food supply, and the natural reaction against the notion that the world's chicken market is brought into existence by merely three breeding stocks, the major problem with the industrialist argument concerning food production is that the structure itself is inefficient, and its integrated world is not from a specific plan of international trade, but rather has been the result of a slow

2 Found in the Wirzba compendium, 154-170

destruction of the agrarian life.³

The destruction of the small farm and the societies they created over centuries is itself testament to agricultural capitalism's inefficiency and irrationality. There is no good economic reason to favor centralized farming over the older, decentralized, yeoman variety. Unlike other businesses, agriculture often does not fit the “economies of scale” model given the inability of the soil to retain its fecundity when worked to its limit.

One can question the utility and efficiency of an international system where megafarms are worked by minimum wage labor, and costs of farm life, such as pollution and liability are passed off to local farmers whose existence then becomes attached to the megacorporation. The produce is maintained by large stocks of chemicals, and is transported by a fleet of trucks then demanding safe roads and bridges, causing traffic problems and consuming more fuel. The maintenance of vast warehouses and the entire infrastructure of national and international trade, amounting to billions of dollars a week.

One should also include such problems as advertising, political lobbying and the maintenance of a massive scientific establishment dedicated to getting more and more out of the land in increasingly unnatural and alchemical methods. All of this is less than optimal and, as a system, irrational. As always, as profits fall, even for a short period, the resulting economies of scale (which are not temporary) lead to the concentration of wealth and power in the conglomerate. Such concentrations of power need not respond to markets, but create them instead.

Nicholas Eliopoulos, mathematician and architect, has this to say about modern processed foods:

All of our vegetables and fruits today are grown with poisons, though poisonous fertilizers, under poisonous sprays and in poisoned atmospheres. The multitude of poisons become a part of the crop. Next, the warehouses spray other poisons on them, keep them in a chamber with a poisonous chemical atmosphere in lieu of the more expensive cooling, or coat them with a dangerous preservative wax. All our crops, as well as the food and water of our livestock found in lakes, rivers and wells which permit through the moisture of the ground, are subjected to industrial wastes, organic, inorganic and radioactive.⁴

Contrast this to the local farm, connected to the local market and other local farmers, utilizing a minimum of transport and natural methods of pest control. It is very difficult to see the much vaunted “efficiency” in the megafarm mentality.⁵ It is also difficult to account for the growth of the human population millennia before the existence of modern gigantism. The wisdom of the peasant is lost. The peasant connection to the land was itself a form of education that proves far superior to the alienated scientist dealing with food production of which he has no part. Knowledge of the soil, local conditions and animals created the old and forgotten image of the ruralist as almost a magician.

This is only the beginning however. Industrialism and urbanism are themselves saturated

3 See Sharzer (2012) for a dissenting view.

4 Thine Health, Logos/Slovo Press, 1981, 172; this large work is very hard to find, but Mr. Eliopoulos can be contacted at POB 65 Oak Park, IL 60303

5 Cf the well known work by Schumacher (2010) for an analysis of this from both a moral and economic point of view.

with moral and philosophical content. Retail can boast of producing shelves and shelves of items, thousands of choices, all at a relatively low price. One can shop in pleasant surroundings and can be helped in a minute by any staff member. One can take care of a week's worth of shopping in one store, at one time. Things that decades ago were luxuries for the rich are now easily obtainable by any middling citizen of America. Apparently, capitalism has won, and has provided even the poorest in America with the possibility of a lifetime of labor-saving devices, entertainment and cheap food. Immanuel Kant would call this a "phenomenon." The problem is that behind a phenomenon is a noumenon, that is, the basis from which the sense impressions⁶ are generated. Sense impressions do not subsist by themselves, generated out of nowhere, but derive from something more real than the sense impression itself. The purpose of philosophical inquiry is to discover, not merely this coherence of sense impressions, but also its origin.

Starting from there, the shadows on the Walmart cave force the sensitive to turn to the Sun. One can now turn around to see who is casting the shadows. As the colorful items on the shelf begin to melt away in the light of truly critical inquiry, as the generic muzak fades, one sees the essence of modern capitalism. One sees the army of security personnel watching thousands of TV screens which monitor and document every move of every shopper. One sees the "walkers," or spies hired by management to follow workers, punishing any shirkers. One sees corporate boardroom meetings where the image of Walmart is created. One sees the offices of an ad agency, where the image of corporate America is created and broadcast to the world as if it just spontaneously developed. One sees thousands of minimum wage workers toiling at the megafarms who supply Walmart with its cheap food. One sees well dressed lobbyists visiting the offices of Senators, Congressmen and staff members, arguing the merits of maintaining the privileges of megafarms and corporate America in general. One sees Walmart managers, who work on average 75 hours a week, monitored minute by minute by the array of cameras whose images are beamed throughout the corporate infrastructure of Sam's empire.⁷

In other words, what is being described is that the glittering display of cheap items is part of the realm of unreality. It is an alchemical illusion, where the images of the television, the manipulations of advertising and PR agencies, and even the expectations of post-modern shoppers conspire to transmit a hologram, that of a peaceful, prosperous America. This America is eternal, able to have cheap food and endlessly development electronic devices promising one convenience or another, without ever really having to pay the bills in terms of resource depletion, suppression of wages and unionization. In addition, rural life is largely invisible to the suburban shopper. Therefore, such benighted persons are shielded from the demolition of the family farm and local retail stores, as well as the wars necessary to maintain a bargain-priced supply of oil (among other things) that keep the production machine reverberant.

It is in this transmission of specifically crafted images that finally reaches the telos of ancient gnosis or the alchemical processing of entire populations to reflect the point of view of the ruling classes.⁸ In the ancient world of the Near East, the banks, or the centers of the economy, were the temples, overseen by a god, or a fetishization of some social or natural force. The public veneration of this totem was a crude cover for the centralized control of the monied powers.⁹ The central reason why the Greek oligarchy put Socrates to death was that by arguing

6 "Sense impressions" do not imply reality. All one knows is that they exist in consciousness. Their origin is, at first blush, unknowable.

7 Cf. Fishman (2006) for a detailed study of this phenomenon.

8 Again, I think Michael Hoffman for educating me on these essential questions.

9 Cf. Goodson's Inside the Reserve Bank: The Origins and Secrets of Central Banking Exposed (Norfolk and

that the fetishized gods were a hoax, he was causing a run on the banks.¹⁰ The power of finance, from Nimrod to Hyde Park, has been cloaked in mystification, and this mystification, in its esoteric form, is the cover for oligarchical rule. This is the rule of matter over spirit, and is justified by the doctrine that matter is the cause of spirit and the cause of life, the very ontological basis of magick.¹¹

The “counterrevolution” as philosophy is to lay out a theoretical and practical ground for the re-emergence of the family farm, for a flourishing provincialism expressed in a true stewardship for the land and local resources, and, importantly, a reorienting of priorities from the glittering hallucination of the Walmart shelf to the very health and well being of the land and of the local community.

Agrarianism is not just about the protection of the land and the family farm. It would be a worthy endeavor if it were just that, but it is more. Agrarianism is a mindset. It is a mindset that prefers the quiet beauty of a sunset through the mountains over the Walmart shelf. It is a mindset that prefers the harvest festival to the television. It is a mindset that prefers true community, that is, a foundation of social life based on what one has in common, a close identity of interests and self-definitions, to the atomization of post-modern consumerism. It is a mindset that prefers reality to the image.

These are not just romantic slogans. Of course, there is nothing wrong with romance, for it is these quite natural connections to the land, to natural beauty, to a local landscape which conjures up feelings of wonder, enjoyment and belonging. Romance is the engine which drives agrarianism—not some feminine desire for the symbolic over the actual—but rather, a true sense of connection, the sense described by Tolstoy in his famous *The Cossacks*, a sense of love and integration rather than alienation.

This estrangement comes from living in a world of images generated by elite rulers in for purposes even economists have yet to fathom. In agrarianism, the haughtiness of Chekhov’s anti-hero is replaced by the humility of the husbandman who is intimately knowledgeable of his own limits, the limits of creation, and the limits of the locality. The artificially detached consumer of the post-modern McEmpire is told that he lives in a world without limits, but the mental representations that manifest that message are the creation of a monumental infrastructure of manipulation, corporate covetousness and ideological brainwashing; none of it is actually real.

AntiChrist will appear in much the same manner as Cargill—he will tell a gullible world that he can feed all men (since men only need physical things); that he will solve all ideological problems, and finally end history, war and evil if and only if they will bow down to him. The religions of the world will be all too quick to bow, since their ties to the world of appearance and illusion leave them little choice. The isolated ascetics will refuse, and, at best, will be called fanatical obscurantists for so doing. One thing they will not have is an organization that can be debased. Since institutions exist only insofar as they partake of the contemporary order, the larger, moneyed churches and faiths will serve the world ruler with enthusiasm. Separation into the rural world not only keeps such people away from the generation of illusion, but also

Good, 2013)

10 This also comes from the world of Eliopoulos, transmitted to me over several conversations.

11 The real issue here is nominalism, or the belief that a) all that exists is singular and particular; b) that no intrinsic connections exist among objects, and c) that objects have no intrinsic meaning or purpose. This, especially in the work of Norman Wirzba (cf *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 83), is the essence of modernity and the destruction of any meaningful connection to the earth.

insulates them from the worst of modern vulgarity.

Chekhov's "Black Monk" is a warning about rupturing natural boundaries. This is founded on the belief that nothing has any inherent function except what the modern scientific or financial establishment gives it. Whether it be a man, an institution or an ideology, as soon as it believes its own limits to be merely conventional, it expands and dominates until it is overstretched and exhausted. In the process, it destroys much of value in its haste to prove itself worthy of its self-appointed messiah status, and usually, psychopathy is the outcome. The world of illusion is this very insanity, and goes to the heart of modernism and its nominalism.

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