

# Introduction

My curiosity about my grandparents has taken me far beyond the Fontenelle Basin in Wyoming and the coal-mining town where my grandfather went to work in 1917. Their story provided only the initial impulse of this book, which explores more broadly the interconnection of economy, culture, and land in the United States. My concentration is on the dominant societal impulses about land, the agrarian and the wilderness ethos, as well as the dominant economic organization of our time, that of the market economy. Lacking is any substantive exploration of the story of Native Americans or any particular ethnic group. These histories are not ignored out of arrogance or ignorance nor do I believe they are unimportant. They simply were not the emphasis of my inquiry.

I hope this environmental history will help us ponder more fully the necessary ingredients for creating a sustainable future. At a time when environmental problems overwhelm us and we have the collective sense that we teeter at the tipping point in our relationship to the natural world, a more detailed understanding of our institutional relationship to land and by extension environment is warranted. It provides important insight into what is possible, what is essential, and what is misguided as we strive for change that will take us down a different path. It is essential from the outset to clarify some of the idiosyncratic vocabulary used in this book. *Agrarian* is an adjective that takes on different meanings depending on what it modifies. When used as the “agrarian ideal” it describes Thomas Jefferson’s idealistic vision of small independent farmers. Similarly, agrarian man denotes such a farmer. The agrarian ideal finds a corollary in petty commodity capitalism, a market economy made up of many small independent entrepreneurs competing for business. Agrarian man is analogous to the petty commodity producer. Both the agrarian ideal and petty commodity production describe mostly the early years of the market economy in the United States before the concentration and centralization of capital and the development of the

modern corporation took hold, a process that accelerated rapidly over the nineteenth century and continues along this path to the present.

The agrarian ethos is a core concept in this book. In part, it is rooted in Karl Polanyi's idea that society responds with a "countermovement" to the revolutionary change brought about by the market economy to reduce man and nature to factors of production.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the agrarian ethos denotes a cultural impulse to interpret and modify the market economy in a way that reasserts control over land, for societal purposes. And what are those other purposes? Polanyi tells us, in the case of land: "It invests man's life with stability; it is the site of his habitation, it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons."<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless the agrarian ethos is not simply a countermovement to the raw forces of the market economy. Once established, it takes on a life of its own and becomes embedded in the social fabric as a habit of thought, a cultural attitude. This is most apparent in Jefferson's agrarian ideal and the agrarian expectations for economic development that grew out of it. By envisioning a specialized market economy of small farmers who would live independently and harmoniously on the land, it reflected a desire to avoid the most distasteful outcomes of the market economy in the context of the Industrial Revolution. For much of our economic development, agrarian expectations as a way to channel the raw forces of the market economy, continued to resonate in our social fabric. Eventually, a point is reached where this countermovement, now an embedded habit of thought, reflected in land policy, ceases to be a sufficient response to the material conditions as the market economy matures and evolves over time.

Thus, the agrarian ethos evolves and changes as the market economy matures and becomes more marked in its cumulative effects. The agrarian ethos would become less narrowly agrarian over time. The accretion of land policies and the agencies that govern and oversee them map this history. For example, the creation of public land can be seen as the extension of the agrarian ethos, now no longer narrowly agrarian. As well, the twenty-first century variants of this societal impulse and cultural attitude are now expressed in the promise of green technology and the vision of more community-centered localized economies in the future. Thus, over time the agrarian ethos has become a more broadly construed ethos of ecologically balanced domestication and economic development. Although remarkably resilient, the agrarian ethos is not infinitely so, especially as the cumulative dynamic of the market economy makes the problem of a balanced and sustainable relationship with land increasingly challenging.

The wilderness ethos also denotes a cultural response that developed under the force of a dramatically expanding market economy. It is distinctively different from the agrarian ethos because rather than promulgating domestication it promotes the conservation of undomesticated wild lands. It is the expression of human sensibility that tells us that domestication and manipulation are not the only way that humans connect to land and environment. It represents a decidedly different response to market forces that work in the direction of universal domestication over time. Both the agrarian ethos and the wilderness ethos must be understood as dominant cultural responses to unmitigated market forces as they impinge on land.

The term *institution* is used liberally throughout the book. This word refers to habits of thought, societal responses, and attitudes, as well as the laws and more formal frameworks established in the social fabric that govern economic, social, and political activity. Some institutions are clearly more important than others and in this book the market economy represents a powerful institution as do both the agrarian and wilderness ethos. Material conditions also are of import in this analysis and may originate from a number of sources. They may come from the conditions laid down by the evolving and maturing market economy or result from inherent differences, potentialities, and limitations of the land itself.

It is important here to provide an explanation of evolutionary or institutional economics, the foundational methodology used here. The legacy of institutional economics is well established within the discipline of economics but has been largely relegated to an arena outside mainstream economics. This is unfortunate because evolutionary economics targets, like no other economic framework, the intermingling of culture, economic, and material conditions as well as the processes of change over time. Although analytical, it is not simplistically mechanistic and it acknowledges dialectical as well as more direct causalities. By its nature it is interdisciplinary. Thorstein Veblen would probably be considered the father of institutional economics and his ideas as well as those of Karl Polanyi and John R. Commons are used throughout the book.

This approach is especially fruitful in understanding the complex and often enigmatic interplay of cultural attitudes, societal impulses, and economic and material forces surrounding land. Evolutionary economics appreciates the changing nature of the economy over time and the fact that this evolving economy and the material conditions that surround it may from time to time be at odds with our habits of thought and other institutional fixtures laid down in previous times. Institutions co-evolve with one another over

time. A point may be reached in this co-evolutionary process where institutional contradictions are so profound that fundamental change is needed to reconcile them. Along the way, much confusion about the nature of things might prevail. Using this methodology, the interplay of the dynamic market economy and dominant cultural impulses about land, the agrarian and wilderness ethos, are untangled. The methodology of institutional economics also recognizes that much of institutional change over time is often a matter of institutional drift. Things go as they will go.

The organization of this book is mostly chronological in that it maps out a process of economic and institutional evolution with regard to land in the United States from the late eighteenth century through the present. The market economy is a powerful institutional arrangement with a life of its own but our experience with this dominant institutional arrangement was uniquely informed by the presence of a huge continent of mostly undeveloped and unsettled land.

The agrarian vision of economic development in the United States came of age in the latter eighteenth century and offered a unique way of distinguishing the United States from England. The specter of the wretched existence of workers toiling in factories in England during the Industrial Revolution was something Jefferson thought could be avoided. He set out to create a homegrown variety of market capitalism with a distinctive agrarian bent. In a sense, this was our unique way of responding to the raw forces of the market economy that had unfolded in England. Land institutions and our cultural impulses with regard to land were perhaps naively formulated, beginning in the late eighteenth century, with this purpose in mind. Thus, we had a particular, land-based countermovement to the market economy, established in the late eighteenth century, which thereafter took on a life of its own over time. This initial response was historically specific and depended on a preindustrial stage of development in the United States juxtaposed with a more industrially advanced economy in England. Thus, the agrarian ethos, seen as the agrarian ideal, tapped into the pulse of an historical moment that gave it meaning and force.

Over time as the productive potential of the economy increased, and land as property matured and moved beyond simple petty commodity production, it became progressively clearer that Jefferson's idealized agricultural society would not materialize. Speculation and rent-seeking behavior became part of the economic landscape, a predictable and immutable force in agriculture and land ownership. The speculator and the noble farmer were governed by the same economic master and both were intent on participating in this

process.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless for a long period of time something vaguely resembling Jefferson's agrarian man was discernable and played an essential role in this process of economic development. Successful farming done by the hard work of the individual farmer added momentum to capital formation while simultaneously reinforcing agrarian man and an agricultural orientation as the counterbalance to raw economic forces. Thus, the agrarian ethos, with its early agricultural emphasis would be long lived in our history, although over time the agricultural emphasis would become progressively diminished as the forces and dynamic of the market economy impinged on society and land and demanded more dramatic and historically appropriate responses

Early land policy, including the Homestead Act, provided quintessential examples of the interplay of the evolving market economy and the agrarian ethos, simultaneously a countermovement and an established habit of thought. For example, the ostensible purpose of the Homestead Act was to settle farmers on 160-acre farms and create a society of small farmers but because the land itself, once disseminated, could be bought and sold according to the dictates of a market system, the Homestead Act simultaneously accommodated the growing economic impulse to use land as a commodity, an impulse that became more marked over time. Under the Homestead Act, the dynamic of economic change and development and the arrangements of land ownership accommodated settlement, self-sufficiency, and speculation simultaneously to give a muddled institutional picture. The vision of agrarian society, that is to say the form the agrarian ethos had taken during the nineteenth century, was extended but not without dissonance that became more pronounced over time.

Land policies on arid land retained the established agrarian rhetoric and embodied the long-established impulse against the raw forces of the market but arid land also more fully exposed and encouraged some of the tendencies in the market economy that the agrarian response was supposed to guard against. The possibility for successful agricultural enterprises on arid land existed but at the same time the risk to the individual increased. Economically viable arid land holdings needed to be larger, necessitating the mixing and matching and development of different avenues of land acquisition that simultaneously reinforced the role of land as commodity and encouraged speculation. Everyone was engaged in speculation of sorts and agrarian man, like my grandfather, was more intentional in viewing agrarian life as a temporary step to some other economic alternative. The line between a viable agricultural land holding and an inclination to speculate was harder to decipher. Yet even on arid land, the agrarian countermovement and habit

of thought found concrete expression. Agrarian man was remolded on arid land to become the western rancher and the agrarian ethos was extended even here although as a response to the raw forces of market capitalism it was clearly becoming less tenable.

Eventually, narrowly defined agrarian land laws and an agrarian response to the forces at hand were insufficient. Economic opportunity on land expanded beyond simple agriculture to include timber and mineral extraction. New institutional arrangements were necessary, to wit, the creation of public land. On its face, the creation of public land seemed to share little with the agrarian predispositions of the past, but on closer examination it is clear that public land and its management tapped into the agrarian ethos broadly construed: The sense that a place of harmony between humans and land (nature) could be forged despite the raw market forces at hand. Public land became the elixir and response to the spiritual and biophysical indifference market forces seemed to exhibit with regard to land. It was the depository of the conflicts and complexities of economic development on land but it was also the way the agrarian ethos metamorphosed into an ethos of balanced domestication as the market economy matured. Thus, public land was the extension of the same societal impulse as the agrarian ideal and agrarian man had been in a previous era.

At best, the institution of public land opened a tiny window, before World War II, where it appeared that we had successfully navigated the complexities of land use under the market economy. Nonetheless, contradictions and cracks in the goals of public land management appeared in the post-World War II period and continue to the present. As the world fills up and preservation, conservation, and recreational use all vie for a claim on public land in addition to more traditional economic uses, the impossibility of the multiple-use mandate becomes more evident. Thus, the ability of the agrarian ethos to stretch around the economic arrangements of our time, as seen in the multiple land-use mandate, is running up against material conditions that may call for a more fundamental change in our institutional fabric.

The wilderness ethos is distinctly different than the agrarian ethos but it arose out of the same complex stew; that is, the simultaneous presence of unsettled land and the economic unfolding of the market economy during the nineteenth century. It too exemplifies the unique interconnection of economy, culture, and land in the United States. The co-evolution and interplay of the wilderness ethos with the market economy became manifest in our policies to preserve wilderness that took the form of policies setting aside wilderness areas. But unlike the agrarian ethos, the wilderness ethos is not as resilient in

the face of the postindustrial market economy and its imperative to domesticate *ad infinitum*. It was never an ethos of domestication like the agrarian ethos, rather the opposite. It reflected an impulse to limit the hand of man and as such does not have the adaptability of the agrarian ethos. Economic growth, the hallmark of the market economy and the wilderness ethos, cannot participate in same institutional dance for long. The wilderness ethos cannot expand into the promise of green technology and green growth like the agrarian ethos. Yet it honors a sensibility somehow more discerning of the profound and problematic changes between humankind and the natural world that presently unfold.