

# The Claims of Community

by J.O. Tate

**Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays**

by Wendell Berry

New York: Pantheon Books;  
179 pp., \$20.00



This slim book packs quite a punch. Its author requires that, in order to read him, we cast off the distorted language and prepackaged thought we absorb from the hum of the media. Indeed, he wants us to awaken from the slumber which that drone is designed to deepen.

You might say that Mr. Berry is interested in words. "Environment," for instance, he sees as an inadequate usage and as a denial of "Creation" and "world." By the time he gets started on "globalization," "free trade," and the "New World Order," he is both illuminating and funny. What Berry says about the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade I have seen nowhere else and is only another reminder that most American citizens don't know what their government does, or care. And when Wendell Berry mentions "the community," he does not refer to the cronies of the Reverend Al Sharpton, or to "the gay and lesbian community," or to any other such real or imagined self-selected assembly of the like-minded. No, he means "community"—you know, the people who live nearby and have an interest and a say; neighbors and cousins, those with whom you sense "an understood mutuality of interest" (excluding the police, the BATF, the IRS).

Mr. Berry's thoughts are bracing and wholesome. His discourse puts me in mind of George Orwell in its insistence on truth and integrity of expression and, in its adherence to simplicity and independence, of Henry David Thoreau. Berry's "Sales Resistance" rejects the cheery idiocy of commercialized niceness and mass merchandizing by virtue of which the human being becomes a robotic consumer as well as a productive automaton. But don't assume Berry purveys sermons—quite the contrary. He can and does express himself with

Swiftian indignation, economy, and dark humor. The few simple "truths" we have to master to understand the new commercial education, for example, can be highly amusing when they are not terrifying:

The main thing is, don't let education get in the way of being nice to children. Children are our Future. Spend plenty of money on them but don't stay home with them and get in their way. Don't give them work to do; they are smart and can think up things to do on their own. Don't teach them any of that awful, stultifying, repressive, old-fashioned morality. Provide plenty of TV, microwave dinners, day care, computers, computer games, cars. For all this, they will love and respect us and be glad to grow up and pay our debts.

In a similar vein, he lists some expensive political packages, such as:

**Tolerance and Multiculturalism.** Quit talking bad about women, homosexuals, and preferred social minorities, and you can say anything you want about people who haven't been to college, manual workers, country people, peasants, religious people, unmodern people, old people, and so on. Tolerant and multicultural persons hyphenate their land of origin and their nationality. I, for example, am a Kentuckian-American.

Right. But Mr. Berry is no entertainer, though he can be very entertaining. He is a moralist and, in the best sense of the word, an economist. His observations on what we usually call politics are striking in that they elude the eroded categories of left and right. Berry's essay "Peaceableness Toward Enemies" is a unique and valuable comment on the Gulf War, which in its rebuke to gigantism, abstraction, and arrogance deserves a wide readership.

Wendell Berry's daring, in trying to imagine how a Christian nation should or might conduct foreign policy, is both morally bracing and politically challenging. His analysis of Christianity itself, however, though highly creditable, is in my view flawed by its scanting of Original Sin. If we have a Redeemer, then

surely there must have been much to be redeemed from—and there still is. In Milton's more comprehensive vision, as with the Bible's, the Earth fell along with Adam and Eve—or was that Adam and Steve? However that may be, Berry's righteous love of the Creation may lead him to forget that the Kingdom of Heaven is, after all, not of this world, and that William Blake, who declared that everything that lives is holy, was not always the most reliable of prophets—or at least never anticipated the Clinton administration. A sterner sense of sin might show Mr. Berry just why he has so much to contend with from all those holy sweethearts, his fellow human beings.

Nevertheless, Berry's sense of our place as stewards is right and needful in many ways. Some of his points and specifically his citation of Ananda Coomaraswamy are highly reminiscent of the work of Andrew Lytle in particular and of the Vanderbilt Agrarians in general. Since Berry does acknowledge Thoreau, I wish that he had also mentioned the principles, at least, of those Southern precursors who (like Berry himself) refused to subordinate the vital needs of humans to the unending demands of business.

Berry's sense of legitimate community interests that supersede both private claims and public requirements leads him to insights that today are almost unheard of:

The conventional public opposition of "liberal" and "conservative" is, here as elsewhere, perfectly useless. The "conservatives" promote the family as a sort of public icon, but they will not promote the economic integrity of the household or the community, which are the mainstays of family life. Under the sponsorship of "conservative" presidencies, the economy of the modern household, which once required the father to work away from home, now requires the mother to work away from home, as well. And this development has the wholehearted endorsement of "liberals," who see the mother thus forced to spend her days away from her home and children as "liberated"—though nobody has yet seen the fathers thus forced away as "liberated." Some feminists are

thus in the curious position of opposing the mistreatment of women and yet advocating their participation in an economy in which everyone is mistreated.

For passages like that, and for other reasons as well, Wendell Berry has earned a special place as a sage. Better than any one of his contemporaries, he has identified what is wrong with the way we live and pointed to ways to make it right.

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## Gathering the Desert

by Gregory McNamee

The Wilderness of the Southwest

by Charles Sheldon

Edited by Neil Carmony and David Brown

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press; 256 pp., \$14.95



It is ironic that the modern environmentalist movement was founded by men with whom most modern environmentalists would have nothing to do today: game hunters, many so avid for the chase that they would spend fortunes to collect antlers and skins and skulls from far-off places. Theodore Roosevelt, to name one distinguished early conservationist, was responsible for setting aside vast tracts of land for national parks and

wildlife preserves; he also traveled to the Arctic Circle, to China's Taklimakan Desert, to the Serengeti Plain to add rare specimens to his collection of kills, which already numbered countless species from fields and streams that lay closer to home. Charles Sheldon (1867-1928) garnered a smaller reputation than that of the bully-pulpit President, but he filled the hunter-conservationist role just as well; his efforts substantially enriched the American public domain, and if few moderns have heard of his work, they have their remedy in *The Wilderness of the Southwest*.

A Yale graduate from a once well-to-do family gone broke in the recessions of the 1880's and 90's, Sheldon scrapped his plans for a grand tour of Europe, took to the woods with a shotgun and pointer, and set about exploring North America from Alaska to the high Sierra Madre of Mexico. He began his career, as literary archaeologists Neil Carmony and David Brown tell us in their edition of Sheldon's unpublished field notes, as the junior manager of a Midwestern railroad. By dint of Yankee virtues Sheldon rose quickly through the ranks, and other railroad tycoons began to take note of him. In 1898 Dean Sage, a New York entrepreneur, hired Sheldon to develop a railroad line through northern Mexico so that Middle American freight could be more efficiently shipped to the Pacific—Los Mochis, Sonora, lies 300 miles closer to San Louis than does San Francisco. The business eventually failed, but it has as its legacy the railroad line that snakes through Chihuahua's Barranca de Cobre, carrying thousands of tourists annually through what is known as Mexico's Grand Canyon.

Now jobless, Sheldon turned to Yalie friends for help. One eventually introduced him to C. Hart Merriam, the director of the U.S. Biological Survey, who hired him as an assessor in 1903 and sent him to central Alaska. He was not there long before he began to press for the creation of a national park to protect 20,322-foot Denali from mining claims. His campaign did little to endear him to Alaska's commercial interests, but it helped launch the present state's vast ecotourism industry, a primary source of revenue. After recruiting Roosevelt and the game-hunting Boone and Crockett Club to his side, Sheldon finally prevailed in 1919, but to his lasting disappointment, as Carmony and Brown note, North America's tallest peak and

its associated park were named Mount McKinley.

Alaska did not hold Sheldon for long. Suddenly interested in the biota of the arid Southwest, Merriam dispatched him to Arizona where at the same time that he hunted pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*) and desert bighorn (*Ovis canadensis*) he became concerned with their continued health as a species. Carmony and Brown have chased down Sheldon's gracefully written notes describing one such hunting trip into the heart of the Grand Canyon, in which the self-taught naturalist offers still-useful observations on the ways of the indigenous Havasupai Indians and on the peerless beauty of their homeland, which had only just come under federal jurisdiction as a national park. Subsequent expeditions took Sheldon into the harsh Pinacate and Lechuguilla regions of western Arizona and Sonora, of which he wrote: "This desert is certainly among the most arid regions of America, but it teems with life. The sands in the washes show the tracks of the small animals." Working there, he continued, was a fine tonic: "I am getting in better condition daily."

When forest ranger Aldo Leopold killed a Mexican gray wolf atop Arizona's Mogollon Rim, he experienced the epiphany that would make him one of America's foremost champions of wilderness: wolves, he concluded, are necessary to a healthy landscape; every creature that does not harm a place belongs there. Charles Sheldon underwent no such transformation, and animal-rights activists may cringe at his account of a prize taken while he explored the remote, imposing Tuseral Mountains of Sonora. He shot and killed a particularly battered desert bighorn. "A veteran old ram, scabby with hair almost gone, front knees bare and calloused, one horn badly broken in the middle from butting, the skin on his face scarred from fighting. His ears were full of ticks and almost stopped up. He was in exceedingly ragged condition and had had hard fighting. It was a romantic spot to kill an old ram." Anyone recounting such an adventure today—or confessing an admiration for barbarians like Hemingway and Turgenev—would earn more wrath than admiration.

Sheldon came to know many such romantic spots, and his explorations of the desert put him in rare company. As with his Havasupai contacts, his dryland trav-

**LIBERAL ARTS**

**TANNING RIGHTS**

A former inmate of the Rush County (Indiana) Jail is suing the county for failing to provide him with tanning sessions, reported the *Chicago Tribune* last December. Tim Spurling seeks \$300,000 from the county, because its commissioners refused to purchase an ultraviolet tanning lamp to treat his psoriasis.