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**FROM STRONG TO WEAK AGRARIANISM.  
A CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACH TO PROTECTING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND THE  
ENVIRONMENT**

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**ABSTRACT: FROM STRONG TO WEAK AGRARIANISM A  
CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACH TO PROTECTING RURAL  
COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

*The paper critiques traditional agrarianism, particularly Wendell Berry's version, proposing a new form of agrarianism called weak agrarianism. Strong agrarianism holds local communities as morally valuable entities because they produce good moral qualities in human beings. However, weak agrarianism supports rural communities based on their positive environmental and economic contributions. Having unique local knowledge, rural communities are essential in combating climate change and promoting sustainable agriculture. The paper highlights agroecology as a sustainable approach integrating ecological, social, and economic principles, emphasizing bottom-up policies and the farmer-back-to-farmer method. These policies address local problems through collaboration between farmers and scientists, ensuring effective, culturally integrated solutions. The paper argues for protecting and incentivizing rural communities not as static reserves but as dynamic, inclusive entities, promoting their development to counter rural depopulation and enhance environmental sustainability.*



**1. Introduction**

«Eating is an agricultural act»<sup>1</sup> is a statement by philosopher and novelist Wendell Berry in one of his most famous essays. Berry recognizes that a genuine moral choice about food can only be made by reflecting on how that food was produced and thus on the model of agriculture and farming.

Agriculture is a human activity that has not always been given due consideration by philosophy. Tracing a history of the philosophy of agriculture is beyond the scope of this paper. I will focus only on analyzing agriculture in the contemporary context, particularly the relationship between economic activity, the

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<sup>1</sup> W. Berry, *The pleasure of eating*, in Id., *What are people for?*, North Point Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990, pp. 145-152, p. 146.

environment, and cultural identities. Since the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*<sup>2</sup>, it has become evident that agriculture impacts the environment and that environmental policies cannot be separated from agricultural policies. Nevertheless, environmental philosophers have paid little attention to agriculture<sup>3</sup>, often discussing the environment as something separate from human activities or considering only places where human activity is marginal.

In agriculture, multiple factors intertwine, such as the environment, the economy, and society. Agriculture is possible only where environmental resources are present (primarily land and water); it modifies and transforms those resources, radically intervening in ecosystems. Secondly, it is an economic activity aimed at production. I refer here to production in an inclusive sense, encompassing both subsistence agriculture and industrial agriculture. Finally, it is a human activity, meaning humans primarily carry it out. An objection could be that these characteristics are unnecessary, and it is possible to imagine a future of agriculture where food is grown on satellites orbiting the Earth, in laboratory-produced culture mediums, and by robots. However, at present, this scenario is far from reality. The food we consume is produced by humans (with the help of machines and other animals) in a specific territory (sometimes very far from our own) and has often been sold, thus becoming part of an economic cycle.

There are various models for how agricultural production should be structured. Philosopher Paul B. Thompson<sup>4</sup> identifies four, based on the philosophical assumptions they adopt and their practical consequences. According to his terminology, these are the Productionist Paradigm, Agricultural Stewardship, Environmental

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<sup>2</sup> R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston (MA) 1962.

<sup>3</sup> P.B. Thompson, *The spirit of the soil. Agriculture and Environmental Ethics*, second edition, Routledge, New York-London 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Economy, and the Holistic Alternative. The first approach is typical of industrialized agriculture, which sees the increase in production as the sole objective to be achieved, regardless of the means used and their human and environmental consequences. The other three models oppose it. The Agricultural Stewardship model presents farmers as good stewards of the environment in which they live and work, dedicated to the care of the soil, water, air, plants, and animals. This view is often accompanied by religious premises, suggesting that the environment should be cared for because it was entrusted to humans by God.<sup>5</sup> The second model is a development driven by economic theory, incorporating environmental costs into economic costs to account for the actual environmental impact of food production and include it in the final cost of the product<sup>6</sup>. Finally, the third model is the Holistic Alternative. Thompson groups under this label various theories, ranging from the rejection of agronomic sciences and the practice of superstitious methods, such as in biodynamic agriculture, to methods that attempt to mimic the mechanisms found in non-anthropized ecosystems in agriculture, as in the theories of Alan Savory<sup>7</sup> and Wes Jackson<sup>8</sup>, to theories that use scientific data to support an agricultural model that prioritizes long-term sustainability such as organic farming, agroecology<sup>9</sup>, or soil restoration<sup>10</sup>. Thompson suggests that all these theories have a common root, expressed by Aldo Leopold's maxim: «A thing is right

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: Franciscus, *Litterae Encyclicae Laudato Si'*. *De communi domo colenda*, Edizioni Vaticane, Vatican City 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: D. Worster, *Nature's Economy. A History of Ecological Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977; M. Sagoff, *Price, Principle and the Environment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>7</sup> A. Savory, *Holistic Resource Management*, Island Press, Covello (CA) 1988.

<sup>8</sup> W. Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place. An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2011.

<sup>9</sup> M.A. Altieri, *Agroecology. The scientific basis of alternative agriculture*, Westview Press, Boulder (CO) 1983.

<sup>10</sup> L. Carlisle, *Healing Grounds. Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming*, Island Press, Washington 2022.

when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise»<sup>11</sup>.

Even though briefly outlined, a particular affinity subsists between Agricultural Stewardship's visions and the Holistic Alternative. Both theories present the farmer as integrated into the natural cycle, acting in harmony with it and fostering its development. However, what differentiates them are the philosophical premises from which they start. Clarifying this point is one of the objectives of the article. First, I will present the position of agrarianism, one of the most influential theories within the Agricultural Stewardship approach, focusing mainly on the version proposed by Wendell Berry. Secondly, I will show some theoretical limits of this proposal. I will then move on to the constructive part of the paper, proposing a modified version of agrarianism, which I call weak agrarianism, combining some points of traditional agrarianism, such as the importance of rural identity, with some elements typical of the Holistic Alternatives, such as agroecology and sustainable agriculture. The final goal of the paper is to provide a mildly consequentialist justification for the protection of rural identities, which does not rely on epistemologically controversial premises or religious assumptions.

## **2. Strong Agrarianism**

The term "agrarianism" refers to a form of thought that emphasizes the idea of the small farmer, owner of a medium-small plot of land (sufficient to be cultivated by the family and to provide sustenance for it), and that agricultural activity shapes one's character and society, producing a set of morally positive values. Agrarianism is a social and political philosophy emphasizing the importance of rural society, family farming, widespread property

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<sup>11</sup> A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1949, p. 225.

ownership, and political decentralization. It values the traditional bonds of the local community and often regards the cultivation of land as a means to cultivate moral character and develop a complete and responsible person. Agrarianism is often associated with a preference for the moral and social values of rural society over the complexity of urban life.

In a work on American literature addressing the contrast between agricultural and urban life and the associated values, Inge<sup>12</sup> identified five aspects that are often found in agrarian thinkers:

1. Religion. Because agricultural activity largely depends on external environmental and atmospheric factors, it reminds humans of their finiteness in the face of divine providence and omnipotence. Additionally, it is connected to the biblical command to cultivate and keep the earth (almost as if to transform it into a new Eden), turning the farmer into an instrument in God's hands.
2. Romance. Technology corrupts character, moral values, abilities, and individual flourishing. It inhibits genuine knowledge of natural rhythms and the actual value of things. Conversely, direct contact with nature can redeem all these evils.
3. Moral Ontology. Modern urban and industrial life causes fragmentation among individuals, alienation of individuals, and people becoming workers without vocation, lacking passion for their work, and whose abilities are undervalued. Conversely, cultivating the land produces positive values such as dedication, the ability to wait, trust in others, reciprocity, cohesion, harmony, and the value of commitment.
4. Politics. Generally, agrarianism values local communities. On the one hand, it argues that local problems should and can be solved only at the local level. On the other hand, it values geographical belonging since being native can provide cultural resources and technical knowledge to address local problems.

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<sup>12</sup> M.T. Inge, *Agrarianism in American Literature*, Odyssey Press, New York 1969; see also P.B. Thompson, *The Agrarian Vision. Sustainability and Environmental Ethics*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2010.

5. Society. A healthy and prosperous society resembles an agricultural community where all members actively participate in everyone's fate, are interdependent, and reciprocate the help received.

Not all these points are always present in all authors and in the same way. These factors can be found in different relationships with each other. In some forms of agrarianism, the foundation of the moral value of agriculture and the farmer is grounded on religious premises, such as the divine command to make the earth fertile or to be guardians of creation or a belief that hard work can manifest divine grace and a sign of future predestination.<sup>13</sup> Other authors, such as Wendell Berry, on whom I will focus, ground the moral value of agriculture on attachment to a territory, which entails several consequences, such as a certain predisposition to care for both the environment and others. I choose to focus on Berry's agrarianism for this reason. Not only because he is the most famous among agrarian thinkers but also because his vision is not dependent on accepting any religious view, making it more philosophically discussable.<sup>14</sup>

Berry argues that the contemporary world is in crisis because it has lost contact with the land. «For the environmental crisis should make it dramatically clear, as perhaps it has not always been before, that there is no public crisis that is not also private»<sup>15</sup>. The environmental crisis is reducible to the crisis of individual subjects and the fact that they have lost ties with their lands, succumbing to the promises of capitalism that uprooted them and forced them into life rhythms disconnected from any natural regularity. As he says elsewhere, «In the 'developed'

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<sup>13</sup> See T. LeVasseur, *Religious agrarianism and the return of place: From values to practice in sustainable agriculture*, Suny Press, Albany (NY) 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Berry also reflected on theological aspects of Christianity in relation to agriculture, but this aspect still remains marginal in his philosophy. See for example W. Berry, *The Unsettling of American: Culture and Agriculture*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco (CA) 1977.

<sup>15</sup> W. Berry, *Think Little*, in Id. *Think Little. Essays*, Vol. 1, Counterpoint, Berkeley (CA) 2019, p. 2.

countries, at least, the large problems occur because all of us are living either partly wrong or almost entirely wrong»<sup>16</sup>. To solve the environmental crisis, we must not think on a global scale; we must think small and return to concrete problems and our relationship with the land. Once we have solved the problems of each piece of land and those who inhabit it, we will also have solved global-scale problems in a bottom-up movement. However, according to Berry, not all places are equal: we establish a special bond with the place where we were born. Our lives intertwine with the human and environmental history of that place. Living in the place where we were born allows us to establish a particular bond with it and implement all necessary strategies to protect it: «When I lived in other places I looked on their evils with the curious eye of a traveler; I was not responsible for them; it cost me nothing to be a critic, for I had not been there long, and I did not feel that I would stay. But here, now that I am both native and citizen, there is no immunity to what is wrong»<sup>17</sup>.

The starting point is thus moral ontology: the contrast between capitalist liberalism and traditional agricultural society. Berry places himself among a series of thinkers, not only agrarian but also populist and communitarian, who criticize modern capitalist liberalism and the lifestyle of the modern worker<sup>18</sup>. Contemporary economics has various deleterious effects on individuals. It severs all ties with their place of origin, causing them to lose fundamental knowledge of land management, making people precarious, promising to free them from work while making them slaves to a life constantly on the brink. We no longer speak of

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<sup>16</sup> W. Berry, *Word and flesh*, in Id., *What are People for?*, North Point Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990, pp. 197-203, p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> W. Berry, *A Native Hill*, in W. Berry, N. Wirzba (eds.), *The Art of the CommonPlace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint, Berkeley (CA) 2002, pp. 3-31, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> See M.N. Johnson, *Nineteenth-century agrarian populism and twentieth-century communitarianism: Points of contact and contrast*, in «Peabody Journal of Education», 70, 4, 1995, pp. 86-104.

“people” but of the “workforce”, and the workforce can constantly be relocated elsewhere<sup>19</sup>. It creates the illusion of a happy, prosperous life free from toil, when in reality, people live isolated, without a place they are attached to, migrants by definition, slaves to a job that does not make them happy.

Conversely, agriculture presents a series of positive traits. It produces at least four distinctive features as opposed to modern city work. It is important to emphasize that the agricultural work Berry has in mind is not the work of a laborer in a multinational food company cultivating thousands of hectares scattered worldwide. Berry’s ideal farm is a small to medium-sized family-run farm where all involved live and work together.<sup>20</sup> Living and working on such a farm produces at least four positive aspects:

- 1. The formation of loyal citizens.
- 2. Workers dedicated to caring for the environment and the farm.
- 3. Reliable neighbors.
- 4. Good parents and children.

Berry takes from Jefferson, though with various criticisms, the idea that promoting small and medium-sized farms creates loyal citizens in the sense that they will have a solid patriotic sense of defending and promoting the state’s interests. Indeed, the farmer establishes a strong bond with the land he works on, and this will encourage him to defend it, for example, in case of invasion. He cannot “pack up and leave” because his wealth and survival depend on the land where he lives. Jefferson contrasted this with the fact that industry relies on capital, money that can be moved not only from one city to another but also from one state to another, making people much more mobile and less attached (even

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<sup>19</sup> W. Berry, *Local Economies to Save the Land and People*, speech at the conference Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, 16th August 2013, <https://archive.kftc.org/blog/wendell-berry-local-economies-save-land-and-people> (last visited 30th May 2024).

<sup>20</sup> W. Berry, *An Argument for Diversity*, in «The Hudson Review», 42, 4, 1990, pp. 537–548.



emotionally) to where they live and work.<sup>21</sup> Berry echoes Jefferson's idea, emphasizing the contrast between industry and agriculture but more on the character-building aspect that agricultural work creates. Berry's thesis is that while urban workers are forced into daily performance and tied to a single highly specialized task without seeing the final result of their actions, farmers have a diametrically opposite experience. They must know how to wait, hence the virtue of patience, allowing nature to take its course. They must be responsible, understanding that their actions affect the soil, water, and ecosystems, and thus on the possibility of continuing to have fertile land.<sup>22</sup>

The second point concerns the consequences of work. Unlike urban workers who form their identity more through hobbies, Berry argues that the farmer identifies with his work. City work does not provide satisfaction in what one does; the worker is simply a replaceable cog in a vast machine. The farmer knows he is unique and indispensable. Without his work and his knowledge of the territory, that land will die, deteriorate, or no longer be productive. The farmer's identity takes shape around his role in the local economy and his virtues: he will be respected if he knows how to be profitable for the local community in which he lives.

The third and fourth points concern communities: one larger, which is the local community, the neighbors, and fellow citizens, and the smaller one, which is the family. In smaller and larger

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<sup>21</sup> T. Jefferson, *Writings*, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984. P.B. Thompson, *Thomas Jefferson's Land ethics*, in M.A. Holowchak (ed.), *Thomas Jefferson and Philosophy: Essays on the Philosophical Cast of Jefferson's Writings*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MA) 2014, pp. 61-77; P.B. Thompson, *Thomas Jefferson and agrarian philosophy*, in P.B. Thompson, T.C. Hilde (eds.), *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 2000, pp. 118-139.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, W. Berry, *The making of a marginal farm*, in Id., *Recollected Essays: 1965-1980*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2012; W. Berry, *Nature as a measure*, in Id. *What are people for?*, North Point Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990, pp. 204-210; W. Berry, *The Total Economy*, in Id., *What matters? Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2000.

communities, interdependent relationships are woven: everyone has their irreplaceable task, which is why everyone is respected and appreciated as an indispensable community member. For Berry, the family seems to be the ultimate element that composes society, in contrast to modern globalized and capitalist society, where society rests on the individual: «A community, when it is alive and well, is centered on the household - the family place and economy - and the household is centered on marriage. A public, when it is working in the best way - that is, as a political body intent on justice - is centered on the individual. Community and public alike, then, are founded on respect - the one on respect for the family, the other on respect for the individual»<sup>23</sup>. And a healthy community rests on “traditional” values, renouncing the capitalist rules of competition. As Berry asserts: «Community, however, aspires toward stability. It strives to balance change with constancy. That is why community life places such high value on neighborly love, marital fidelity, local loyalty, the integrity and continuity of family life, respect for the old, and instruction of the young. And a vital community draws its life, so far as possible, from local sources. It prefers to solve its problems, for example, by nonmonetary exchanges of help, not by buying things. A community cannot survive under the rule of competition»<sup>24</sup>. The community also fulfills another task: transmitting knowledge related to the place. Such local knowledge, co-evolved and selected based on the specific conformation of the specific place, allows for responsible and better land management, contributing to solving the ecological problem.

In light of this brief exposition of Berry’s thematic nuclei, it is clear why Thompson’s choice to catalog Berry among the proponents of the stewardship vision is justified, as the farmer

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<sup>23</sup> W. Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, W. Berry, N. Wirzba, *The Art of the Commonplace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2002, pp. 159-181, p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> W. Berry, *Economy and Pleasure*, in Id. *What are People for?*, North Point Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990, pp. 124-144, pp. 134-135.

is the good steward of the land. It is also evident how Berry can be considered a thinker belonging to the vision of agrarianism. The type of environmental defense proposed emphasizes small rural properties on the one hand and aims to respect natural rhythms on the other.

### ***3. Limits of Strong Agrarianism***

I wish to raise two objections to Berry's position. The first concerns the necessary link proposed between attachment to a territory and the care of that territory. This first objection falls more generally within a critique of agrarianism and its metaphysical premises, the assumption that working with the land inherently produces a morally good character. The second concerns the exaltation of belonging to a local identity.

Berry, and generally most authors close to him, argue that the bond with the land—particularly the native land—produces a unique moral value. On the one hand, emotional attachment to that land makes us care for it, and on the other, working the land, by its very nature, produces positive moral qualities, such as knowing how to wait or mutual interdependence among all individuals. This statement can summarize Berry's thesis: «The loss of local culture is, in part, a practical loss and an economic one. For one thing, such a culture contains, and conveys to succeeding generations, the history of the use of the place and the knowledge of how the place may be lived in and used. For another, the pattern of reminding implies affection for the place and respect for it, and so, finally, the local culture will carry the knowledge of how the place may be well and lovingly used, and also the implicit command to use it only well and lovingly. The only true and effective 'operator's manual for spaceship earth' is not a book that any

human will ever write; it is hundreds of thousands of local cultures»<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, we must see whether emotional attachment to the land necessarily leads to its care. Although Berry emphasizes the bond with the native land, the one where one grew up, he does not exclude that an emotional bond can also arise with other territories. Indeed, staying in or returning to one's place of origin has a positive effect, allowing the cultural heritage people carry to remain in place and be passed down from generation to generation. Berry states that «a man ought to study the wilderness of a place before applying to it the ways he learned in another place»<sup>26</sup> highlighting how knowledge is not abstract but contextual. However, this position seems more like a romantic myth than the reality of the facts. Many farmers who produce according to the most industrial and least sustainable forms have cultivated the same plots of land for generations. There are well-known cases of entire territories cultivated in small plots by the same farmers for generations that have lost fertility because they were cultivated in the wrong way or to increase production more and more. In reality, the feeling of attachment to the land and the sense of responsibility for its use is independent of one's bond. If I care about the place I live, I will treat it well, but it is not because I live in my native place that I will take care of it. The feeling of care seems to be more a cause of wanting to live in the native place than a consequence of living there.

The issue is different regarding whether working the land (with pre-industrial or not fully industrialized means) produces positive qualities. We can imagine that there is a sort of pedagogical force in being a farmer: one indeed needs to wait for the right moment to do things, which can teach patience; one needs

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<sup>25</sup> W. Berry, *The work of local culture*, in Id., *What are people for?* North Point Press, Berkeley (CA) 1990, pp. 153-169, p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> W. Berry, *A Native Hill*, W. in Berry, N. Wirzba (eds.), *The Art of the CommonPlace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2002, pp. 3-31, p. 26.

to be able to coordinate, ask for help from others, and offer it when asked, which can foster traits like a sense of justice and community unity; one needs to be aware that mistakes have long-term consequences, which can foster a positive tendency to care for the land. However, the issue is whether this is the only way to develop these character traits. The character traits are inherently positive, not how they are produced. Imagine a physician working in a hospital. This work can also produce positive character traits: the fact that one cannot do everything alone and must work in a team can produce coordination and a sense of community, the fact that one is trying to save lives or cure diseases can produce a sense of responsibility, the fact that one works long-term, for example, in chronic illnesses or with a treatment that lasts months, can generate patience.

The second objection concerns the exaltation of belonging to a local rural identity. Rural geography has long questioned how to evaluate the life of rural communities and the positive and negative aspects it presents. The rural community has problematic traits that, if highlighted, can shatter the idyllic aura surrounding it. Talking about rural communities often means excluding minority groups, whether ethnic or social. Berry himself is aware of the process of reducing the number of farms owned by African Americans<sup>27</sup>, attributing it to the advance of industrial agriculture. Industrialization may be among the causes that have produced the marginalization of African Americans, even in agriculture. However, indeed, other factors have played a role, such as widespread racism and the idea of defending a supposed superior identity. This concealment of marginal identities does not occur only with particular ethnic identities but also with

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<sup>27</sup> W. Berry, *Racism and Economy*, in W. Berry, N. Wirzba, *The Art of the CommonPlace. The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint Press, Berkeley (CA) 2002, pp. 47-64.

women, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities.<sup>28</sup> The community can be a refuge where one gives meaning to one's life, sees one's individuality flourish, and builds one's identity. However, it can also be a prison where non-standard identities are excluded and marginalized.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, living in a peripheral and rural area can give rise to spontaneous movements of self-government or problem-solving, as Berry hopes. However, it is also well-known that peripheral areas have fewer state services.

Let us thus bring out a more nuanced image of rural life. We can also analyze Berry's proposal more clearly, which seems convincing and emotionally motivating but hides the harsh sides of agricultural life. We cannot think of it as an idyll: if we truly want every person living or choosing to live in a rural community to be truly happy, we must think of profoundly transformed rural communities capable of including diversities, communities not closed to the outside but permeable, where everyone can realize their desires and abilities.<sup>30</sup>

In essence, the defense of the local community as it is, as Berry intends, is possible only for those who do not present non-conforming or non-standard identities, only for those who are already well disposed to such a life.

#### **4. The Proposal of Weak Agrarianism**

The thesis I maintain here is a defense of a different version of agrarianism, a weaker one, which I call weak agrarianism. This thesis has already been supported in various forms by other

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<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that on the one hand the countryside is the place from which non-standard identities flee, but on the other hand it has also been the place where non-standard identities have often been confined. One could thus conclude that no one wants different people and that there is a temptation to have homogeneous and compliant communities.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, M. Woods, *Rural*, Routledge, London 2011; R. Yarwood, *Citizenship*, Routledge, London 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See for example K. Halfacree, *Trial by space for a 'radical rural': Introducing alternative localities, representations and lives*, in «Journal of rural studies», 23, 2, 2007, pp. 125-141.

scholars in different disciplines, notably by Liz Carlisle.<sup>31</sup> Here, I present a philosophical defense of it. I use the term weak agrarianism to distinguish it from traditional forms of agrarianism and to indicate that its foundation is “weak” because it is based on consequentialist arguments. The defense and presentation of this theory I will make here is schematic.

I hold that rural communities should be protected. I make this defense based on the criticisms just made against Berry. Rural communities are fundamental because, on the one hand, they preserve the territory and safeguard the environment, contributing to resolving the climate crisis, and they do so because they often carry specific knowledge of the territory that only they possess. Furthermore, they support a positive economic model that should prioritize the dignity of workers rather than their exploitation. Unlike Berry, I do not want to defend communities as they are or want to defend small and medium-sized farms based on ownership titles as other agrarians do. Rural communities and small and medium-sized farms must be supported based on the positive consequences they produce for themselves and especially for the global population.

We can distinguish between two types of policies aimed at combating climate change. Top-down policies are those imposed from above on citizens and businesses, forcing a change in the way of living or producing. Examples include limiting the production of combustion cars or new community agricultural policies. On the other hand, bottom-up policies start from the self-organization of citizens or businesses. The two intervention systems can also intersect when political action is limited to incentivizing the transition, but the concrete action is chosen and implemented by individuals. The recent farmer protest movement shows how top-down policies that are not adequately explained and shared result in

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<sup>31</sup> L. Carlisle, *Critical agrarianism*, in «Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems», 29, 2, 2014, pp. 135-145.

the opposite intended effect and can thus be ineffective. Sometimes, they are necessary and not always destined to fail, but they are exposed to resistance from individuals who see an external authority disrupting their lives. This is especially true for farmers who often perceive politics as something distinct, something “urban” radically different from their “rurality.” On the other hand, bottom-up policies can be characterized by conservative or anti-scientific attitudes, as in the case of biodynamic agriculture, or can be intrinsically fragmented.<sup>32</sup>

Agroecology proposes a solution to this impasse. Agroecology is an approach to agriculture that aims for environmental, social, and economic sustainability, integrating ecological principles into food systems, promoting biodiversity, soil fertility, and the resilience of agricultural ecosystems. The goal is to develop agricultural practices that are ecologically balanced, socially just, and economically sustainable<sup>33</sup>. It is important to emphasize that agroecology is not only concerned with the environmental impact of agriculture but also aware that people practice it and, therefore, must adequately consider their culture and social organization. On the other hand, it must also be economically sustainable, not leaving those people in poverty. This perfectly accounts for what agriculture is: an activity situated in a place (the environment), an economic activity carried out by flesh-and-blood people. For a practice to be sustainable, it must consider these three aspects. One of the solutions proposed by agroecology is an approach called farmer-back-to-farmer<sup>34</sup> (Rhoades-Booth, 1982). This involves designing technological or agronomic

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<sup>32</sup> See P.B. Thompson, *The Agrarian Vision. Sustainability and Environmental Ethics*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2010; P.B. Thompson, *The spirit of the soil. Agriculture and Environmental Ethics*, second edition, Routledge, New York-London 2017.

<sup>33</sup> M.A. Altieri, *Agroecology. The scientific basis of alternative agriculture*, Westview Press, Boulder (CO) 1983.

<sup>34</sup> R.E. Rhoades and R.H. Booth, *Farmer-back-to-farmer: a model for generating acceptable agricultural technology*, in «Agricultural administration», 11, 2, 1982, pp. 127-137.



interventions to support a local crop. Summarizing the steps of this approach, the idea is to start from the concrete problems of farmers in a given territory, through dialogue with farmers, the establishment of standard definitions between farmers and scientists, the elaboration of possible solutions by scientists that integrate into the territory and local culture, the experimentation of solutions by farmers, who will then decide which to adopt based on their preferences and the replicability of the solution. In this way, the process is transformative, but the solution responds to concrete needs and is the one that best fits the local context. This way, local identities are preserved, and the agronomic intervention is effective.

Why, then, all this attention to local communities? Why defend them? As I said, the reason for this defense is consequentialist. Local communities serve to combat climate change. The argument can be structured as follows: if rural local communities possess unique knowledge on how to manage and cultivate the land they inhabit, both in terms of suitable varieties and how to cultivate them; if this knowledge is indispensable for environmental sustainability, then defending those who possess this knowledge is functional to combating climate change and achieving environmental sustainability. The two premises are confirmed by agroecological agrarian research.<sup>35</sup> Thus, defending rural local communities is fundamental in combating climate change. Agriculture cannot help but pass through them.

Indeed, there may be other methods; it needs to be demonstrated that this is the only effective method. However, it must be considered. The rural local community is a subject that must be protected and incentivized. The phenomenon of rural depopulation,

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<sup>35</sup> See D. Deb, *Valuing folk crop varieties for agroecology and food security*, in «Bioscience Resource», 2009, pp. 54-58; E. Guttmann-Bond, *Reinventing sustainability: how archaeology can save the planet*, in «Reinventing Sustainability», 2018, pp. 1-192; I.S. Bisht et al., *Subsistence farming, agrobiodiversity, and sustainable agriculture: A case study*, in «Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems», 38, 8, 2014, pp. 890-912.

already occurring in Western countries, is repeated in every country that undergoes economic progress. Nevertheless, even in Western countries, more and more people leave rural areas to live in cities, whose population is continuously growing. Protecting these identities involves respecting and enhancing local culture through economic incentives and investments in the territories to meet social, health, and educational needs. Local cultures should not be considered “reserves” in which to confine something or someone on the brink of extinction. However, they must be permeable to the outside, to gather all the resources they need and allow everyone to flourish their individuality. In this way, it might be possible to counter the depopulation of certain territories and protect the environment.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper, I critique the traditional concept of agrarianism, which I call strong agrarianism, to distinguish it from the version I support: weak agrarianism. I have mainly focused on Wendell Berry’s theses. Two main objections are raised: the lack of a necessary link between emotional attachment to and care for the land and the exaltation of belonging to a local rural identity that can exclude or marginalize minority groups.

The first objection concerns the necessary link between emotional attachment and care for the land. Although authors like Berry are inclined to argue that a strong bond with the native land produces a special moral value and leads to more excellent care for the territory, I challenge this correlation as a romantic myth. Emotional attachment does not always translate into concrete actions of care, and care for the land depends on multiple factors, including the agricultural practices adopted and the environmental policies implemented.

The second objection concerns the exaltation of belonging to a local rural identity, which can marginalize minority groups. I

highlight how rural communities are not necessarily idyllic but can present problematic and exclusionary traits. Therefore, the defense of rural communities should not be based on an idealization of rural life but rather on a pragmatic analysis of the benefits such communities can bring in terms of environmental conservation, economic resilience, and the preservation of local knowledge.

The proposal of weak agrarianism is distinguished by its consequentialist approach, which justifies the defense of rural communities based on their potential contributions to environmental sustainability and social and economic justice. It emphasizes the importance of agroecology as an integrated approach to agriculture that considers ecological, social, and economic principles, promoting sustainable agricultural practices and the active involvement of local communities in decision-making processes.

Finally, I reiterate the need to consider rural communities as dynamic and inclusive subjects, promoting policies that encourage the active participation of all community members in their development. This approach aims to counter rural depopulation and promote overall sustainability that considers the diverse needs and identities within local communities.