



**“THE MOST VIRTUOUS AND INDEPENDENT CITIZENS”:  
Farmers, Whalemens, and Factory Workers and the  
Americanization of Manly Physical Laborers**

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During the years following the American Revolution, American writers became increasingly concerned with work and labor, and they published large numbers of work narratives, which described, in great detail, the various kinds of work Americans performed. This preoccupation might be attributed to the fact that, after breaking away from Great Britain, Americans acquired a certain amount of new-found economic freedom. However, early American work narratives do more than just celebrate American capitalism. These texts attempt to Americanize the United States' working-classes by endowing particular kinds of masculine, working-class identity with national significance. Whether or not these work narratives ever succeeded in Americanizing the working classes is debatable; however, it is important to note that these authors launched an incredibly enduring ideological fantasy of manly, American, physical labor which is still in existence today.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Thomas Jefferson suggested that the United States should “turn all our citizens to the cultivation of the earth,” for “cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens” [Jefferson: 175]. Jefferson felt that promoting insular agrarianism over global mercantilism would help protect the fledgling United States from becoming enmeshed in potentially devastating international wars. Practically speaking, Jefferson's claim about the inherent value of farmers and their labors helped bolster support for the development of agrarianism in the United States, but it also generated a culturally-dominant and enduring strain of national identity which transformed American farmers into representative and exemplary citizens. Jefferson was quite heavily invested in an already-existing ideological fantasy of agrarian labor, and he used it to endow ordinary farmers with national significance. This fantasy ignored many of the social contradictions inherent in performing agricultural work; however, it created tremendous admiration for farmers who confronted the elemental forces of nature, sowed crops, and gathered the harvest. However flawed, the vision of farmers as representative Americans remained in the national imagination for over three centuries. What is perhaps even more interesting about the Americanizing impulse of this fantasy is that, across time, authors of American work narratives fairly consistently attempted to attach it to other kinds of manual laborers who also used their sheer physical capacities to produce valuable commodities—including New England whalemens and factory workers.

Agricultural work seemed to naturally lend itself to nationalistic appropriations because there was already in existence a long genealogy of thought that held farming as integral to the development of civilization and its modern integer, the nation. Certain republican, agrarian strands of Enlightenment philosophy, which heavily influenced Jefferson, emphasized that the central institution of civilization was private property, and the key to transforming land into private property was to farm it. As John Locke maintains in *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*:

As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property... God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, *i.e.*, improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labor. He that in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled, and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him [Locke: 398].

Here, Locke argues that mankind, following God's directives, invests the only thing that he owns, his labor, in the land, thereby transforming it into private property—the basic organizational unit of modern civilization. Deriving his line of reasoning from Biblical sources which reinforced the idea that investing physical labor in the land is a moral and virtuous activity, Locke argues that God's expectation that men would labor meant that they would turn wilderness into private property, civilize it, and organize it into towns, cities, and ultimately nation states.

Drawing on this foundation of philosophical ideas, Jefferson argues that there is a great deal of moral value inherent in agricultural work. Furthermore, these sources give Jefferson the means to connect agricultural identity to national identity, transforming farmers into representative American citizens. Significantly, this vision of the American farmer persisted across time and remained a part of the national imagination up through the twentieth century. As anthropologist Peggy Bartlett claims in *American Dreams, Rural Realities*, the farming crisis of the 1980's quickly became a national concern, and it prompted the organization of a series of nationally publicized and wildly popular Farm Aid benefit concerts. While it is enduring, one of the inherent problems with this fantasy of American national identity is that it is available to any nation possessing an agricultural economy. In other words, any agrarian nation could describe its farmers as exemplary moral and virtuous citizens. Furthermore, this national fantasy tends to overly romanticize farmers and tends to represent their deep, abiding connection to the land as symbiotically idyllic. More realistically speaking, farmers were forced to struggle through immense adversity in the form of devastating droughts, widespread floods, pestilent insect infestations, and fickle markets. I would suggest that the fact that this mode of defining Americans and American-ness persisted, despite its flaws in logic, demonstrates both the attractiveness of this fantasy of masculine physical labor and the strength of the rather suspect but keenly felt need to explain what made the political project of the United States so novel and exceptional.

It is most important to recognize, first and foremost, that the early impetus toward national self-definition in the United States arose out of a set of specific historical and cultural concerns having to do with life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America. After all, nations, themselves, are historically and culturally bound phenomena, or as Benedict Anderson would say, “cultural artifacts of a particular kind” [Anderson: 4]. National self-definition was a practice engaged in self-consciously by a number of different kinds of individuals, each of whom had their own particular motives for defining American-ness and their own modes of doing so. Some were Revolutionaries, such as Thomas Jefferson, who, among other things, felt the need to justify the violence of the American Revolution. Others were immigrants, such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who wanted to explain what made life in the United States so much better than that in Europe [*Letters from an American Farmer*]. And still others were artists, such as James Fenimore Cooper, who wanted to demonstrate the limitless potential of life in America and on its frontiers [*The Last of the Mohicans*]. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson helps to explain this variation in narratives of national identity when he claims that nations “are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” [Anderson: 6]. I would argue further that there is not just *one style* or mode of imagining a nation but many *styles* or modes for any one nation. Defining American-ness in terms of the frontier, as Cooper does, or agrarianism, as Jefferson does, represent two separate styles of imagining what it means to be an American, styles which actually co-existed with numerous others.

Narratives of American national identity based upon agrarianism and physical labor are more than just imagined, however. They are also fantasies. As Lauren Berlant in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* quite simply claims, “Nations provoke fantasy” [Berlant: 1]. Significantly, national identity registers both cognitively and emotionally with national citizens, and it is this double significance of national identity—its ability to say something about both the internal experience and external labeling of national citizens—that I am emphasizing here. For me, then, as it is for Berlant, national identity is a fantasy, an internalized relationship to a category that is externally produced.

Furthermore, I would suggest that styles of imagining national identity can be divided into two basic types—those which legitimate the state, and those which provide a unifying identity for the people who live in a nation. Berlant, using a Foucaultian approach, argues that states often attempt to generate narratives of national identity on their own behalf; however, once these narratives reach the realm of the social, they get re-framed and re-interpreted. Jefferson’s writings take both forms, for the Declaration of Independence represents state desires, and *Notes on the State of Virginia* imagines culturally-based narratives of American-ness. While the former category is important to consider, I want to focus on the latter because fantasies of manly American labor ultimately circulate in the American imagination at the cultural level. Here, Berlant’s formulation of the National Symbolic is helpful because it explains what happens to these fantasies as they enter into and circulate throughout the social realm. According to Berlant, the National Symbolic is:

The order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the 'law' in which the accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity [Berlant: 20].

People experience nationality as lived-belonging in collective community, and they are somehow inserted in national narratives—they are Americanized. The National Symbolic gives people a means of understanding what it means to be an American and a figurative language for expressing their nationality. Once they reach the realm of the National Symbolic, though, narratives of national identity are often re-framed, re-interpreted, and perpetuated for any number of other reasons—often having little to do with their origins. Combining Anderson's and Berlant's approaches to national identity, then, I would argue that Jefferson helped to *imagine* a connection between agricultural work and American national identity, a national fantasy, which, once it left his hands and made its way into the National Symbolic, took on a life of its own and adapted itself, not just to the work of farming, but to a wide variety of other kinds of physical labor.

Although quite insightful, Berlant's scholarship does not explain why some narratives of national identity continue to perpetuate themselves across time as ideologies. However, Myra Jehlen in *American Incarnation* and Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad* both set out to grapple with the ideological nature of dominant conceptions of "American-ness"—its artifice and non-empirical nature. While both Bercovitch and Jehlen are highly critical of these ideologies, they both observe that they can be immensely powerful in their social and psychological effects even if they can easily be empirically disproved or discredited. As Myra Jehlen concludes in reference to "the idea of America", "Denunciations of the reality of life in America as a travesty of the idea, or even the idea itself as a travesty, need not impair the idea's capacity to organize the world for those who continue to believe" [Jehlen: 40]. Here, Jehlen touches on the paradoxical nature of ideological fantasies of American national identity, namely that even deeply flawed or unrealistic ideologies tap into very real emotions. I want to point out that Americans who continue to believe in these ideologies are not simply being naïve or unintelligent, for these ideological fantasies possess what Fredric Jameson would call a utopian impulse which somehow manages and masks their social contradictions [Jameson: 130-48]. Therefore, many Americans might continue to believe that hard-working physical laborers embodied foundational national values and attitudes, because this was an incredibly emotionally compelling utopian vision of American ideals.

While I have outlined the origins and nature of national fantasies of manly agrarian labor, the question of how these ideological fantasies expanded to include other kinds of physical labor still remains. This adaptation occurs in the genre of the American work narrative; therefore, it is necessary to trace the fantasies' evolution across time via these texts. Since this genre developed early in the history of American literature and has persisted up through the present, it is immense in size and addresses a wide

variety of labor issues. Amazingly enough, though, the vast majority of the texts comprising this genre actively engage with ideological fantasies of manly American physical labor. Some pieces praise the fantasy; some adjust and manipulate it; and some directly criticize it. In this respect, the genre of the American work narrative represents what Michael Denning calls “a contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict” [Denning: 3]. What is so remarkable about fantasies of manly American labor—and the ideological bind they generate—is that once they became attached to non-agrarian laborers, they were virtually impossible to dismantle. Many authors of American work narratives severely criticized American capitalism and the way in which it exploited its laborers, but they never managed to subvert the idea that dignified and honorable physical laborers made virtuous and exemplary American citizens.

As a work narrative, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) plays a key role in the application of the fantasy of agrarian labor to that of other kinds of physical labor. Oddly, five chapters of *Letters from an American Farmer* are devoted, not to farming, but to the Nantucket whaling industry. What the two kinds of work had in common was that men, using skillful techniques and sheer physical capacities, confronted and subdued nature to extract valuable commodities from it—crops and whale oil. Thus, to Crèvecoeur, whalers seemed akin to farmers, and he tried to Americanize both groups in the same manner. In fact, he describes both groups of laborers as representative citizens: honest, hard-working, highly-skilled, practical American men. While the work of whaling bore certain similarities to agricultural work, many scholars, such as C.L.R. James [*Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*] and William Spanos [*The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*], have observed that the whaling industry also operated according to a factory system—an important precursor to that appearing later in the nineteenth century—in which men formed assembly lines to process whale oil. Although some authors of whaling narratives argued that this organization of labor was highly exploitative, others, such as Crèvecoeur, claimed this as a novel innovation, displaying the shrewd capitalist business sense of New Englanders. Crèvecoeur, along with Nelson Cole Haley [*Whale Hunt*] and Thomas Nickerson [“Desultory Sketches from a Seaman’s Log”], claimed this meritocratic hierarchy gave common foremast hands a proverbial “ladder to climb”; whalers could, by investing their labor and time in the industry, acquire additional skills and earn promotions, successively becoming harpooners, mates, and captains. This facet of the industry made it possible to attach the national fantasy of manly physical labor to whaling and other kinds of manual laborers, factory workers, who were also producing important commodities on America’s assembly lines and trying to earn wealth, status, and advancement.

Crèvecoeur’s casting of manual labor as skilled labor is taken up by many other writers of American work narratives, and this generates a particularly utopian sense of laboring pride in the physical capacities and practical knowledge these men possessed. In fact, most work narratives maintain that not just anyone could be a farmer, a whaler, or a factory worker. Crèvecoeur spends a great deal of time explaining how immigrant farmers apprentice themselves to already established American farmers in

order to learn the particulars of agricultural work. In *Etchings from a Whaling Cruise* (1846), J. Ross Browne explains that before he could become a proficient whaleman, he had to learn a special set of skills and develop his bodily musculature in order to perform these tasks. Representing manual labor as skilled labor effectively sets up an anti-intellectual value system which downplays the importance of book-learning and formal education and privileges experiential learning and practical knowledge. While this tendency in American work narratives has a number of different implications, I raise it here because it inspires the emotional component of the fantasy—laboring pride. Physical laborers can be proud of the work they do, and proud of themselves for doing it, precisely because it is skilled labor and requires knowledge and ability.

Ideological fantasies of manly American labor also play upon the idea that there was something honorable and dignified about working with one's hands and the rest of one's body. In fact, many work narratives argue that these laborers represent the soul of America—or, in bodily metaphor, its backbone. Importantly, this symbolic figuration of manual laborers has immense emotional currency and serves to further amplify the utopian and nationalist components of fantasies of manly American labor. In reference to farmers, the ideological attachment stems from the idea that God instructed man to labor and till the earth. For other physical laborers, the attachment came from the fact that they were using their physical capacities—their blood, sweat, and tears—to create something. Thus, admiration of skilled manual laborers involved the idea that these men produced commodities which served their families, their fellow Americans, and their national economy. Upton Sinclair's main character in *The Jungle* (1906), Jurgis Rudkus, is initially quite proud that his muscularity and physical prowess enable him acquire a job, which supports his family and produces food for all Americans. As Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) proclaims, whalers fought tooth-and-nail to gather the whale oil that kept the streets and homes of America well-lit and cheery, and they contributed immense amounts of money to the United States' economy [Melville: 109]. Even though they were at the bottom of the proverbial capitalist totem pole, these dignified and honorable men were not exploiting anyone other than themselves and their bodies, and they were supporting their families and, most importantly, their nation.

Changing social conditions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries had the potential to destroy this compelling ideological fantasy of masculine physical labor, but, as many of the work narratives show, it somehow managed to survive and perpetuate itself. As Howard Zinn observes in *A People's History of the United States*, during the nineteenth century American capitalism's hierarchy of labor became increasingly exploitative and oppressive. The working classes found themselves underpaid and overworked, laboring for incredibly long hours in horrendously dangerous conditions, and they were forced to fight, sometimes violently, for limits to the workday, wage increases, and safe, sanitary workplaces [Zinn: 247-89]. Authors of some American work narratives, believing both that the promise of America had failed and that American capitalism was inherently corrupt, attempted to show that

physical labor hardly ever leads to material success and promotion. Countering success stories, such as the Horatio Alger novels, these pieces of social protest claimed that all of the sweat and energy that working-class men invested in their physical labor meant nothing because they could not even support themselves, never mind their families [Denning: 171]. In these texts, cruel ship captains, factory managers, and bankers are all stock characters, who stymie the success of physical laborers at every turn. Early examples include Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*. Later examples include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901), Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Despite appearing in different periods and addressing different kinds of work, all of these narratives firmly ground their critiques of American capitalism on the idea that hard-working, honorable, and dignified men faced insurmountable odds in their pursuit of status and success. In other words, American capitalism doomed these working-class heroes to failure and reduced them to animalistic slaves to the system. Even though these American work narratives remained highly critical of ideological fantasies of manly American labor, they never fully succeeded in dismantling them. Ironically, their sympathetic characterization of their working-class heroes actually reinforced laboring pride. The emotional thrust of Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Norris's *The Octopus* stems from watching physically-impressive, proud, and resourceful men evolve into specters of their former selves. Furthermore, as ideologies, these fantasies were too emotively compelling, and they locked into other narratives of American national identity which ultimately served to protect them. Many of the authors who protested on behalf of America's working classes argued that the promise of America was not being fulfilled as it should be. Thus, they were, as Sacvan Bercovitch says in *The American Jeremiad*, not attacking America or its national values. Rather, they were trying to rectify what they perceived to be the hypocrisy of American ideals by making America's opportunities available to everyone. Ironically, this ideological bind kept social protest work narratives from dismantling fantasies of manly American labor and helped them endure across time.

By way of concluding my meditations on American work narratives, I want to say that it is difficult to determine whether or not the ideological fantasy with which they engage actually succeeded in Americanizing every member of the working-classes. As David Roediger insightfully points out in *The Wages of Whiteness*, masculine American working-class identity has historically excluded "non-white" laborers, such as African Americans. Because of this racial bias, fantasies of manly American labor tend to ignore racially and ethnically diverse working-class men. Keeping this important caveat in mind, I want to suggest that, despite their racism and ethnocentrism, authors of American work narratives managed to launch a culturally-dominant national fantasy which still directly impacts the way many Americans perceive the working classes. Over three hundred years, the conditions of capitalism and life in America have changed, but, significantly, the fantasy continues to manifest itself in books, such as

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Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* (1997); films, such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997); and songs, such as Lynyrd Skynyrd's, "Red, White, and Blue" (2004).



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