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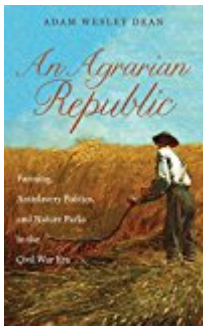

Reviewed by Eric Burke

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Historians have long attributed the ascendance of the Republican Party during the late 1850s to its broad appeal with Northern farmers, especially in the Midwest. The political ideology of the party was weighted heavily toward lauding the benefits of the proliferation of small-plot family farming throughout the nation. Indeed, as Eric Foner has pointed out, though Republicans are often connected in historical memory to their efforts to champion industrialization during the Gilded Age, antebellum and wartime Republicans emphatically insisted that America could (and should) remain "a society of family farms and small towns, while still experiencing the benefits of industrialization," and constructed their platform and policies accordingly.[1] Adam Wesley Dean's *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* returns readers to the "fundamentally agrarian" character of antebellum and wartime Republican political ideology. Building on the work of historians like Foner, William Gienapp, and Mark Lause, Dean analyzes the rhetoric of key Republican figures in order to reconstruct the system of "beliefs, fears, values, and commitments" that comprised the party's predominant ideology, and that subsequently "spurred action" (p. 4).

Dean maintains that historians "cannot understand the complexity and nuance of the Civil War era without understanding the agrarian world that the participants lived in." The historiography of the era, he argues, slips far too often into what he senses as the prevailing "leitmotif" of nineteenth-century American history—namely, that of ever-increasing industrialization. While he admits that there is "nothing inherently wrong with such a story," he notes that it does threaten to distort our understanding of the ideas and concerns of the rural majorities of mid-nineteenth-century Americans by tempting us to "look at the industrial economy of the late 1800s and early 1900s and find past 'causes.'" By instead examining the ways in which "the physical environment —farms—in which ordinary people lived" shaped their political views, Dean suggests, historians

stand a far better chance at accurately uncovering their convictions and hopes for the future (p. 186).

With this in mind, Dean argues that what troubled the agrarian Republican majorities of the North about Southern slavery at mid-century was not so much the immorality of the institution, but rather its supposed detrimental effect on otherwise bountiful Southern soil. Destructive monocrop farming practices that rapidly exhausted soil fertility and necessitated constant westward expansion contrasted with the multigenerational diversified family farms on small plots of improved land in the North. It was bad enough that such "barbarism" was allowed to prevail throughout the South, Republicans cried, but by 1854 it threatened to spread its disease of profligate land monopolies and antidemocratic slaveholder oligarchies, degraded white labor, and precipitately exhausted soil into the "virgin" lands of the West.

If this reasoning was in fact central to the party's resistance to slavery's expansion, Dean explains, it was also "foremost among people's reasons for supporting the Union" in the wake of Southern secession (p. 72). In chapter 3, Dean examines how agrarian Republican ideology was mobilized successfully in the effort to secure California's fidelity to the Union; pass the Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act, and the Land Grant College Act; and establish the United States Department of Agriculture. Throughout the chapter, Dean adeptly illustrates how antebellum concerns over "proper land use" continued to inform and guide Republican policymaking during the war years. Reveling in near untrammeled legislative power following the departure of Southern congressmen, Republicans worked to make good on antebellum dreams of spreading an "Agrarian Republic" of free smallholding farmers across the western territories, ostensibly girding the future Union against the possibility of a coming national reunification with the menace of slavery still intact.

In 1864, Congress also debated the fate of the Yosemite territory in California—a gem of natural beauty that many hoped "would 'civilize' the average person and improve his or her intellectual abilities" upon the mere sight of its splendor, and thus could best serve the public good preserved in its natural state (p. 7). Consistent with their near deification of the smallholding farmer however, radical Republicans disagreed. "The Constitution and the laws are for the protection of citizens and not for the creation of fancy pleasure grounds by Congress," one radical remarked, aptly summarizing the sentiments of many Republicans like George Julian of Indiana (p. 109). Radicals instead argued that the territory should be opened up for settlement by small farmers at once, thus fostering the spread of "freedom, union, and an improved society" (p. 126). The situation was complicated by the presence of "squatting" farmers already productively working the soil of the territory, forcing Republicans to decide whether or not to evict their beloved yeomen in order to preserve the territory's natural beauty for the enjoyment of the public at large—a plan supported by ardent Republican and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. As Dean shows, Republicans fractured on these lines during the Yosemite debates of 1864, with the Olmsted project finally prevailing. But more important, Dean argues, the debates themselves offer a glimpse into the prevailing agrarian ideology of radical Republicans, suggesting that such "environmental controversies were not about preservation versus destruction," but rather were directly "connected to the main political currents of the time" (p. 8).

Also connected to these currents were Republican endeavors to reconstruct the South in the aftermath of victory and "civilize" Native Americans on western reservations. In his final chapter, Dean argues against the tendency of historians to find "inconsistency in [Republicans] promoting African American land rights in the South while curtailing Native American freedoms in the West." Republicans perceived no such inconsistency.

"Both groups, they believed, would become small farmers and, in doing so, adopt white cultural values," Dean explains. "Since most northerners lived in rural communities and celebrated the environmental and political benefits of small farming, converting others to their lifestyle seemed natural" (p. 186). By emphasizing this factor, Dean ably supports his claim that "Northern policy makers did not want to industrialize the South and the West," but rather "intended to promote farming communities and strengthen the yeomanry that provided the foundation for republican government" (p. 136). Although perpetual violent resistance and the ever-decreasing tenability of small farming across the late nineteenth century gradually dismantled dreams of "civilizing" the Republic, Dean's approach highlights the continuity of Republican projects across the Civil War and Reconstruction era and "allows historians to make new connections between seemingly different topics" (p. 186).

Some will likely charge Dean with oversimplification of a very complex (and, in many ways, quite heterogenous) political ideology, but the importance he places on rooting the ideas and concerns of historical actors within the particular contexts in which they lived is a point well taken. In a modern Republic in which a mere 2 percent of American families and but 15 percent of the total American labor force is engaged in agricultural work (compared to 60 percent in the summer of 1859), it is easy to forget that less than two centuries ago the most "progressive" of Americans foresaw a future nation composed chiefly of smallholding farmers (p. 2).[2] Dean also slips at times into a conflation of the terms "Northern" and "Republican," ignoring Democrats, many of whom were also smallholding farmers embracing a markedly different political ideology. One wonders why the word "Republican" is nowhere in the subtitle. Still, as a supplement to our growing understanding of Republican (and especially radical Republican) political ideology during the era, Dean's work is a valuable addition well worth the time of all who study the party of Abraham Lincoln and the many rural Republican "Boys in Blue" that eventually did its bidding.

Notes

[1]. Eric Foner, ***Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36.

[2]. American Farm Bureau Federation, "Fast Facts about Agriculture," http://www.fb.org/index.php?fuseaction=newsroom.fastfacts.

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