

**A European Experience in the South: Eric Voegelin, the Southern  
Agrarians and Common Sense Philosophy.**

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## **Introduction:**

The purpose of this research paper is twofold. First to examine Eric Voegelin's treatment of common sense philosophy, especially its role in the foundation of an innovative political science. In this context, Voegelin's formative years in the United States and his early reflexions on the "intellectual formation" of the American society, discussed in the book *On The Form of the American Mind*, will also be considered.

Secondly, I will link Voegelin's analysis of common sense philosophy to the Southern Agrarian tradition. Voegelin had a strong connection with the South and, even if he was not a southerner, his years in Baton Rouge were one of the most significant periods for his philosophical speculation and the acquaintances he made. I will demonstrate the Agrarian perspective to common sense philosophy. The argument is not that Southern Agrarian conservatism can be likened to the Scottish common sense tradition. I do not want to claim historical continuity. It is only that Scottish common sense and Southern Agrarianism (via antebellum intellectuals), distinct as they are, are movements that have some similarities. In particular, I intend to focus upon the Agrarians' perspective about literature and the philosophical import of literature considering its crucial importance in helping to address the crises of modern political, social and spiritual order.

The questions for discussion are the following: what kind of common sense philosophy is present in Voegelin's political thought? What is the role of common sense philosophy in Southern Agrarianism? Can the Southern Agrarian alternative vision of American political and social life be regarded as a political theory connected to reality? Is it possible to build a coherent political theory on which to base practice from Agrarian thought?

## **Voegelin and common sense philosophy:**

Voegelin first visited the United States in 1924. Thanks to a Laura Spellman Rockefeller fellowship, the German scholar had the opportunity of studying in the United States for two years – from 1924 to 1926. He began his work at Columbia University, where

he attended the courses of Franklin Henry Giddings (sociology), John Dewey (pedagogy), Arthur W. McMahon (public administration) and Thomas Hunt Morgan (biology). In 1925 he moved to Madison for the summer session at the University of Wisconsin. Here he met John R. Commons and Selig Perlman, who introduced him to American political history and labor history. Then, in the fall of 1925, Voegelin went to Harvard, where he attended the lectures of Alfred North Whitehead and studied American jurisprudence with Roscoe Pound. Finally, he visited Yale law School, studying with Arthur Corbin. In those American years another significant cultural stimulus came from reading George Santayana's works.

The American experience strongly influenced Voegelin's way of philosophizing. As he says: «These two years in America brought the great break in my intellectual development. [...] I discovered English and American common sense philosophy» and the «English and Scottish conception of common sense [...] has remained a lasting influence in my understanding both of common sense and Classic philosophy. It was during this time that I got the first inkling of what the continued tradition of Classic philosophy and the common-sense level, without necessarily the technical apparatus of an Aristotle, could mean for the intellectual climate and cohesion of a society».<sup>1</sup> Voegelin immediately notices the uniqueness of the intellectual climate of the United States and he conveys it through the volume, *On The Form of the American Mind*, published in 1928. The book went virtually unnoticed by the American public and the German academic environment gave it a cool reception. The style is, actually, not as clear as in the later Voegelinian works and its contents, which go from the discussion of time to American political and economic theories, made it a fragmentary collection of essays. However, the book shows the new epistemological basis of Voegelin's interpretative analysis of socio-historical reality.

The subject matter of his inquiry is the «intellectual formation» (*geistige Gestaltung*) of a specific society.

By the term *intellectual formation* we refer not only to the larger, obvious phenomena, such as political institutions, art, works, factories, railroads, psychological therapies, and the like. The study must also take into account all aspects of everyday life, no matter how trivial: for example, the ships on the Hudson River tend to be painted a smudged red color, rather like bloodsausage, while boats on the Seine seem to prefer a more gentle tint; [...]. Intellectual formations should show traces of

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<sup>1</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Autobiographical Reflections*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2006, pp. 56-57.

their origin in a particular social body. But such a social body is itself merely the embodiment of intellectual formations held together by traits peculiar to the form.<sup>2</sup>

Voegelin argues that the “form” of a society had to be based on the interrelationship of various mental expressions (philosophy, economy, law, etc.) that led to a same model which binds the entire social order into a unity. Therefore, instead of identifying the State with the monarch or law with the *Grundnorm*, Voegelin refers to the *intellectual formations* which are at the root of the political organization.<sup>3</sup> To grasp society in all its richness it is necessary to focus on the self-reflection of society. According to Voegelin:

[...] what is it we want to know when we look into a national mind and try to understand it? We want to know the nation’s attitude toward the essential questions of life [...]. We want to know what it considers a valuable aim to pursue in life, its attitude toward death and God, its ideal of humanity, its ideas about social relations within the body politic, about relations to other national units, its belief in its mission in history, what it thinks of itself. A scientifically worked out concept of a national mind has to answer these questions, [...].<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the (political) scientist must begin his investigation from the interpretation of the inherent meaning of the material that he wants to study. He proceeds grasping from history the morphology of the national type of mind. As a matter of fact, the national type of mind is brought into existence by history itself. Thus, investigation has an empirical-experiential basis: the analysis of the intellectual formation is tied to personal and social or institutional expressions of mind which have an experiential foundation.

In this respect, common sense is at the base of the American type of mind. According to Voegelin, the intellectual and political life of the United States is not founded on a rigid doctrinal system, it was inspired by concrete political events which constitute the basis of political life, such as the founding of the American Republic, the Declaration of Independence and the adoption of the Constitution. An immediate perception, an original trust/belief in the historical roots of the basic principles of the democratic community prevail in the social and political scene. From Voegelin’s perspective, the political

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<sup>2</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *On the Form of the American Mind*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1995, pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> In *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin speaks of *existential representation*.

<sup>4</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *National Types of Mind and the Limits to Interstate Relations*, in E. VOEGELIN, *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1921-1938*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2003, pp. 447-448.

significance of common sense in the United States emerges from the “sense of things in common” which is a prerequisite for a healthy moral and political life. Moreover, this sense of things that human beings and human communities have in common is grounded in the immediate knowledge of reality that is a mental capacity to recognize self-evident truths. These self-evident truths, on which common sense understanding is based, are not truths that are necessarily obvious to everyone, but are evident only to those who, with an unclouded vision, have detected and experienced their importance.<sup>5</sup> Hence, on the one hand, common sense is anchored in experience, concerning a contact with the world in its physical and mental dimensions, and on the other hand, is founded by experience because «it is the fruit of innumerable encounters with the world’s basic features and innumerable judgments both of fact and logic».<sup>6</sup>

Just as in the Scottish School, in Voegelin’s conception, common sense is «the ability of the normal man, reasonable man (the common man in the Anglo-Saxon sense) to behave rationally in the ordinary affairs of everyday life»;<sup>7</sup> and so it «must be understood in the sense of the Scottish School, especially Thomas Reid. For Reid, man is, in Cicero’s sense, *rationis particeps*; [...] Common sense means the same as “a branch or degree of *ratio*”» and as a result «does not connote a social ballast of vulgar ideas [...]. On the contrary, it is the habit of judgment and conduct of man formed by *ratio*; one could say it is the habit of an Aristotelian *spoudaios*».<sup>8</sup>

For Voegelin, common sense is a necessary mental disposition for philosophizing, keeping philosophy anchored in direct experiences of reality. Hence, both as the capacity to recognize self-evident truths and as a body of knowledge constituted by self-evident truths, common sense is the condition for political science. The use of reason for the basic questions of order is the insight necessary for the correct modes of action concerning man’s existence in society. Common sense insights, which are «the lowest-ranking statements that directly interpret concrete experience»,<sup>9</sup> range from the organization of government,

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<sup>5</sup> S.P. SEGREST, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2010, pp. 1-2, 21-24.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 310.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, pp. 410-411.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 410.

requirements of domestic, foreign, military and financial policy to decision-making in concrete cases.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the body of knowledge constituted by common sense is essential for building an ordered political society. As a matter of fact, a good society depends on a) men of seasoned judgment who b) define the decision-making process of politics on self-evident facts and truths. This involves a common sense understanding of what is right and good, so that the communal sense of justice, humanity and happiness is not messed up.

Voegelin points out that the loss of reasoning logically has its decisive manifestation in the mass and ideological movements of our age. Moreover, the meaning of life in all its facets cannot be grasped by means of a-priori concepts or calculative reason or natural science models. The attempt to understand man's being through this type of reason is an existential disturbance and a potential source of social disorder. Thus, the lack of a common sense tradition makes society vulnerable to self-destruction. Common sense as common judgment and as a mode of thinking is «a refuge of *ratio* in the modern crisis of order».<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he states that «the remarkable strength of the Anglo-American cultural sphere in resisting the ideologies could be traced to the strong social field of common sense, even though, admittedly, in this sphere too the ideologies gain foothold, but have not up to now seriously endangered the order of *res publica*».<sup>12</sup> Hence, «the absence of political institutions rooted in an intact common sense tradition is a fundamental defect of the German political structure that still has not been overcome. [...] American society [has] a philosophical background far superior in range and existential substance, though not always in articulation, to anything that I found represented in the methodological environment in which I had grown up».<sup>13</sup>

Although a compact form of rationality (made up of good habits of judgment and conduct), there can be no science of politics without an *empiria* of politics that is the habit of common sense. Common sense is a «pragmatic factor of highest importance for the stability of western society», but it has its limits: being «a genuine residue of noesis», it lacks the «differentiating knowledge of noesis», that is «the insights of consciousness into

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<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 409.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 412.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Autobiographical Reflections* cit., p. 57.

order by which commonsense insights receive their direction».<sup>14</sup> Hence, noetic exegesis is the next step towards a philosophy or science of politics, that is a higher degree of differentiation. The adequate articulation and symbolizations of the questioning consciousness is the expression of a radically new insight into reality itself.

However, in Voegelin's account, a penetrating inquiry into man's existence and into the real source of order cannot be achieved without common sense. Common sense thinking is foundational and regulative for a theoretical understanding of political reality. On the one hand, it constitutes the starting point for theorizing and, on the other hand, it provides the foundation for the advancement of political theory.

In addition to common sense philosophy as the distinct form of the American way of thinking, the German political philosopher notices the significance of William James's thought. In James's philosophy Voegelin captures an unconventional rationality which is characterized by a core of common sense convictions that are refined and enriched. In particular, in the Voegelinian perspective, Jamesian philosophy is remarkable for a) the conception of experience and b) the creative and spontaneous confrontation with reality, which experience itself determined. The variety of experience in its individual and social dimensions is the element that Voegelin appreciates most and around which unfolds his theoretical speculation. Like James, Voegelin is against an artificial and impoverished notion of experience.

The gnoseology of James is grounded in *pure experience*, that is «the instant field of the present», «the immediate flux of life», the undifferentiated primary experience that man naturally embraces being part of the reality from which experience itself originates. Man (subject) and the world (object) are simultaneously implicated in the constitution of experience and in the process of knowing. Hence, pure experience is the starting point for understanding reality considered concretely, because it is in this *flux of life* or *stream of consciousness* that we find all the material from which to build our truths. Pure experience indicates the path of knowledge, which is founded in an instant awareness of "things" perceived as they appear to personal consciousness, and therefore it corresponds to reality telling us all we can ever know. Thus, consciousness appears to be characterized as a

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<sup>14</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Anamnesis* cit., pp. 410-412.

function of knowing by experience (the knowing stream of consciousness within reality): to know and to be conscious of are integral parts of pure experience. In this context, common sense still represents reality in its direct view and it is the first form of truth, the first stage of philosophizing. Accordingly, at the basis of human well-being there is experience in its participatory nature and common sense: they both bind together the socio-political community.

James's philosophy «navigate[s] us across the sea of experience and get[s] us in touch with its farther reaches»;<sup>15</sup> as a matter of fact, according to Voegelin, James emphasizes the creative, participatory and dynamic role of experience capturing, on the one hand, the complexity of the world and, on the other hand, rejecting the dogmatic components of reality which through abstraction and conceptual constructions deform and eclipse reality. Thus, James's study becomes of particular importance for Voegelin's search for truth providing a fundamental insight into experience and the reality of consciousness. In particular, in the Voegelinian view, the stimulating effect lies in «the in-between character of experience»: experience is «neither in the subject nor in the world of objects» but «In-between of the divine and the human». These poles of experiential tension of the participatory pure experience make noetic differentiation possible, which implies the differentiation of society itself.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, according to Voegelin, society and its order depends on *homonoia*, in the Aristotelian and Christian sense, that is likeness in the participation in the common *nous* under the guidance of attraction toward transcendence. *Homonoia* (or *likemindedness*) reveals the substance of society and it is closely linked to common sense. Actually, common sense describes the common interest of the community, what is right and good for the communal life. In Thomas Reid terms, it is a concord, a trust and a sharing about what is required morally and practically to bind the community together. Hence, common sense is a kind of rational sociability which presupposes a mental disposition that is «an openness of consciousness to all that the experience may show».<sup>17</sup> In Voegelin, the openness of common

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<sup>15</sup> S.P. SEGREST, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense* cit., p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Autobiographical Reflections* cit., pp. 98-99.

<sup>17</sup> S.P. SEGREST, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense* cit., p. 22.



sense is broadened to encompass a kind of judgment and friendship guided by the attraction toward transcendence.

In conclusion, Voegelin combines common sense, Classic philosophy, Christian culture and the dynamic and creative qualities of William James's notion of pure experience to conceive a philosophy of politics which finds in common sense philosophical and practical equilibrium. The respective insights of each branch is brought together by common sense; common sense makes possible a balancing between these different traditions by means of its comprehensive reasoning about truths and its constant attention to all experiences. It is «a civilizational habit» and it «make[s] clear [...] that [...] there can be no “theory of politics” in terms of fundamental propositions or principles rising above the propositions of an “empirical” science of politics».<sup>18</sup> Stressing the pre-philosophic quality of common sense and that the grasp of first principles or self-evident truths is however rooted in experience, Voegelin reminds us of the necessity to keep philosophy anchored in reality. Thus, common sense is the first step to reacting to the political and economic disarray of contemporary politics, finding a concrete ground that could serve as a reliable basis for moral and political order. But, Voegelin adds to common sense the questioning dimension of philosophy: the never ending search for truth that takes place in the in-between reality of consciousness. The openness to reality, which in common sense philosophy originates in intimate acquaintance and trust and in the sense of a higher law and divine demand or higher judge, in Voegelin's perspective, is the pivot for unfolding the experiential tension of *metaxy*.

### **Southern Agrarianism and common sense philosophy**

Speaking about Southern Agrarians and measuring the depth of their political theory and its relation to common sense and to Voegelin's political philosophy, I will indicate the prominent features of their thought. I will not explore Agrarianism systematically in its historical roots and in its ideological complexities even if I recognize the difficulty of generalizing about a group of individuals who diverge radically in their personalities and ideologies and which includes a complex array of movements. I will focus on Agrarianism

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<sup>18</sup> E. VOEGELIN, *Anamnesis* cit., p. 411.

underlining that it has a contemporary relevance reminding us, a) to ponder carefully the dilemmas of our world and b) the necessity to fight for a humane, just and responsibly free society.<sup>19</sup>

The twentieth-century Southern Agrarians are a distinct group of intellectuals, historians and men of letters,<sup>20</sup> all with roots in Southern United States, that in 1930 published a pro-agrarian Southern manifesto entitled *I'll Take My Stand. The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. In the book they sought to confront the increasing loss of Southern identity, culture and tradition by the widespread effects of modernity. The Southern past «appear[s] to offer an oasis of order, tradition, and stability countering the national obsession with progress, expansion, and transformation».<sup>21</sup>

Since the publication of that collection of twelve essays Southern Agrarianism continues to fascinate because it is «perceived today not as a nostalgic look backward, but as a forward looking, [...] an affirmation of universal values» in defense «of the religious, aesthetic, and moral foundations of the old European civilization».<sup>22</sup> Of course, their political and social philosophy changed over the years and they reinterpreted their original perspective in the light of changing convictions. However, they still offer a rich political discourse about contemporary Western civilization.

In the 1930s the Agrarian vision of a proper order of man and society, born as a relief from the pressure of modernism, secularism, progressivism, scientism, materialism, centralism, industrialism, capitalism and endless economic expansion dissolving communities and social cohesion. As a matter of fact, at the core of the Agrarian thought

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<sup>19</sup> I will not take into consideration the sense of white supremacy, the subordination of African-Americans, the marginalization of women, the thorny question of racism that in some cases occurs in their works. These are facets profoundly related to their thought, requiring a vaster analysis that cannot be tackled in this brief paper.

<sup>20</sup> The Southern Agrarians included: Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, Henry Blue Kline, Lyle H. Lanier, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Herman Clarence Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, John Donald Wade, Robert Penn Warren, Stark Young. After World War II Southern Agrarianism reached its most comprehensive theoretical formulation in the works of Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) and *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (1964). Carried forward by Melvin Bradford's intellectual and political aegis, it enjoys the support of a talented group of writers, scholars and social critics.

<sup>21</sup> S.V. DONALDSON, *Introduction: The Southern Agrarians and Their Cultural Wars*, in *I'll Take My Stand. The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2006, p. XIX.

<sup>22</sup> W.C. HAVARD-W. SULLIVAN, *Introduction*, in *A Band of Prophets. The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1982, p. 9.

there are: a) opposition to unfettered individualism, sweeping America and adherence to Christian individualism that condemns personal license and the demand for moral consensus rooted in elementary pity, b) opposition to financial capitalism and, more broadly, the attempt to substitute market for society itself; localized agricultural production, self-directed work and simple living is highly valued, c) the rejection of moral relativism in favor of belief in a transcendental order or natural law in society as well as in nature, so that political problems are revealed as essentially religious and moral, d) the concern for the environment against the depredation of progress and the necessity to regain a proper connection with nature, e) the persistent desire to maintain the Christian values of Western civilization, f) an insistence that every people must develop its own genius, based upon its special history, and must reject the call for cosmopolitanism that would eradicate local and national cultures and standards of personal conduct by reducing morals to commodities.<sup>23</sup>

All these issues, that after 1933 underwent a more pragmatic reading,<sup>24</sup> coalesce in a particular kind of political theory which provides an alternative vision of American political and social life which is a reassessment of bourgeois assumptions and a reevaluation of the limits of democracy. In particular, Southern Agrarians devise a Christian Republicanism which embodies a vision of the world based on family, community, civic responsibility, moral consensus, religion and tradition.

Tradition, especially, exemplified Agrarian idea of social order: it is understood not as the passing of beliefs or customs from one generation to the next, not something «cast in stone and worshiped as an idol», but as «an embodiment of “givens” that must constantly be fought for, recovered in each generation and adjusted to new conditions».<sup>25</sup> In T.S. Eliot's words tradition «cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves in the first place the historical sense [...] and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the

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<sup>23</sup> E.D. GENOVESE, *The Southern Tradition. The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> By 1933, all the Agrarians joined a more general attacks on privileges and money and more general efforts to decentralized property to large number of people.

<sup>25</sup> E.D. GENOVESE, *The Southern Tradition. The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* cit., p. 5.

literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order». <sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, emerges a sense of tradition that is an experience of intimacy with history. On the one hand, tradition represents the essentials of the history of the South and of Western Christian Civilization and, on the other hand, it appeals to history in order to interpret society as religiously grounded and to live the present responsibly. Moreover, man is perceived as a unity of mind, body and spirit and he is understood in the wholeness of his being that means in his individuality and sociability, both closely related to family, community and nature. This is fundamental to fight against personal isolation and social atomization and against the messianic pretension of science. Thus, they revolt against the products of modernity and market society rethinking the social and political conditions capable of realizing a civil society organized on a human scale.

The preservations of society's spiritual and moral values depends, above all, upon the nature and form of property and government. Against big business and big government they favor an economic development that must be rendered morally and socially responsible; they condemn corporate centralization for divorcing property from the direct responsibility of those who control it and thus they look after a kind of *proprietas* that «keeps its identity with the individual». <sup>27</sup> Hence, Southern Agrarian conservatives desire to combine private ownership and social participation and control. In this respect, they defend constitutional democracy-representative government against the “numerical” democracy-radical egalitarianism which is always on the verge of degenerating in centralized forms of political regime. Big business or finance capitalism forces a bureaucratic control that is the sign of a strong central government. In contrast to that, they feel the necessity to strengthen the political power of states and communities and, at the same time, they recognize the indispensability of a limited federal government in the solution of vast international (and sometimes national) problems. This double aim is pursued recovering moral consensus and a social order founded in communities embedded in shared experience and faith. In this sense, Southern Agrarianism expresses a belief in a transcendental order of natural law in

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<sup>26</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in ID., *Selected Essays*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964, pp. 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> R.M. WEAVER, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 133.

society, so that political problems are revealed as essentially religious and moral. Moreover, the valuable form of community, which they defend, appears to be rooted in the Aristotelian idea of *homonoia*, interpreted as concord and agreement in thought generating social bonds and communally produced truth.

All of that envisages a familiarity with the basic ideas of the common sense of the Scottish philosophers. Even if the Agrarians do not make frequent references to common sense philosopher writings, the notion of common sense affected, somehow, Agrarian thinking. As a matter of fact, the Agrarians via antebellum southern theorists (for example, John Randolph of Roanoke and John C. Calhoun) echo some features of the Scottish Enlightenment. In particular: a) the appeal to common Christian moral standard, b) the reliance in natural law which comes to us through Christian revelation, c) an anti-relativistic standpoint which regards moral truths as almost unchanging and d) God perceived as the Agent who guarantees an eternal moral order. These are all issues which constitute the philosophical political program of Agrarianism. As Richard Weaver emphasizes:

the necessity of having some form of knowledge that will stand above the welter of earthly change and bear witness that God is superior to accident [...] teaches that whereas some things may be learned through investigation and the exercise of the reasoning powers, others must be given or “revealed” by God. Man cannot live under a settled dispensation if the postulates of his existence must be continually revised in accordance with knowledge furnished by a nature filled with contingencies. [...] in the science of nature there are constantly appearing emergents which, if allowed to affect spiritual and moral verities, would destroy them by rendering them dubious, tentative and conflicting. It is therefore imperative [...] that man has for guidance in this life a body of knowledge to which the facts of natural discovery are either subordinate or irrelevant. This body of knowledge is “the rock of ages”, firm in the vast sea of human passion and fallibility. Moral truth is not something which can be altered every time science widens its field of induction.<sup>28</sup>

The Agrarian re-adaptation of common sense ideas that concur to shape a well-ordered society, which have also in Burke (and in Burkean conservatism) a point of reference, warns against the forces of modernity and the destructive results of science. Today more than ever it is clear that the «flourishing technology», the uncontrolled exploitation of nature, industrialization and finance capitalism without restraint «may make our civilization more rather than less difficult of attainment». They lead to «mobilization of external forces», they create «enormous concentrations of irresponsible power» and

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<sup>28</sup> R.M. WEAVER, *The Southern Tradition at Bay. A History of Postbellum Thought*, Washington D.C., Regnery Gateway, 1989, pp. 89-90.

«through an inexorable standardization» they destroy individuality and create «the greatest moral confusion».<sup>29</sup> Hence, thinking about the recent events (such as foreign and domestic policy failures, environmental depredation, urban decay, loss of confidence in institutions, economic disarray) the Agrarian analysis of the precarious state of our civilization is illuminating. Furthermore, they call for an economy and a society organized on a human scale, that permits a) more individual, family and community control over personal and social destinies than does the centralized industrial and capitalistic society, b) more concern with spiritual and human values than does the mode of existence fostered by the scientific-technocratic-industrial world, c) a political order constituting civilization on traditional bonds and on timeless moral truths.

Condemning modernity not per se but rather the cult of scientism, rationalism and material progress, Agrarian conservatism tries to reconcile, on the one hand, modernity and tradition and, on the other hand, modernity and progress. Their aims are to purge the worst from modernity responding to the needs of community and individuals and to combat the progressive disintegration of the Western social fabric. The synthesis they are looking for is not simple to find: they try to envisage a different form of society balancing history, religion and ethics. The awareness of the relevance of common sense (common sense perceptions, common sense morality, an adaptation to God and a gradual victory of the good...) to modern political life and especially democracy affects the Southern Conservative thought. The renewal of well-being of the whole society, in particular the revitalizing of the Southern tradition, that they desire to carry out, is related to common sense. In fact, common sense is seen as a guide to govern man between good and evil and thus to grasp how man ought to live and best realize the potential of his existence. At the heart of the Southern experience there is a *societas* which is a repository of values and in which members are «“related in terms of practice”» in «a common way».<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ivi, pp. 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> M.E. BRADFORD, *Conclusion. Not in Memoriam, But in Affirmation*, in *Why the South Will Survive. Fifteen Southerners Look at their Region a Half Century after I'll Take my Stand*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1981, p. 213.

In this respect, the philosophical import of literature is crucial and so the fact that most of the Agrarians are men of letters<sup>31</sup> is essential to fully understand their vision of order and their perspective of common sense. First, literature is a source for the sense of unity and community and it is a relief from the pressures of modernity. By means of literature in all of its dimensions (poetry, novels and so on) it is possible to recover the tradition and the myth of the South, its regional memory and its heritage. Thus, it is the expression of a creative power and of a sensibility: literature has a meditative quality through which it is possible to examine and recover the «positive economic, social, and religious values out of which the good life and its profound expression in art [is] possible».<sup>32</sup> Secondly, and above all, literature is a contemplative mode of consciousness which denotes a particular process of thinking about our «common humanity» and about «the crises of modern political, social and spiritual disorder».<sup>33</sup>

From this point of view, Voegelin plays a significant role for understanding the mode of philosophizing through literature. The German philosopher influences Southern thinkers (and conservative thought) of the post Second World War period (such as Weaver and Bradford) for his criticism of modernity in its various aspects: rationalism, scientism, positivism, antiphilosophism, secularization, relativism, liberalism, Marxism etc.. Moreover, having taught at Louisiana State University from 1942 to 1958 he made acquaintance with long-time associated Agrarians such as Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman.<sup>34</sup> The contact with these colleagues of the English Department was to be stimulating for reflecting upon the relationship between philosophy, literature and common sense.

Writing to Heilman, Voegelin underlines that:

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<sup>31</sup> The leading poets, novelists, and literary scholars among the Agrarians were Ransom, Davidson, Tate, Lytle and Warren. Moreover, long time associated with the Agrarians were the literary critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman.

<sup>32</sup> W.C. HAVARD-W. SULLIVAN, *Introduction*, in *A Band of Prophets. The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years* cit., p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> C.R. EMBRY, *The Philosopher and The Storyteller. Eric Voegelin and the Twentieth-Century Literature*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2008, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Voegelin published some essays in «The Southern Review», a literary and critical journal: E. VOEGELIN, *Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw'. With I. Prefatory note by Robert Heilman*, 2. *A Letter to Robert Heilman*, 3. *Postscript: "On Paradise and Revolution"*, «The Southern Review», VII, I, pp. 3-48; ID., *Reason: The Classic Experience*, «The Southern Review», X, 2, pp. 237-264; ID., *Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation*, «The Southern Review», XVII, 2, pp. 235-287.

literature constitutes reality, if it is any good, and does not merely imitate or interpret it. The starting point for theoretical consideration would be for me the Aristotelian observation (in the *Poetics*) that the poets give better insights into human nature than the historians, because they do not report reality but imaginatively create the “nature” of things. “Reality” as observed is always nature in the state of potentiality; the “true” reality of actualized nature is rarely given, but must be constructed from the resources of the artist.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, literature is a way for starting an inquiry into the nature of man. This type of investigation does not exclude history. On the contrary it is a historical interpretation because the nature of man unfolds its potentialities historically and it reveals the mutual participation in the quest of human nature between the object of interpretation or rather the human being (the novelist/the poet who symbolized their experiences in language) and the subject of interpretation (the philosopher or the literary critic). The shared spiritual substance of, on the one hand, the writer and, on the other hand, the philosopher/literary critic makes possible participation «in the great dialogue that goes through the centuries among men about their nature and destiny».<sup>36</sup> Thus, in literary works emerge the symbolism of the search for order in the human existence of artists. And the works of art enable us to understand the one ordered universe common to all, to develop and fulfill our potential as human beings and to understand the dimensions of reality in which we find ourselves immersed.<sup>37</sup> This literary exploration into being has two constituents. First of all, it consists of a common sense approach (a «pre-philosophic “wisdom” literature»)<sup>38</sup> which clings to reality and reveals the immediacy of the language symbolism of the artist.<sup>39</sup> In addition to that, it also involves a critical-questioning approach or rather a philosophical inquiry to reach the heart of human existence. This kind of analysis is the one carried on by philosophers (and literary critics) to fully grasp human experience as it has been articulated and symbolized. Both components (common sense and critical-philosophical approach) are

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<sup>35</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, January 14, 1961, in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2004, p. 210.

<sup>36</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, August 22, 1956, in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 157. Cfr. C.R. EMBRY, *The Philosopher and The Storyteller. Eric Voegelin and the Twentieth-Century Literature* cit., p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> C.R. EMBRY, *The Philosopher and The Storyteller. Eric Voegelin and the Twentieth-Century Literature* cit., pp. 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, December 30, 1969, in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 259.

<sup>39</sup> From the philosopher or literary critic's view that means a historical study which gives precedence to the texts and to the experiences of reality that texts symbolize.



indispensable elements in the search for order. Both of them are necessary to confront the socio-political reality (and the symbolic expressions of the works of art). They are necessary for the philosopher and the literary critic who desire to establish a theoretical science of humanity that would include all dimensions of human existence and to understand the trail of symbols left by the human search for order.

## **Conclusions:**

The philosophical program of Agrarianism is based on the two modes of philosophizing, the common sense level and the critical-questioning level, mentioned above. As a matter of fact, these two levels of inquiry are the one structure that enable the construction of a political philosophy for a thorough understanding of reality. However, one of the persisting criticisms of Agrarianism has been that they failed to bring their political theory into pragmatic existence and thus to translate their philosophical project into action. Being strong social critics, they lack a reflective distance in the quest to recover reality from the perils of modernity which endanger humanity. Hence, Southern Agrarians have a theoretical position too firmly embedded in the reality they examine and a weak questioning dimension or noetic insight able to grasp the full participation of man in the realms of being. If the Southern Agrarians' common sense approach is a factor of highest importance for the recovery and the stability of a healthy Western society, it is inadequate to respond to the philosophical and practical struggle against the ideologies of the modern age. From this perspective, Agrarianism is extremely vulnerable: their «awareness of the past and the way it influences the conduct of life», their «preference for the concrete over the abstract that places the consideration of personal, family and community relations above legal, contractual, and formal bureaucratic arrangements, and a persisting attachment to organized religion»,<sup>40</sup> from pillars of democracy can slip into threats to democracy. The Agrarian type of political discourse thus risks, a) appearing reactionary and b) wavering between the defense of the common man (who nurtured by day-to-day experience has a first-rate sense of what is right and good) and the exclusivity of a Southern elite.

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<sup>40</sup> W.C. HAVARD, *The Distinctive South: Fading or Reviving?*, in *Why the South Will Survive. Fifteen Southerners Look at their Region a Half Century after I'll Take my Stand* cit., p. 39.

Rather, common sense combined to the questioning-noetic dimension of philosophy can be the key to balance the ambiguities and the paradoxes of Southern Agrarianism and to strengthen Southern political philosophy and its significance in pondering carefully the dilemmas of the American way of life and of the worldwide political, economic and social uncertainties. In fact, Agrarianism aims, despite the enormous changes that have occurred in American and in Western society since the 1930s and post Second World War, at the root of things that still threaten the foundations of our civilization.<sup>41</sup> The blend of the two modes of philosophizing, as in the Voegelinian speculation, will enable us to see through the symbolization to the reality from which symbols emerged into the consciousness of man. This kind of interpretation of human experiences by means of common sense, history and noetic philosophy (or, in Voegelin's words, luminosity of noetic science) is the means to understanding the complexities of human nature and political reality.

The closer realization to that mode of philosophizing in Southern conservatism is Southern literature itself, offering the guidelines to translate the literary works of the Southern Agrarians into a thorough understanding of the areas of politics. The importance of literary works to the struggle for a just and ordered society has nothing to do with poems or prose about politics. On the contrary, it refers to a vision of reality of profound significance to the truth of human experience. Men of letters (such as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman) are great participants in life and they can reveal to us the search for meaning that takes place in history. As a matter of fact, literary works are one of the principal scenes for the recovery of the wholeness of reality that surrounds us; their pages tell of the participation in the cosmic, human, and divine elements of reality and so the mutual interaction between God and man, world and society. For Voegelin, literature is «a vital resource for the philosopher who would understand human consciousness as it manifests itself historically in the biographies of concrete human beings through their imaginative symbolizations».<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, according to Voegelin, literary criticism is a literary theory that leads us into the complexity of the philosophical work. Literary

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<sup>41</sup> Today the world appears still dominated by man's dominion over nature, moral crisis and perversion of truth, standards of consumption which we cannot meet, the overwhelming power of financial organizations, etc...

<sup>42</sup> C.R. EMBRY, *The Philosopher and The Storyteller. Eric Voegelin and the Twentieth-Century Literature* cit., p. 32.

interpretation, as the one developed by Robert Heilman and so a type of analysis very close to the one advanced by New Criticism,<sup>43</sup> imposes a procedure of reading reality that arranges «the problem of human nature in the technically perfect order of progress from the peripheral to the center of personality».<sup>44</sup> Without divorcing literature from history, but leaving behind a historicist analysis,<sup>45</sup> it deals with «action and language, body and soul, emotion and expression, experience and symbol» that are all parts of «the web that mysteriously carries the meaning of being and existence».<sup>46</sup> Through a cognitive process rooted both in common sense and reflective distance literary theory can capture the existential movement in the *metaxy* of human beings and «penetrate to “the eternal truth of things”».<sup>47</sup>

This is the further philosophical insight necessary to the Agrarian perspective and when thinking about Agrarian literary men and about the literary movement of the New Criticism, they have it to hand. Their commitment to literature offers a dense philosophical texture which can be one of the catalysts to look into the soul of man and politics. Literary criticism is a way to understand and judge a work of art and to discover the phenomenon of mind and spirit present in reality (but not to re-create the world in the critic's image!). It is

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<sup>43</sup> The New Criticism was a movement developed in the United States in the 1920s-1930s which reached its peak in the 1940s-1950s. New Critics emphasized the close reading of the text because structure and meaning of the text were intimately related. The movement developed from the teaching methods advocated by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Heilman, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.

<sup>44</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, July 24, 1956 in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 152.

<sup>45</sup> «Two theoretical points of mine you did not mention. [...]. The first was the effort to distinguish two aspects of a work – the “was” and the “is”. To this formulation I was driven by the dominance of historical studies, in which it is assumed that the work has a single reality which is derivable only from historical context. This seems dangerous nonsense to me (and I need not to explain to you that I do not condemn historical studies), for it appears to deny the existence of a non-historical permanence which I find inseparable from myth, fable, the artistic formulations and the imagination, etc. [...] The second point followed from this: my assumption of the power of the critic to view the work, at least in part, non-historically, i.e. to transcend the intellectual and cultural climate of his own time and thus to be able to identify in the work those elements that conform to the eternal truth of things. The historical relativists argue, of course, not only that the work is relative only to its times, but that the mind of the critic is relative only to his own times, in which he is hopelessly enclosed» (Heilman to Voegelin, 19 August, 1956, in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 155).

<sup>46</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, July 24, 1956 in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 152.

<sup>47</sup> Voegelin to Heilman, August 22, 1956, in C.R. EMBRY (ed. by), *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin. A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* cit., p. 157.

armed with awareness and concern for social and political issues and, above all with reflectiveness as a source of creative tension.

Thus, literary criticism is a kind of inquiry that can bring together religion, pity, traditions and the historical experience of the South, recovering a clearness of vision which enables us to sense the dehumanizing effects of modernity, to find ways of living which can preserve values to which modernity appears indifferent and hostile, to recapture the symbolic and programmatic character of the Agrarian credo, and to perceive the source of order and the constancy of man's quest for the meaning of transcendence.