Labor, land, and racism

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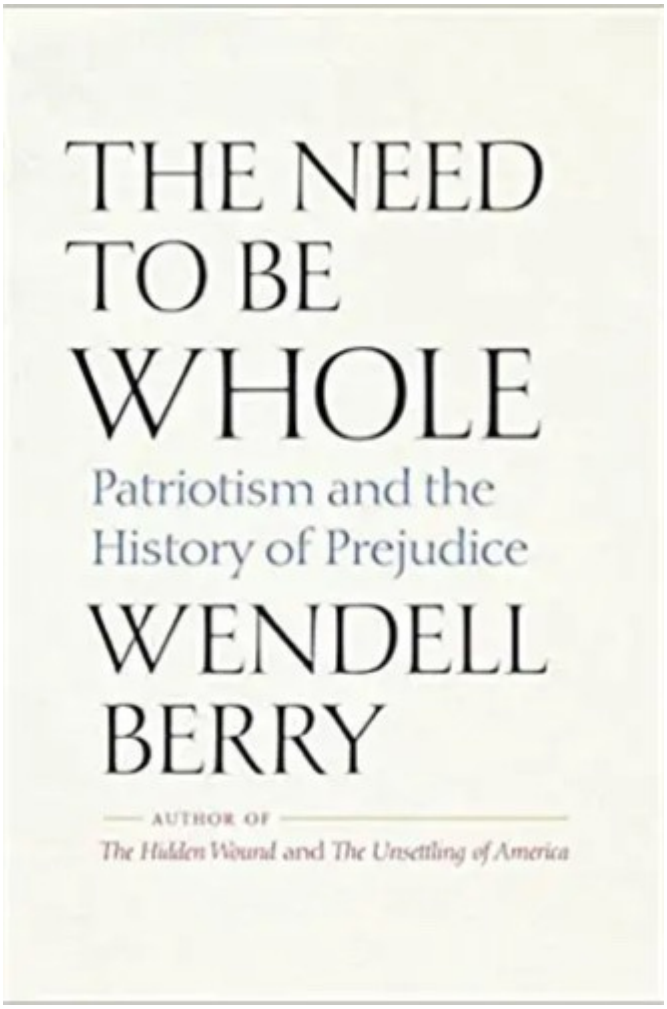
by Brian Volck in the November 2022 issue

In Review



The Need to Be Whole

Patriotism and the History of Prejudice

By Wendell Berry
Shoemaker and Company
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In his slim but profound book *The Hidden Wound,* first published in 1970, Wendell Berry wrestled with the enduring effects of American race-based slavery on "the heart of the society as a whole and of every person in the society." Recounting his great-grandfather's sale of an enslaved person and his own childhood friendships with rural men and women of color, Berry linked the persistence of American racism to the enduring conviction that some physical labor, particularly the "degrading" work of agriculture, was beneath the station of many White settlers and their descendants. From its colonial foundation to this day, Berry claimed, the United States has relegated direct care for the land to those it scorns: the poor, the slave or indentured servant, the sharecropper, the "hillbilly," the "rube," and the immigrant.

Fifty years later, Berry revisits the intersection of racism, the stigma of agricultural labor, and the pervasive abuse of the land in *The Need to Be Whole.* In the many books he wrote in the interim, Berry refined and expanded his central claims that abuse of the land inevitably entails abuse of others, that the corrective to this abuse is a network of healthy local economies, and that "the smallest unit of health is a community."

For Berry, there are no autonomous people and no isolated social problems. Thus, while acknowledging that "it is obvious that race prejudice or white supremacy is the original and fundamental mistake in the European conquest of this country," he sees questions of structural racial discrimination as part of a larger discussion about an economy founded on the abuse of the land and its inhabitants: displacing Native people, depleting the soil, destroying landscapes with extractive industries, and targeting the small family farm for extinction. "We need to remember," Berry writes, "that we solved the one great problem of slavery while ignoring every issue raised by our manner of doing so, and that when the slaves were 'freed,' we resorted to an industrial system that exploits and enslaves people in other ways for other purposes, leaving them stranded and hopeless."

That industrial system, he claims, "requires dispensable land and dispensable people in order to provide cheap goods—or more accurately, goods produced at the lowest possible cost to be sold at the highest possible price." Many among the dispensable are people of color, but not all. To be sure, the great 20th-century

migration of Black people from the rural South came in response to the brutal regime of Jim Crow. But the racist cities to which they relocated were simultaneously absorbing poor White people displaced by an abusive industrializing economy in which farmers took the risks and corporations took the profits. Berry does not equate magnitudes of suffering, as if decades of White rural decline might compare to centuries of involuntary Black servitude. Still, he argues, the long, ongoing history of American White supremacy leaves crippling wounds on all members of the body politic, manifestations of a deeper, more pernicious malady.

Berry never denies his own complicity in this economy of dispossession and violence, but he finds political discourse on such problems among both conservatives and liberals simplistic, divisive, and grossly inadequate. Accordingly, he takes time to consider matters that the current political polarization obscures: rural experiences with race and class prejudice, the disappearance of small family farms (particularly alarming among Black farmers but by no means limited to them), and a narrowing social imagination in which ever more extreme positions are staked out on complex issues such as abortion or what passes for permissible public language. Estranged and isolated, Americans prove increasingly unwilling to understand—much less forgive—"those people" whose habits, choices, and affections offend them. Such public political codes, Berry writes, "serve mainly to make divisions between the innocent and the guilty, offenders and victims, winners and losers."

Well aware that he is treading dangerous ground, Berry wrestles with the complex choices made by "people who happen to be on the other or wrong side" and who at times "have done really terrible things." If we are to learn anything from the necessarily subjective histories we tell, he argues, we cannot reduce the dead to one-dimensional stock figures within a morality play, as if hindsight renders ethical decisions simple, binary, and perfectly clear.

Berry considers Confederate general Robert E. Lee, for instance, as both a slaveholding White supremacist and a deeply tragic figure, a man of his time forced to choose between loyalty to the American nation-state and a now all but incomprehensible "patriotism" to Virginia, his birthplace and home. Similarly, Berry argues, while the Confederacy's economic and political elites were intent on preserving and extending the evil of race-based slavery, most of its enlisted men were poor rural White Southerners who understood themselves as defending their agrarian homeland against an invading industrial power. He relocates the

controversy over Confederate monuments within the larger question of what and how a people chooses to remember.

In condemning the Confederacy while refusing to dismiss all of its partisans as intrinsically evil without remainder, Berry knows that he—a rural White man writing in the agrarian tradition—will undoubtedly anger some of his readers. He tells of friends warning him “of the retribution that will surely follow any interest I may show in understanding the Confederate soldiers.” At this, Berry demurs, “they are asking me to lay aside my old effort to tell the truth, as it is given to me by my own knowledge and judgment, in order to take up another art, which is that of public relations.”

As he works out his thoughts throughout this lengthy volume, Berry offers the reader much to struggle—and perhaps quarrel—with. Yet it is in the book’s final third that Berry brings his lapidary prose style to bear on the key issues of work and words. Here he draws on African American writers such as activist and politician John Lewis, novelist Ernest J. Gaines, and Berry’s fellow Kentuckian Crystal Wilkinson to imagine how diverse peoples might live together in a place, engaging in good work that fosters a health which can only be held in common. Such communities, he asserts, cannot be formed through policies or programs.

Indeed, Berry rejects both the catastrophic free-market solutions of the right that destroy farms and the land as a matter of policy and the condescending reductionism of the left that writes off rural dwellers as Trump-loving troglodytes. Healing communities, Berry insists, will grow when now-estranged peoples risk getting to know one another in a particular place, seeing how each other lives and works, and conversing toward a shared recovery of long-abused words such as *equality*, *freedom*, and *justice*.

Readers will rightly critique elements of Berry’s analysis, but to dismiss it completely would be, I think, shortsighted. Now in his late 80s, Berry writes from a singular perspective, drawing on a lifetime of experience. As in all his work, he returns to fundamental questions about how people might live together in ways that heal and nurture all members of a local community. To bring such communities into being will require acts of shared imagination, a capacity, he writes, that “involves knowledge, understanding, perception, and insight, but . . . also enables you to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel what you know, to know absolutely and forever what you know.”

If Berry’s imagination is, as he repeatedly admits, limited by circumstances of race, class, and location as well as the selectivity of any one person’s memory, his carefully chosen words are often startlingly original, incisive, and salutary. For those seeking a better and richer public conversation on race, place, and community, this book constitutes essential reading.