James M. Buchanan, Political Regionalism, and the Southern Agrarians

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Abstract: James M. Buchanan described, discussed, and rejected the regionalist proposals of Howard Odum and William Elliott Yandell in his 1948 dissertation, *Fiscal Equity in a Federal State*. His discussion of regionalism is of particular interest because Odum and Elliott's ideas were hotly debated by the Southern Agrarians in the 1930s and 1940s. Odum was a frequent critic of the Agrarians, while Elliott was a former colleague of the poets at Vanderbilt University. Some Agrarians, such as Frank Owsley, enthusiastically embraced Odum and Elliott's ideas. Others, such as Donald Davidson, opposed their proposals. In this note I show that Buchanan's rejection of Odum and Elliott bears a close resemblance to Davidson's own criticism. This case illustrates the complexities of Buchanan's relationship with the Agrarians, a problem first highlighted by Nancy MacLean in her intellectual biography of Buchanan, *Democracy in Chains*.

Introduction

One of the most frequently criticized elements of Nancy MacLean's intellectual biography of James Buchanan is her association of Buchanan with Agrarianism, the Southern literary and socio-political movement based at Vanderbilt University and exemplified by the work of the poet Donald Davidson. Few seriously dispute that Buchanan knew the Agrarians' work. In his autobiography, Buchanan praised the "valuational content" that was "put forth by the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s" (Buchanan, 1992, p. 126). This acknowledgement of the movement, combined with Buchanan's stated aspirations to attend Vanderbilt, distaste for New York City, and conservative outlook on politics, leads MacLean (2017, p. 33) to assert (with appropriate qualification) that "[t]he Nashville writer who seemed most decisive in Jim Buchanan's emerging intellectual system was Donald Davidson, the Agrarian ringleader."[2] MacLean's critics note the imprecision of these autobiographical hints and dismiss her association of Buchanan with Agrarianism as baseless grasping for tainted geographic and temporal analogs.

That criticism may be premature, or at least the criticism may unproductively shut down important avenues of inquiry. At two points in his 1948 dissertation on fiscal equity and federalism Buchanan discusses proposals for "political regionalism," an active area of Agrarian political commentary in the 1930s. Proponents of political regionalism believed that traditional federal-state relations did not adequately account for the regional dimension of the nation's social and economic problems. In his dissertation Buchanan (1948) discusses and rejects the regionalist proposals of Howard Odum and William Yandell Elliott. Odum was a famous University of North Carolina sociologist and frequent critic of Agrarianism. He proposed regional planning councils to administer federal development initiatives. Elliot was a Harvard political scientist originally from central Tennessee. He went further than Odum and proposed consolidating the states into sovereign regional governments. Before moving to Harvard, Elliot was a celebrated Fugitive poet at Vanderbilt University. The Fugitives were a Southern literary movement in the 1920s closely identified with Agrarianism. Although he is not typically classified as an Agrarian himself, Elliott was a classmate and then faculty colleague of Davidson's in the Vanderbilt English Department, and he was close

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[2] MacLean could have also included Buchanan's (1992, p. 3) note that "there was much value" in the "modern poetry" he was taught at Middle Tennessee State Teachers College in the 1930s. "Modern poetry" is left undefined, but it presumably included the Agrarians, given the period and place.

with other Fugitives who went on to populate the Agrarian ranks (Davidson, 1958; Campbell, 1979). The only Agrarian openly skeptical of political regionalism was Donald Davidson himself. Davidson argued that Odum's distinction between "regionalism" and "sectionalism" was naïve and overwrought. He considered Elliott's regional government plan a romantic program that ignored the reality of politics.

In this note I review Buchanan's discussion of political regionalism and his arguments against Odum and Elliott. I show that Buchanan's criticisms of regionalism were closely aligned with Davidson's criticisms. This brings us back to *Democracy in Chains* and the question of Davidson's influence on Buchanan. Buchanan's alignment with Davidson on political regionalism does not prove the lineage of Buchanan's ideas. Nevertheless, the public debate on regionalism was practically defined by the dialogue between Odum and Davidson, and much of Davidson's discussion of regionalism in his book *Against Leviathan* is dedicated to criticisms of Elliott's plan. It is inconceivable that Buchanan would be familiar with Odum and Elliott's proposals but unaware of Davidson's response. At the very least this episode makes Buchanan's much-discussed "milieu" more concrete, even if influence remains an open question.

Odum and Elliott's Regionalist Proposals and Davidson's Criticisms

The idea of "regionalism" – that American cultures and economies are bounded by geographic realities that transcend more localized and arbitrary state boundaries – inspired a variety of American artists and scholars. Donald Davidson (1936, p. 113) described the disciplinary breadth of regionalism as encompassing "younger historians – and with them sociologists, political scientists, economists, and even men of letters." Regionalism grew out of the work and theorizing of the historians Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, particularly in their work on the West. The "political regionalism" that Buchanan comments on in his dissertation had its roots in this broader regionalist intellectual tradition, but was more focused on the potential for regions to serve as administrative units or even sovereign governments in a reimagined federalism. Political regionalism is closely associated with the work of Howard Odum and Rupert Vance at the University of North Carolina, and in particular with Odum's 1936 book *Southern Regions of the United States*. Odum's book provided a voluminous account of the South as a regional whole.[3] Part statistical abstract, part cultural anthology, the book sought "to explore the southern regions as a laboratory for regional research and for experimentation in social planning" (Odum, 1936, p. 3). Regional planning would be conducted by "federal, regional, and state planning boards (Ibid, p. 600) operating in the context of the existing federal constitutional order. Two examples of this administrative regionalism that were often invoked by Odum and Davidson are the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the National Resources Committee (NRC). Odum emphasized that his regionalism was distinct from the old sectionalist phantom that haunted American history, and the history of the South in particular. *Sectionalism* pitted the interests of one region against another. *Regionalism* rejected the idea that there was any necessary tendency towards conflict and instead suggested that cooperative political and economic progress depended on a proper accounting for regional resources bases and cultures. *Southern Regions of the United States* did not include a call for regional governments, but it did propose organizing government activity around regional realities, guided by regional planning agencies (O'Brien, 1979).

[3] "Voluminous" must be distinguished from "comprehensive." Odum's nearly 700-page book provides considerable detail on the South as a region but manages to say almost nothing about the functioning of white supremacy. Segregation is mentioned only once, in passing, on page 235. White terrorist practices like lynchings go unmentioned. Statistics on Black Southerners are frequently reported, but never in the context of the systems of white supremacy that produced those statistics. *Southern Regions of the United States* was a book written decades before white social scientists bothered themselves to see these problems.

A stronger version of political regionalism was proposed by William Yandell Elliott, a Harvard political scientist. In his 1935 book, *The Need for Constitutional Reform*, Elliott imagined a new constitutional order where the forty-eight states would be consolidated into larger regional governments. These governments would be better equipped to defend regional interests and coordinate public investments than the fractured system of states inherited from the American founding. Buchanan (1948, p. 24) describes Elliott's proposed regional governments as both "fiscally superior and more economically self-sufficient than are the present arbitrarily bound states." Elliott saw the incongruity of state borders with economic realities as an important driver of political centralization in the United States. Addressing the College of William and Mary in his James Goold Cutler Lecture, Elliott (1938, p. 15) asked "isn't it precisely the fact that these areas [the states] are not grouped in a way that is adequate to that purpose which is fatally transferring everything to Washington"? Elliott's plan was attractive to many Agrarians. Frank Owsley, an Agrarian in good standing and contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*, embraced Elliott's regional governments as "essentially what the Agrarians have argued constantly" (Owsley, 1935). Owsley promoted regional government as a sort of Agrarian policy plank in his 1935 essay *The Pillars of Agrarianism*. Agrarian appreciation for Elliott's proposal is not particularly surprising. Before his career as a political scientist, Elliott was a Fugitive poet at Vanderbilt University. The Fugitives wrote distinctively Southern poetry that rebelled against both the anti-Southern prejudices of H.L. Mencken and the "old high-caste Brahmins of the Old South" (Holman and Harmon, 1986, p. 8). The Fugitives counted many future Agrarians in their ranks, including Donald Davidson, and they are often treated as interchangeable with the Agrarians (Inge, 1990). Owsley's essay on the pillars of Agrarianism is widely understood as the representative political program of the Agrarians (Conkin 2001).[4] His adoption of Elliott's plan for regional government highlights how closely the Agrarians associated themselves with the proposal of the former Vanderbilt professor and Fugitive poet.

One notable exception to the Agrarian embrace of political regionalism was Donald Davidson. Davidson accepted regions as a unit of analysis but rejected Odum, Vance, Elliott, and other regionalists as hopelessly naïve about the sectional conflicts that regionalism would set in motion. Davidson appreciated Eliott's acknowledgement of the significance of regions and accepted it as the most thoughtful plan available. "If we can get regional reform in no other way," Davidson conceded, "let it come in Mr. Elliott's way" (Davidson, 1936, p. 129). But he warned that Elliott's plan would invite sectional conflict and that by empowering regions the dominant section (presumably the Northeast) would wield even greater Federal authority than it would in a more decentralized system of states. "Mr. Elliott's plan offers no safeguard against" the prospect that "a region, behind a Federal mask, may also play the role of Caesar" (Davidson, 1936, p. 129-130). When a region dominated the United States and put on this "Federal mask," the representatives of that region would pursue their own provincial interests but present those interests as nationally minded policy (Davidson, 1940). Davidson's 1938 book, *Against Leviathan*, was predominantly concerned with attacking regionalism, including the regionalist plans of Odum and Elliott. In their place, Davidson (1938) advocated for a version of Frederick Jackson Turner's regional analysis that brought sectionalist conflict to the foreground. The subtitle of *Against Leviathan*, "Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States," gives a much clearer synopsis of the main thrust of the book.

Davidson was particularly incensed by the TVA as a case of regionalist planning (Shapiro 1970, 1974). While Odum (1936, p. 3) saw the South and other regions as a "laboratory" for "experimentation in

[4] John V. Van Sickle's 1943 book, *Planning for the South*, discusses the Agrarians in detail and draws almost exclusively on Owsley in his account of their policy program (including Elliott's proposal for regional governments). Van Sickle taught at Vanderbilt, and was therefore a colleague of Davidson's. Buchanan knew the book and included it in the references of his dissertation (although it is not cited in-text).

social planning," Davidson railed against the Northeastern dominance of the TVA, the most concrete example of regionalist planning to date, the TVA. In 1934, Odum and Davidson appeared together at a conference on planning in the South hosted by the Tennessee Valley Institute. The local papers reported on the conference with great interest, but Davidson stole the headlines by declaring that "the South is not inhabited by guinea pigs" (Associated Press, 1934, p. 1). Echoing Odum's language of the laboratory, Davidson said that the TVA was "virtually a foreign experiment on Southern soil" and he demanded that the affected states exercise more control over the administration of the TVA (Ibid, p. 14). Davidson's various criticisms of regionalism did not go unnoticed in the economics profession. His exchange with Odum was discussed in the *American Economic Review* (Kollmorgen, 1945) and by Van Sickle (1943), the latter of which is cited in Buchanan's dissertation although not referenced in the text.

Political Regionalism in Buchanan's *Fiscal Equity in a Federal State* (1948)

Buchanan discussed Odum and Elliott's proposals for regionalism in his 1948 dissertation at the University of Chicago, *Fiscal Equity in a Federal State*. Buchanan's doctoral work dealt with the problem of unequal fiscal capacity across states, and the appropriate federal policy response to that inequality. Buchanan confronted the question of political regionalism early in his dissertation soon after describing and adopting regionalism's underlying premise, that state borders were incongruous with economic capacity and reality in the United States. Buchanan insisted that,

> "[i]t must be recognized that the American states have lost all reality as economic units, even if they ever did possess such characteristics. The basis for the prosperity of the United States is national. The political structure, federal in nature, is not coincident with the economic entity." (Buchanan, 1948, p. 23.)

This incongruence between economic capacity and state borders generated an inescapable inequality in state fiscal capacity. The first solution to unequal fiscal capacity considered by Buchanan after laying out the problem was none other than Elliott's political regionalism. Citing to Elliott, Buchanan notes that "some students of the problem" of regionalism "have advanced the reorganization and assimilation of state governments into regional governmental units which would both be fiscally superior and more economically self-sufficient than are the present arbitrarily bound states" (Ibid, p. 24). Buchanan doubted the feasibility of regional government. Elliott's political regionalism "seems to overlook the cultural traditions which surround existent state units." Perhaps state boundaries were inappropriate, but it was "wishful thinking" to assume that regional governments could preserve the "federal spirit" (Ibid, p. 25). Regionalism brought other dangers as well. Consolidation of the states risked exacerbating existing inter-regional conflicts, or what Davidson would call "sectionalism." Buchanan warned that,

> "Any steps taken toward making the subordinate political units into more complete economic units would likely tend to aggravate economic conflicts among the units themselves, and make interunit trade barriers a much more difficult problem than the one which now exists." (Ibid, p. 145).

Buchanan pointed to Australia as an example of how regions that were organized around economic interests could exacerbate sectional conflict. Australia was federalist, like the United States, but because "the state areas are much more representative of the economic units than is the case in the United States" (Ibid, p. 145) it provided guidance for assessing the regionalist proposals of Odum and Elliott. In Australia, political conflict over the unequal regional incidence of the tariff was "much more acute" than in the United

States (Ibid, p. 146). [5] Buchanan's concern with the inter-regional conflict created by Elliott's regional governments was identical to Davidson's point that regionalism would unravel into familiar American sectionalism as regional governments vied for control of the federal government. Odum, Elliott, and Owsley were romantics, but Davidson – like Buchanan – insisted on politics without romance.

Buchanan raised a number of other points against political regionalism besides the concern that it would create sectional conflict. He feared that regional government could not be "accomplished while preserving the federal principle" (Buchanan, 1948, p. 145). Federalism in the United States was and is tied to states and it was not clear to Buchanan that it could survive their dissolution. Perhaps more importantly, regionalism did not solve the underlying problem of unequal fiscal capacity. After highlighting the sectionalist case against regionalism, Buchanan continued that,

> "Even if regional reorganization were an accomplished fact, there would still exist some differences in treatment among "equals" since there would likely remain some variations in the per capita incomes and wealth of the regions which were established. In large part, the income inequalities which exist in the United States at the present time are almost as pronounced among regions as among individual states. If the regional reorganization took the form which has been proposed [by Odum]… the effect would be the reorganization of low per capita income states into a low per capita income region" (Ibid, p. 146)

Buchanan's preferred solution was unconditional grants to the states, because "only the use of the unconditional grant is capable of substantially achieving the equity criterion while preserving the federal principle without serious institutional distortion" (Ibid, p. 189). Federal grants to states to equalize fiscal capacity were a recurrent policy solution for Buchanan in his early career (e.g. Buchanan, 1950, 1952, 1968, 1969; Buchanan and Wagner, 1970). Unconditional grants also guaranteed what Davidson saw as lacking in the TVA: local control of investment decisions.

Although Buchanan rejected Elliott's political regionalism and criticized elements of Odum's administrative regionalism, he was active in private Southern regional organizations that fulfilled many of the regional planning purposes that Odum envisioned in *Southern Regions of the United States*.[6] Buchanan served as a researcher with the Southern Regional Education Board and as a delegate to the Southern Regional Congress on City Planning (Menhinick, Zuber, and Leach, 1954). These activities and a general interest in strengthening the economic position of the South (Marciano, 2020) underscore the value of the regional perspective for Buchanan, even if specific regionalist policy proposals were unpersuasive.

Agrarianism and Buchanan

This note is narrowly focused on documenting Buchanan's engagement with proposals for political regionalism. Buchanan directly engaged with Agrarian arguments for and against political regionalism in his dissertation. He cited Fugitive poets and critics of Agrarianism, and shared Donald Davidson's concerns about the potential of political regionalism to exacerbate sectional conflict and dominance. The contrast between Donald Davidson and Frank Owsley's reactions to Elliott's regional government plan highlight the limits of imposing a false uniformity on what it means to have an "Agrarian" view of politics,

[5] The tariff had particular salience for the Agrarians, who frequently highlighted it as a tool of the industrial Northeast for dominating the South. Owsley's (1935) elaboration of Elliott's regional government plan included an intricate alternative system that would allow regional governments to skirt national tariff rates through internal tax adjustments.
[6] Odum himself worked to build similar private regional planning organizations. See Tindall (1958) for details.

economics, and policy. Was Buchanan an Agrarian for sharing Davidson's concerns about Elliott, or was he anti-Agrarian for not sharing Owsley's enthusiasm? The whole question is poorly posed and unhelpful.

This note does not try to answer any question about the influence of the Agrarians on Buchanan, it only suggests that he was well aware of their political thought. A full account of Buchanan's relationship with the Agrarians requires different evidence and analysis, and a deeper understanding of Agrarianism than historians of economics have exhibited to date. In the rush to grapple with *Democracy in Chains*, the complexity of the Agrarians' political ideas has been overlooked. Contrary to popular misconception, the Agrarians did not call for an end to industrialism.[7] In Owsley's (1935) words, the Agrarians merely wanted to see "agriculture put upon the same basis as industry." Davidson characteristically said it more colorfully,

> "The theory of agrarianism, stated by some of these people in a book called *I'll Take My Stand* does not propose, as some frightened owners of electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners have thought, the use of a sledge-hammer upon labor-saving machinery and the immediate return of the entire American population to the cow-shed and the old oaken bucket." (Davidson, 1939, 115)

Instead of demanding a return to the America of the nineteenth century, Owsley pointed to contemporary Scandinavian countries and to France as models of the proper balance between agriculture and industry. In the 1920s and 1930s, between 35 and 40 percent of French workers were employed directly in agriculture. The United States began the century with similar rates of agricultural employment, but launched its structural shift away from agriculture sooner than France.[8] A French benchmark for the Agrarians therefore implied a higher level of agricultural employment than was currently the case in the United States, but it did not imply doing away with industry or regressing back to the nineteenth century. The Agrarians saw themselves as demanding equal treatment for agricultural regions. They felt that industry was privileged by the tariff, interregional discrimination in freight rates, the types of public investments made by the federal government, and the consolidating effects of finance. The solution was not to pull back from industry so much as to reform and support agriculture. Donald Davidson similarly did not target industrial modes of production themselves so much as the "standardization" imposed by the "pseudo culture that has accompanied the diffusion of industrialism" (Davidson, 2017 [1938], p. 11).

The Agrarians believed that the federal government had a role in this reform process. Frank Owsley proposed massive land reform and redistribution through federal property acquisition and land grants. He called for federal advances on living expenditures for the new class of yeoman farmers that would move from the cities to the country in response to land reform. Redistribution of capital and Jeffersonian yeomanry were the principal Agrarian political aspirations, not opposition to industry. James Buchanan never presented such an intricate plan for land reform and redistribution, but there are parallels between Owsley's federal land grants and loans to yeoman farmers and Buchanan's federal equalization grants. These parallels become particularly apparent as Buchanan shifted from an ethical case for equalizing grants to an efficiency case later in his career. The efficiency case for equalizing grants came from how the grants changed the incentives to crowd into dense urban areas with high fiscal capacity. Equalization grants would

[7] See Van Sickle (1943) as an example of an economist who was a contemporary of the Agrarians understood and emphasized that Agrarianism was not bald anti-industrialism. W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941) suggests that the Agrarians adopted a more nuanced understanding of the economic and social order only in the years after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, and that the view of Agrarianism as aggressive anti-industrialism in large part emerges from some of the more bombastic passages of that earlier book.

[8] See the cross-national agricultural employment shares reported in Wingender (2014).

"slow down and possibly reverse migration flows to the conurbations" (Buchanan, 1968, p. 785).[9] The importance of dispersing population to rural areas was tied to Buchanan's concerns about the negative externalities associated with cities. In "A Future for 'Agricultural Economics'?" Buchanan writes,

> "Few among us can look optimistically at the pattern that threatens to emerge with coalescence centered primarily on age, race, innovation in behavioral perversity, and, finally, terror. Perhaps I both exaggerate the seriousness of the portent and grasp at straws of my own prejudice. But radical dispersal of people over space appears almost to be a necessary complement to any policy of hope." (Buchanan, 1969, p. 1036).

Correct principles of governance had to complement dispersal of the population, so Buchanan further issued a "plea" for scholars to provide intellectual support to "enlightened leaders" of rural areas who "espouse the virtues of smallness, of limited power of man over man, of decentralized authority, of the clean pure air of the countryside, which every man must seek and few men find" (Ibid, p. 1036). Do these views, edging closer to Owsley and Davidson, make Buchanan an "Agrarian"? No, of course not. The Agrarians were a distinct community of scholars, bound to a particular time and place. But the thread of Southern distributism running through Jefferson's Arcadia and the Agrarians' yeoman farmer class is clearly identifiable in Buchanan as well. And not just in his beloved southwest Virginia farm, which taught him the "valuational content" of "the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s," (Buchanan, 1992, p. 126) but in some of his most famous papers and policy proposals.

The fact that Buchanan was so familiar with an important Agrarian policy proposal suggests that arguments about a scholar's "milieu" should be taken more seriously and investigated more closely. It is not surprising that Buchanan was familiar with the Agrarians by the 1940s. The Agrarians were cultural fixtures in central Tennessee during Buchanan's adolescence and early adulthood. One contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*, the novelist Andrew Lytle, was from Murfreesboro.[10] Starting in the 1930s, the local newspaper dutifully recorded Lytle's visits home and his various speaking engagements and book signings around town. The week that Buchanan started his freshman year at Middle Tennessee State Teachers College, Lytle was signing books just down Main Street from the college.[11] Buchanan probably did not bother with the book signing. Although he was an avid reader, he was also what we would refer to today as a commuter student, and he and continued to work on the family farm through college (Buchanan, 1992). If Buchanan was on campus that day, he probably would have been caught up in the freshman welcoming activities that were reported on the same page of the same local paper.[12] But Buchanan's attendance or non-attendance at a particular Agrarian book signing is not really the point. The point is that the Lytle was a celebrated Murfreesboro success story who was in the area frequently, and that the Agrarians regularly made the local news (and Lytle wasn't even the most famous of the Agrarians). The Agrarians were part of growing up in or around Murfreesboro in the 1930s. This type of familiarity is not easily documented in the Buchanan Papers at George Mason University or in Buchanan's published works, much less in his

[9] Interestingly, this was a direct reversal of proposals Buchanan made twenty years earlier to raise the productivity of Southern workers either by moving industry to the region or, if necessary, to move workers out of the South. In a public lecture in Knoxville, Buchanan advised that "it would be easier to import industry than to export workers, but that outward labor migration should be encouraged" (Industry Held Southern Need, 1948).

[10] Technically Buchanan lived in the village of Gum, although Gum is only eight miles down the interstate from downtown Murfreesboro.

[11] See advertisement for Andrew Lytle's book signing at Stickney and Griffis in Murfreesboro, *The Daily News-Journal*, September 24, 1936, p. 5.

[12] S.T.C. Freshmen Get Acquainted in Annual Rally. 1936. *The Daily News-Journal*, September 24, 1936, p. 5; Optimism is Note at S.T.C. Opening Exercises Today. 1936. *The Daily News-Journal*, September 24, 1936, p. 1;

conveniently searchable collected works. Nevertheless, it is the type of social history that helps to frame and explain why Buchanan might have cited the political plans of a Fugitive poet cum political scientist in his dissertation, and why he might have reacted to that Fugitive poet with arguments that mirrored the reactions of Donald Davidson.

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