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John Micklethwait
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Sir:

Since your very poignant article of January 21 entitled "The Appalachia of the West" fell into my hands last week, I have been inspired to offer a rebuttal on behalf of our beautiful valley. You cite no statistics, but refer to a Congressional report which "argued that the San Joaquin Valley is in some respects behind Appalachia's coal country in diversifying its economy." While every region grapples with projecting how economic evolution will affect its financial health in a rapidly changing world, I would argue that central California's agricultural economy in no way compares to Appalachia, with its "declining extractive industry." It is true that the water wars go on and on in our irrigated desert, and that during periods of drought farmers and their employees suffer dire hardship. But historically, agriculture as an industry has adapted successfully to innumerable challenges, not the least of which is the need to get by with less water.

Risk is inherent in agriculture. Our vast, fertile valley thrives as a result of a distilled entrepreneurial spirit borne of generations of farmers willing to accept that risk—among them weather, water availability, labor supply, market timing and governmental red tape. Secretary Chrisman is optimistic in part because that very spirit is embedded in his DNA. As you look down when flying over central California, a counterpane of fields in various stages of production lies below. It is hard to imagine what California would look like without farming.

The fact that agriculture represents such a large part of our Valley economy but employs less than 20% of the workforce is laudable. You state, "In the San Joaquin valley agriculture provides almost 20% of the jobs. The alternatives are depressing and scant." Eighty per cent of Valley jobs exist within the same types of businesses which fuel other regions, and are as varied as those found in counties throughout the world. I cannot comprehend how this statistic can support your assertion that non-ag jobs are "depressing" or "scant". If what you intended to say is that farm workers have few opportunities outside agriculture, you are misinformed. Historically much of the labor force has moved out of agriculture and into other jobs—including construction, food services and industry—which explains the influx of "new immigrants [who] continue to pour in looking for farm work." Still, for those farmers who rely on a large crew at peak harvest, it is not always easy to field a team.

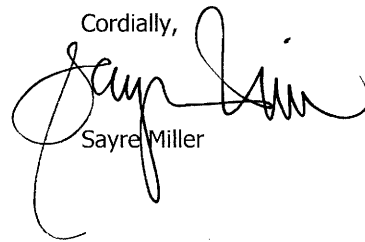
I was shocked by your cultural insensitivity to the demographic groups you specifically named. Many descendants of Portuguese and Dutch immigrants may well own dairies; in addition to these, the valley was settled by a multitude of pioneers who crossed the plains and mountains, sailed around the Horn of South America or rode the transcontinental railroad to come to California, a land of great opportunity. Later, they provided labor opportunities for refugees from the Dust Bowl; but it is absurd to say, "most of the whites tend to be 'Okies[.]'" People from all over the world have settled here. Many were refugees from persecution or war. Armenians, Italians, Germans, Japanese, Basques and Scots count among those who have contributed to the melting-pot.

You could not be more wrong when you say, "Economically, socially and educationally, their descendants have barely moved up." There will always be those who take advantage of a generous social welfare system, rather than to take advantage of the possibilities provided by a free public education. Yet it is both unfair and inaccurate to pin that label on the Southeast Asian or Mexican populations. Were you here to see for yourself, you would observe that they are the people working. My own children attended elementary school with the children of Southeast Asian immigrants who spoke what had never before been a written language. Within a startlingly brief period of time, many of them were being honored as high school valedictorians. In any medical workplace a significant percentage of the staff is Hispanic. Opportunity is alive in central California.

It would be disingenuous of me to fail to acknowledge the economic struggles of outlying small towns gripped in a spiral of unemployment. Reflecting the central theme of your article, this has much to do with the allocation of water, as well as a transition of cropping patterns from labor-intensive row crops to more mechanized permanent crops. There is justification for serious concern about the future of such towns without writing off the entire central Valley as an illustration of "devastation in the making."

The financial meltdown of 2008 has touched every corner of America, and people have become grim about the future. There are sacrifices and compromises to be made, infrastructure and ecosystems to address, and improved technology and governance to explore. But right now it is raining in California, the mountains are white and the valley is green. So to those who think they might prefer Appalachia, I say, "Have at it."

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sayre Miller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and "M".

Sayre Miller