

# Reassessing *Paganus*: Toward an Ontology of the Rooted Human

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## Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the concept of human identity has been predominantly shaped by economic and materialist frameworks. Marxist thought, in particular, has centered its analysis on the figure of the **proletarian**, the laborer whose emancipation is defined through class struggle and production. In this paradigm, the rural world is often conceptualized primarily through the **agricola**—the farmer as an economic agent engaged in material production. The emphasis on labor as the foundation of historical progress has, however, overshadowed an alternative mode of being, one embedded not in production but in **dwelling**: the identity of the **paganus**.

This paper seeks to reassess the **paganus** as a category of human existence distinct from the economic determinism of the **agricola**. Whereas the latter is defined by productive labor, the former embodies an **ontological relationship to place**, a way of being that extends beyond mere economic function. By engaging with phenomenology, ecological philosophy, and political thought, this paper will argue for a re-evaluation of the **paganus** as an essential dimension of human identity—one that has been historically marginalized yet remains fundamental to the human experience.

## The Reduction of Human Identity to Economic Function

The dominance of **historical materialism** in social theory has led to a conceptual narrowing of human identity, reducing it to economic participation. Marxist historiography, for instance, largely interprets rural populations through the lens of agrarian labor, subsuming the **peasant** into the category of **proletariat** insofar as he is engaged in economic struggle. The rural world is thus analyzed in terms of its role within the **means of production**, disregarding other dimensions of human existence within the countryside.

However, this economic reductionism fails to account for the **existential depth** of rural dwelling. The **paganus**—originally denoting an inhabitant of the countryside—signifies more than a mere agricultural worker. He is not defined exclusively by his contribution to production but by his **inhabitation** of the landscape, his embeddedness in the rhythms of nature, and his transmission of cultural memory through lived space.

## Beyond Production: The Metaphysics of Place

Philosophical traditions outside of historical materialism offer alternative approaches to understanding the **paganus** as a figure of dwelling rather than labor. **Phenomenology**, for instance, provides critical insights into the way human existence is shaped by place. Edward Casey (1993) argues that human identity is inherently tied to **topology**, that is, the lived experience of particular places. Similarly, Martin Heidegger's concept of "**dwelling**" (*wohnen*) emphasizes that human existence is not simply defined by production or utility but by a deeper relationship with the environment. Heidegger's analysis suggests that modernity, in prioritizing

technological mastery over the world, has alienated individuals from this fundamental condition of **belonging to a place**.

From an ecological perspective, the **paganus** represents a form of existence that predates industrial exploitation of the land. Whereas **agricola** signifies a relationship of **cultivation and extraction**, **paganus** embodies **coexistence** with natural cycles, a mode of living that modern environmental thought increasingly seeks to recover (Serres, 1990). The distinction between **agricola** and **paganus** is thus not merely economic but ontological: the former represents human control over nature, the latter an attunement to it.

## The Marginalization of the Paganus in Modern Thought

The marginalization of the **paganus** is not only a consequence of economic ideology but also of broader cultural shifts that have privileged **mobility, urbanization, and abstraction** over rootedness and tradition. The modern era has seen an increasing **detrterritorialization** of human life, where economic and technological forces promote an existence unbound from specific locations. This phenomenon has contributed to the decline of rural communities, the erosion of cultural memory tied to landscapes, and the loss of traditional knowledge.

In contrast, literary and philosophical reflections on the rural world often highlight the enduring significance of **dwelling in place**. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) presents an experiment in self-sufficiency that is not merely an escape from industrial society but a **reclamation of a mode of being** rooted in observation, patience, and coexistence with the environment. Similarly, Sylvain Tesson's *The Consolations of the Forest* (2013) engages with the tension between modern restlessness and the existential depth of solitude in nature. These perspectives suggest that the **paganus**, far from being an obsolete relic of the past, represents an alternative model of human flourishing—one centered on locality, continuity, and embeddedness.

## Conclusion: Reconsidering the Paganus as an Ontological Category

The **paganus**, as an identity distinct from **agricola**, offers a critical counterpoint to the modern tendency to define human existence in terms of economic function. By shifting the focus from **production to inhabitation**, from **labor to dwelling**, this concept challenges the dominant narratives of progress that have relegated rural existence to a secondary status. In an era increasingly characterized by ecological crises, cultural alienation, and urban detachment, the question of **what it means to belong to a place** acquires renewed philosophical significance.

The **rehabilitation of the paganus** does not imply a rejection of economic and social justice but rather an expansion of human identity beyond materialist constraints. It calls for a **re-engagement with place as a fundamental dimension of existence**, one that recognizes the interdependence between human beings and the landscapes they inhabit. In doing so, it opens new avenues for thinking about sustainability, tradition, and the meaning of **dwelling in the world**.

## Bibliography

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