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Rural America as a Symbol of American Values

American culture has long held an antiurban bias. To a great extent, what we value in rural settings is defined by what we suspect we have lost in the city. Some aspects of urban life are also appealing to us, and in some respects, they reflect the same values that we cherish in the countryside—community, family, work. But rural America has a greater appeal precisely because we know it only at a distance. The meanings that we have constructed for urban and rural areas help to legitimate an antiurban bias in American public policy.

Although nearly a quarter of Americans still live in nonmetro areas, the United States is mainly an urban society. Urban lifestyles and economic forms extend to increasingly remote areas, drawing all parts of the country together. The system is integrated by the transportation and distribution technologies that place WalMarts within reach of rural shoppers and by the media technologies that bring 200 channels to a satellite dish and move data at lightning speed through fiber optic cable. Few rural residents are farmers, and fewer still live in families whose livelihood comes only from the land.

We value "rural America" no less today and perhaps even more than in the past. Its disappearance gives it a nostalgic quality. It also allows us to exercise a good deal of selectivity in what we remember about it and what we experience when we visit it. Rural America is taking on the character of a historical site, like Iowa's Amana Colonies—once a working farm community but mostly now a tourist attraction. And, just as Diane Barthel (1984) notes about Amana, our treatment of rural areas is more a reflection of ourselves than of the areas' real character.

As an urban sociologist, my natural inclination is to understand what we value in rural America in the context of our views of the urban scene. I will develop this point in the following sequence. First, I will argue that American culture has long held an antiurban bias, and that to a great extent what we value in rural settings is defined by what we suspect we have lost in the city. Second, some aspects of urban life are also appealing to us, and in some respects, they reflect the same values that we cherish in the countryside. But rural America has a greater appeal precisely because we know it only at a distance. I will also draw some tentative conclusions about how these ways of constructing meanings affect public policy.

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Antiurban Bias

An antiurban tradition extending out of the 17th and 18th centuries regarded the city as a defilement of nature and a moral scourge. From the Hudson River School's depictions of unspoiled valleys and public fascination with the discovery of the Grand Canyon and Yosemite Valley to the radical mobilization of agrarian populists, Americans displayed a romantic attachment to rural values and mistrust of the city. Thomas Jefferson himself believed that democracy depended on the sort of personal freedom and independent work that could only be found in the countryside.

Sociologists, as institutionalized in the Chicago School tradition of the 1920's and 1930's, formalized these suspicions. The defining elements of the city—for Louis Wirth, size, density, heterogeneity—generated an "urban way of life" in which people were released from social controls and alienated from their neighbors. The city offered personal freedom, too. But in the ensuing "community of

limited liability," people's freedom to choose their social partners and to withdraw their commitments at will spelled the end of family and community as the building blocks of society.

These images of the city in public discourse of the 20th century have been reviewed by Bob Beauregard (1993). Beauregard points out an ambivalence that also leads us to regret the decline of cities. Cities, after all, were always the focal points of civilization and progress (the Empire State Building, Carnegie Hall). In the last 20 years, however, he detects a shift in public sentiment, coinciding with the racial transformation of cities. There is progress without the city; investment flows to the suburbs and the centerless metropoles of the Sunbelt. Most salient now is that the city is Black and Hispanic, it is dangerous, and it cannot be controlled.

The racial component of antiurban bias is perplexing. Historically, America's Black population was predominantly southern and rural. But Black Americans played no part in Jefferson's vision of rural values (it was rather the free landholder on whom he relied). Nor are Black sharecroppers (or their contemporary counterparts in the Mississippi Delta and elsewhere) featured in today's rural folklore, which tends more to "Lake Wobegon" or Kansas wheat farmers or Wyoming cowboys. We are surprised to hear that there were also Black cowboys. Whatever the facts of the past or the present, we now associate racial minorities with the big city, and our racial prejudices and fears have much to do with our antiurban bias and idealization of the countryside.

Rural (and Urban) Values

We attribute to rural America those values that we most fear have been lost in our city and suburban way of life. In both the popular media and in our own imaginations, these values are encapsulated in powerful visual images:

- ***Hard work***. The image of the productive farmer, up before dawn and earning an honest living through hard and independent work.
- ***Family***. The image of the farm family, raising many children, still interdependent as a production unit and offering a secure role for every generation.
- ***Community.*** The image of the smalltown gathering places where social relationships are face to face and personal and where everyone knows your name—barn raisings, church picnics, the general store.
- ***Nature.*** The image of the self-sufficient farm, where everything is recycled and no scrap can afford to be wasted; the clean air and water; the open spaces; the big sky.
- ***Safety.*** The image of children wandering freely through fields and streams, of unlocked doors, of encounters with people whom you know as friends and neighbors.

Rural America is not the sole repository of such images, nor does the reality of rural life conform more closely in all respects to our values than does urban life.

Urban sociologists and ethnographers have rediscovered dense and supportive social networks in the city. Herbert Gans (1962) was among the first to describe the mixed working and middle class ethnic neighborhoods of older cities in the 1950's. Manhattan's Little Italy and Jewish tenements have nearly passed into history. Few Italians and Jews live there, but they remain as tourist attractions because we so appreciate the form of social life that they represent to us. Television's *Brooklyn Bridge* achieved a temporary success extolling the immigrant family: the working father and full-time mother, grandparents living nearby, children playing without fear in the streets of a safe neighborhood. These urban images reinforce the same values that Americans extoll in the countryside. *Brooklyn Bridge*'s short run, by comparison with *The Waltons*, suggests that they do not have the same resonance as the rural version.

The modern version of the European immigrant neighborhood is the entrepreneurial immigrant enclave—the Chinatowns and Little Havanas, where people manage through hard work, strong families, belief in education, and reliance on neighbors. Surprising numbers of these people manage to set up a small business and buy a home by saving carefully and pooling family resources. In these new urban enclaves echo the values of earlier groups with whom we identify. However we have perhaps less empathy with groups who continue to speak their own languages. And immigrants seem to be more acceptable a few decades after they have ceased to arrive in large numbers. A recent visit to New York's Ellis Island, where millions of Europeans arrived in the United States around the turn of the century, reminded me that the dominant culture was not so enchanted with Italian neighborhoods then as it is now. In the early 1920's, in fact, it was common for politicians to denounce Italian and Slavic immigrants as debasing the White race.

Some academics, always willing to venture a little farther than the popular press, find these same values in the underclass neighborhoods in which Blacks and a new wave of Hispanic refugees are concentrated. Carol Stack (1974) describes loving and sharing bonds, frugality and mutual support among these city residents, based on kinship and neighborhood. This interpretation of the city ghetto is not widely accepted, of course. More consistent with popular imagery, most sociologists (such as William J. Wilson (1987)) emphasize the stark statistics of high crime rates, high unemployment, and teenage single mothers living on welfare.

As a counterpoint, rural America has proved to be susceptible to certain "urban" ills. These include intensive land development and environmental degradation through the overuse of water resources, the establishment of waste dumps, and inadequate regulation of toxic materials. The excellent census monograph by Glenn Fuguitt, David Brown, and Calvin Beale (1989) offers several reflections on the social structure of *Rural and Small Town America.* Rural America has a disproportionate share of children and elderly, without the resources to support them. Rural family structure remains distinct from that found in the city, but the trends are clearly toward higher divorce rates and more single-parent families. Poverty remains higher in rural than in urban areas, and the opportunity structure in rural areas (reflected, for example, in the payoff from education) is less open.

The point is, however, that these "facts" do not much matter. A large share of what we value is the mythology and symbolism of rural places, rather than their reality. Rural America has the special advantage of being the place where most of us don't live anymore, which frees us to reconstruct it in our imagination. Rural America is a historical museum, more so than the historic districts of cities. We visit the countryside mostly as tourists, rarely as residents conducting normal errands and chores. Our contact is through a rare car ride on the back roads, a weekend in the Amish country, where we sense that something important has been preserved.

Packaging the Countryside

I contend, in short, that the core values that are identified with rural America have to do with people's primary attachments to family, community, ethnicity, and work. These are not necessarily the special characteristics of any single sector of the country, rural or urban. Yet we treat them as such. Rural America serves as a storehouse of values on which we draw. The mythical character of this association does not diminish its importance.

What are the consequences of this cultural phenomenon? Has the praise of country living paid off in a tilt of public policy or economic opportunity toward rural Americans? It is easy to see that the association of core values with rural areas helps to legitimate a disregard for the city and the concerns of city residents. Less clear are the implications for the countryside. I am reluctant to venture an opinion without doing a careful review of policies regarding poverty, education, health care, environmental protection, and investment financing, and other significant issues. I will set forward a line of reasoning, however. Suppose that there are two rural Americas, the real one with a set of problems that its residents identify and the mythical one with a set of concerns that outsiders might attribute to it. In that case, and if public policy were guided by the values of outsiders, most likely it would be misdirected. I have in mind, for example, the broad public support for farm subsidies, surely based partially on a romantic image of family farmers. Do farm subsidies respond to the concerns of the majority of rural residents, or do they enhance the profitability of only a certain kind of agricultural production? As a city dweller, I might place a high priority on protecting natural habitats, preserving historic buildings, developing vacation spots or condominiums, improving access roads to scenic areas—maybe even building casinos and amusement parks in the countryside. Are these the priorities, and do they reflect the values, of rural Americans?

A rural sociologist, Fred Buttel (1992), put the question in these terms with regard to environmentalism: "I cannot help but wonder whether ... environmentalism might over time lead to a fundamental shift in how rural spaces are symbolized, and accordingly how we define and deal with rural problems.... Will we, in other words, witness a further erosion of commitment to improving the livelihoods of the rural poor and to rural development?" Environmentalism is only one of many ways of thinking about rural spaces, and it is not necessarily antithetical to the views of these areas' residents. The more general point is that what we value in rural America sets the agenda for public policy. The residents of these areas should surely question whether their interests are well served by the antiurban prejudices and romantic nostalgia of people who have never lived and worked outside the city.

For Additional Reading . . .

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