

The Fruit of Difference: The Rural-Urban Continuum as a System of Identity¹

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ABSTRACT Today sociologists tend to doubt the rural-urban continuum, the idea that community is more characteristic of country places than cities. Based on an ethnographic study of an English exurban village, I argue that the continuum remains an important source of identity for country residents, one from which they derive social-psychological and material benefits. They root this conception of themselves as country people in nature, making this identity a particularly secure one. These real social consequences suggest that sociology should no longer doubt the reality of the rural-urban continuum, at least at the level of the definition of the situation. It, therefore, should remain an important topic of sociological study.

Introduction

It was once common wisdom in the social sciences that there is a substantial difference between country life and city life (Durkheim 1964; Redfield 1947; Simmel 1950; Sorokin and Zimmerman 1929; Tönnies 1940; Wirth 1938). But the sociologists of today's modern urban age are not so sure. As a result of a host of studies, mainly since 1950, we doubt whether people in the countryside really have the greater community ties the old rural-urban continuum ascribed to them (Avila 1969; Connell 1978; Dewey 1960; Friedland 1982; Gans 1962; Pahl 1965, 1966; Vidich and Bensman 1960). We doubt whether city people really are less friendly and less neighborly (Fischer 1982; Stinner et al. 1990; Wellman 1979). Indeed, we even doubt the sociological value of the concept of community (Coleman 1990; Friedland 1989; Gusfield 1975; Hillery 1955; Stacey 1969).

The purpose of this paper is to point out that, whatever the academic standing of concepts such as community and the difference between country life and city life, these ideas remain strongly held popular beliefs. There should be no surprise here, of course. But I suggest that this fact in itself makes the rural-urban continuum (which for the purposes of this paper I will define as the idea that community is more characteristic of country places than cities) real. So bent has sociology been on debunking this popular idea that we have lost sight of its real implications.

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Based on ethnographic field research in an exurban village on London's commuting fringe, I will argue that this concept remains real at least at the level of definition of the situation. Following W. I. Thomas' famous dictum that if social actors believe a thing to be real then it is real in its social consequences, sociology must come to grips with the rural-urban continuum. The difference between country life and city life may only ever be true in the mind. But as Thomas observed, ". . . the subject's view of the situation . . . may be the most important element for interpretation" (Thomas 1951:80). One of the tasks of sociology is to study what is in people's minds, and why that should be so. This is particularly the case when we are dealing with some of the keywords, to use Williams' (1976) term, in the vocabulary of culture and society: country, city, and community.

For the people of Childerley² are firm in their belief in the reality of urban and rural differences. They have little doubt that country life may be distinguished from city life on two principal counts. First, they feel there is far more community in the country. The second is that life in the countryside is closer to nature. These beliefs have very real consequences. Upon them they construct a source of identity they and others regard as highly legitimate. And with a legitimate basis for identity comes some material and social-psychological benefits that are quite important to the villagers.

Setting and methods

Childerley is an "unspoiled village," as the local residents say, a parish of 475 souls lying amid the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs and near the boundary of central London's commuting watershed. Like other villages in the area, residents of Childerley are all white, mainly conservative, entirely Christian, and almost all Protestant. The only local employment is provided by a small craft works, the village shop, two pubs, the school, five large farms and several smaller ones, and the maintenance and cleaning required in the "Big Houses," as the villagers call them. Most residents, rich and poor, work elsewhere.

Childerley fits closely with what Pahl (1969) called a two-class village. A wide range of economic groups lives side-by-side, from farm-workers bringing home £6,000 a year to people of capital bringing home £6,000 or more a week. Most poorer residents live in one of two council estates (public assistance housing, which in Britain is found even in very remote settlements) and in tied cottages (residences tied to a job, usually on a farm or large country estate). Most richer residents live in restored farm cottages, converted barns, and other old structures. There are only a limited number of recently constructed homes. The very wealthy live in the Big Houses, in a few instances attached to substantial land holdings. In the terminology

² I have used pseudonyms throughout for the village and all respondents quoted.

of the residents, Childerley is a village of the haves and the have-nots, of ordinary people and moneyed people, of those at this end of the village and those at that end of the village.

I lived in Childerley for eight months in 1987–1988, and made brief visits in 1990 and 1991. The general approach of the fieldwork was inductive, similar to the grounded theory method of Glaser and Strauss (1967). I employed a mix of techniques, combining participant-observation, semi-structured interviewing, and analysis of documentary materials on the area. I conducted first interviews with 109 adult villagers, second interviews with 28, and a series of repeated in-depth interviews with 10 others. Most of the interviews were taped and in the participants' homes. Potential participants were approached through network contacts, resulting in an exceptionally high response rate with only one outright refusal and two apparent dodges. In addition to formal interviewing, I spent many hours in informal activities in the company of the participants, coming to know them in a more general way too. Through engaging in local activities, I came into direct social contact with roughly half of Childerley's residents. These hours of informal exchanges—kitchen chats, tea parties, dinner parties, evenings watching telly, mornings fixing cars, nights out at the pub, walks and car trips through the countryside, and the like—provided a valuable social context for interpreting the content of the formal interviews.

Although most of Childerley's 4,000 acres are devoted to fields and woodland, geographers would likely label it exurbs—or some related term, like accessible countryside (Russell 1986), the fringe city (Pahl 1965), the rural-urban interface (Harper 1987), or the perimetropolitan bow wave (Hart 1991). The City, central London, lies a scant two hours away (less, if you drive quickly or catch the fast train from "Winford," the closest station). It takes something over an hour to reach the edge of London's built-up area. The surrounding satellite cities and market towns are as little as 15 minutes away. Most residents of Childerley work, shop, attend school, see doctors, run errands, and otherwise spend nearly half their waking hours in these places. Even Childerley's fields, pastures, and copses have a citified air about them. Most of the land is managed by large syndicates, worked by moving factories (modern tractors and logging equipment), and regularly basted with the latest in herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, and synthetic fertilizer compounds.

No hard and fast definition exists for exurbs. The line is hard to draw. Indeed, a certain indeterminacy is perhaps central to their definition. What I mean by exurbs is that region where plenty of city money is to be had, but where pastures, fields, woods, or other forms of rural enterprise clearly dominate the landscape. Exurbs, then, are areas where people likely argue from time to time if this is really still the country.

This is a question Childerleyans often ponder. Here the country, given its conventional opposition to the city, lies close to its cultural boundaries. It is appropriate to assess the significance of conceptions of rural and urban distinctions in a place where people of cultural necessity often discuss this very topic.

The country difference

In the interviews, one of the principal questions I asked residents was why they chose to live in the village. The primary reason residents gave, over and over again as if in chorus, was their decision not to live in a city or a suburb. Despite the exurban setting of their own homes (and indeed, as I shall argue, in part because of this setting), Childerleyans repeatedly stressed the importance to them of the distinctiveness of the country. Bill Chesson, an older villager who describes himself as an ordinary working person, is one of many who identified the distinctiveness of true country life's greater closeness to nature.

Country life to me is—well, if you look out over there, there's quite a nice view. Now, I can go out over there every day, and every day you see something just slightly different. Now there's blooms just starting to get on the trees, getting ready to burst. And all over there, I know all those woods and fields by name like the back of my hand. Cause I've lived in the area for so long. I know what life's going on in there. . . . I mean, you see the country life.

Andy Simpson, a middle-aged lower-grade professional⁵ has traveled extensively on another continent. I once asked him what the word country meant to him.

If you said that to me sometimes, I'd think of . . . [the other continent] because the country there was such a formative thing in my development. I loved the wild ways. I loved the mountains. I loved the wilderness and the freedom and the sense of being just a small part of vastness, of emptiness. I loved being close to the natural world. So that would come to my mind. Or Childerley might come to mind. Woods, fields, the plowed fields, the sheep, the cows, the walks I go on, the dells, the badger holes, the fox holes, the rabbits, the lot of woodpeckers you see, the deer.

Simon Mason is a local farmer. He used much the same language of closeness to natural beauty to describe what he liked most about his work.

⁵ To further protect the confidentiality of the respondents, I report their employment mainly with the terminology of the Hope-Goldthorpe scale of occupational prestige (Goldthorpe et al. 1987).

The bit I really enjoy is walking around in the evening—taking the sheepdogs, going around looking at the sheep, standing in amongst the beef, and looking at good cattle. And that's something. . . . The beauty in the countryside is something too, just walking around in the autumn in the mist. Once your eyes have been opened to beauty, you can see it everywhere, can't you?

In addition to the closeness to nature country living makes possible, Childerleyans were also virtually unanimous in ascribing a distinctive lifestyle and pattern of social relations to country life. Mary Phillips "does" (cleans) for one of Childerley's Big Houses and has lived in the village for more than two decades. This is how she described that lifestyle and pattern of relations.

Peaceful. It's a whole new "ballgame." You know, there's a quietness about genuine country people that sort of just plod along. The no-hassle of life. . . . People have got time, time for living, time to talk, which I think is smashing. I mean, even in our little country shop, they've got time to serve somebody rather than expect them to rush around and get it all themselves and get 'em out as quick as possible.

Others echoed the same and other themes:

It means a quieter life-style to start with. I don't know, you could call it an escape from the rat-race. . . . Kind of a much slower way of life (farmer's son, late teens, born in village).

Living in a small community's very nice because you can't not know people. If you're in suburbia, you can live next door to somebody and not speak to them (higher-grade professional, male, middle-aged, less than 10 years in village).

[In the towns] if somebody's got a new car, it's a status symbol thing. You're suddenly putting yourself on. You must have a new car. You must have a washing machine. And we couldn't really care less what anybody had. Bicycle, car. It didn't matter. And we find that that's how [people in] the towns live. And we wanted to get away from that (housewife, middle-aged, new to village).

Life is like it was in the past here. You feel like you should lock it up every night. Coming home at night when we first moved here we used to think we should be closing a gate behind us at the bottom of the hill (routine service worker, female, early middle-aged, less than 10 years in village).

These themes of quietness, a slower pace, smallness of scale, knowing everyone, helping others, traditions, refuge from the rat race,

and freedom from material and status competitiveness are ideals Tönnies (1940) would have immediately recognized as those of *gemeinschaft*. In addition, residents raised other *gemeinschaftlich* themes—the importance of the countryside as a place of family ties, as good for children, as a place of mutual aid in times of trouble, and as a locality where English and Christian moral values can be found. I use the term *gemeinschaft* to make clear that the residents describe the ideal of community in the widest sense, as something more than the local settlement and its people. As did Tönnies, they connect community as well to themes of tradition, familism, ascriptive solidarity, anti-materialism, religion, even nationalism.

Of course, as is plain from the quotes, residents also describe a *gemeinschaft* rooted in a locality, a place, moreover a country place. And what makes *gemeinschaft* so significant in this place is its additional rooting in nature. I suggest this interpretation both because closeness to nature is the other principal distinction residents ascribed to the real country, and because Childerleyans often interwove the themes of nature and *gemeinschaft*, passing easily from one to the other. Simon Mason made the connection directly, tying together the reality of nature and the *gemeinschaft* of family life.

It's been really great bringing the kids up in a natural environment. . . . My kids see things live, they see things die. They're natural. I covet that for them. I don't want them to become divorced from the reality of life.

Harry Lowe, a retired higher-grade professional who has lived more than two decades in Childerley, made the same connection in a different way. Most of Childerley's land is farmed by large operations headquartered outside the village. Harry drew together what he saw as the anonymous economic motivations of these farming arrangements (what Tönnies would have called *gesellschaft*) with the substantial changes in landscape and wildlife Childerley has recently experienced.

Nearly the whole of the land is really run by some syndicate which is just controlled perhaps by one remote man 20 miles away. And he's disinterested in the village and everything else. . . . They've lost all the personal control and touch. It's like the big company, the multi-national, who comes along and takes over. The bosses are remote from the workers and there's no feeling of community or family. It's an unhappy situation. And that's reflected in the loss of the little fields with lovely thick hedgerows and lots of birds and meadows with flowers in it. Now you walk along and a machine has chopped the hedges down to [three feet]. The birds and animals have got no habitat. And the fields are just like miniature prairies, they're so vast.

In making this connection, Harry was also sounding another important theme—the widespread complaint among Childerleyans that the actual village does not come up to the standards of *gemeinschaft* and nature they expect to find in the country. Criticisms of the actual village as a *gemeinschaft* close to nature were as common in the interviews as praises of these ideals.

Childerley doesn't have an identity. This is a dormitory village (farmworker, male, late teens, less than 10 years in village).

Everything's changed now. You don't have the flowers that you used to, or the berries. There used to be strawberries, oh such berries, right down there by the corner. And down the lane, there were blackberries and wild gooseberries. There was such color too (retired unskilled worker, female, advanced aged, lifelong resident).

It isn't a friendly village (lower-grade professional, female, middle-aged, less than 10 years in village).

It's not the same as it was. The new farming's got so far away from nature. They used to farm with nature in the old days. It makes you wonder how much longer it can continue. The soil's gone. No hedges. No wildlife or flowers (part-time unskilled worker, female, early middle age, two decades in village).

It's become sterile. The sort of nitty-gritty has gone out of it. Now everything is all preserved and washed and painted, but . . . the heart of it has gone. The buildings have been preserved, but the character has been lost (lower-grade professional, female, young adult, less than 10 years in area).

I preferred the old village life. It was real friendly, like one big family. We always used to go out visiting. You didn't need a telephone. You just went and asked someone. If anything happened, if someone was sick or something, everyone knew it soon enough (unskilled worker, female, older, lifelong resident).

The big problem is that the community spirit is gone, or at least much declined. There's no longer any common purpose, no common goal. That's what is needed to hold a place together. I can't really see where it's all leading to (retired farmer, male, more than two decades in village).

Village life has gone up the creek (skilled manual worker, male, middle aged, lifelong resident).

This is not really a rural area (skilled manual worker, male, young adult, less than 10 years in village).

Why do the villagers praise the ideal of country life as what has led them to live in Childerley, yet at the same time so sharply criticize the contemporary village on precisely the same grounds? Ideals are, of course, very rarely attained. As the sociology of deviance has recognized since Durkheim, it is perhaps the essence of the power of an ideal to motivate that failings are so common. Deviance from the norms of an ideal clearly defines, for all to see, what is right and just. As Erikson (1965:13) has written: "Deviant forms of behavior, by marking the outer edges of group life, give the inner structure its special character and thus supply the framework within which the people of the group develop an orderly sense of their own cultural identity." No one in Childerley has gone to jail for violating the ideals of country life. But trespasses against its directives for living do highlight its principles, providing "... a point of contrast which gives the norm some scope and dimension," as Erikson (1965:27) put it.

The contradiction between the ideal and the real gives the notion of rural-urban differences its edge, the cutting surface that makes it a cultural tool for Childerleyans. As Williams (1973) has noted, the ideal of country life has always gone hand in hand with a sense that it is in decline, a Golden Age which is always slipping away. In sounding this rural complaint, as Williams termed it, Childerleyans make the case for the appropriateness and legitimacy of community and closeness to nature in the countryside, heightening the importance of maintaining this boundary by stressing its permeability.

Country people, city people

Residents of Childerley thus define the social situation of the village as that of a *gemeinschaft* in nature, although under stress from the forces of *gesellschaft*. This definition has real consequences. It provides a flexible boundary across which Childerleyans allocate identity. Paralleling the distinction between country life and city life, residents often spoke of marked differences between country people and city people.

The residents use many terms to distinguish these two groups, including a number of familiar pejoratives. The residents will refer to themselves as true villagers, country cousins, country bumpkins, locals, a country girl, a countryman bred and born, Hampshire hogs, salt of the earth, a real countryman, and village people, as well as what I will adopt as the broadest term, country people. Others they describe as city dwellers, bloody townies, Londoners, yuppies, city slickers, city-ites, outsiders, foreigners, day-trippers, town people, as well as city people. Together these terms comprise a vocabulary of country identity.

In using these terms, Childerleyans claim and grant membership

into a bounded social group—real country people versus city people. Among these city people, in the views of most Childerleyans, are many current residents of the village. And it is these city people and city influences to which residents mainly attribute Childerley's failings as a natural *gemeinschaft*.

Bill Chesson explained the difference he felt between real country people and the city people both within and outside the village.

They want town refinements in the country. All the things they've got in the town, they want in the country. And it doesn't quite work that way. You see, I'm a countryman bred and born. Lot of people that come down, [for example] my neighbor over here, they have absolutely no idea of country life at all. You can't blame him for it. But people don't understand the way country people work, really. I suppose, it's probably the same [with me]. When I went up to London, people used to laugh at my accent and treat me as a country cousin, because I have a country accent.

The problem is, Simon Mason explained, country people are simply different from city people.

Sometimes friends of ours from the city, they come here, and they feel insecure in our fields. And walking around the farm at night without any lights, they think that's very dangerous. . . . But [when I go to the city] the thing I'm frightened of is being mugged and losing my money and getting lost and not knowing where I'm going. Getting run over because I don't understand the traffic system. Things like that. I just don't know the rules, and they don't know my rules when they come up here.

The word rules is significant, for as is plain from the statements of these village residents, just moving to a place like Childerley does not lead to being accepted as a real country person. Considerable barriers to membership exist. Not surprisingly, one of the most frequently mentioned is the length of time a person has lived in the village. Aware of this test of time, Stephen and Joan Kidder, a moneyed couple in the village less than a decade, were cautious about claiming the right to be considered country people:

Joan: We would like to think we're country people. Put it that way.

Stephen: We don't make any great claims in that direction. [laughter]

Joan: I should think we're getting there. . . . Perhaps 15 years and we'll have qualified!

But in an exurban village such as Childerley, acceptance is not based simply on local roots and residence time. The feeling of being "Whalsan" that Cohen (1986) reports for the Shetland Island of Whalsay is not strongly evident in Childerley today. Rather than dividing up the village into who is "Childerley" and who is not, the main distinction is between who in the village is a real country person and who is not. Lifelong or very long-term residence is now so uncommon among adults in Childerley (only 28 were born in the village) that few could derive a source of identity using that measure. Now, other factors are also invoked in the determination of acceptance.

Childerleyans use four general rules to determine acceptance into the group of real country people. The first is *localism*. This refers to longterm residence in the village, especially birth or pre-World War II family roots in it. *Ruralism* is a second rule. It refers to the length of time living in country areas, including those other than Childerley, or holding a country job like farmer, farmworker, farm management consultant, or estate worker at a "Big House." Participation in and knowledge of country ways and activities, such as farming, gardening, pet raising and pet care, botany, riding, hunting, walking, local history, and authentic remodeling, constitute *countryism*, the third rule. Finally, there is *communalism*, which includes participation in informal inter-household exchanges and in community activities like church committees, the darts and cricket teams, the Parish Council, use of the village shop, the Women's Institute, the annual village fete and harvest festival, and tending the village green.

Moneyed and ordinary villagers differ in some regards in the deployment of these rules, allowing them to become as well a language for talking about class tensions and class identity. In general, ordinary villagers put more stress on localism. This is no surprise, for most of the few who qualify under this rule are working class residents. Localism is less available to the richer residents; so while the rich continue to grant the authority of localism to those who can claim it, for themselves they stress other rules.

There is considerable agreement over the importance of ruralism, but working class standards are stricter, again reflecting their greater access to this indicator. There are also class differences with respect to what best indicates countryism. For example, working class villagers routinely criticized authentic remodeling, participation in the hunt, and keeping horses or non-commercial sheep as displays of wealth, not countryism. They also often objected to efforts by the moneyed people to make the village tidy by straightening the stones in the graveyard, cleaning the village pond, and other so-called improvements. The working class sees the formal communalism of civic duty promoted by the moneyed people as taking over the village, as I often heard. In contrast, ordinary villagers advocate an informal kind of communalism based on child care exchange, assistance in car

repair, nights out drinking with the lads, and the proverbial cup of borrowed sugar.

Country rights

With a sense of identity as a country person comes a sense of associated status and rights. Childerleyans seek a feeling of personal empowerment and distinction as well as actual material benefits through their country identity, which often results in considerable local conflict and struggle for political control, particularly over housing and development issues.

Newby (1979) has described the social and economic privileges that accompany country identity for richer villagers. In an application of the ideas of Hirsch (1977), he noted the use of the countryside as a positional good, that is, a good which is inherently limited in supply and which consequently accrues social esteem and power to those who have title to it. The significance of a residence in the countryside as a source of cultural capital for the wealthier classes has long cultural roots in England. But this social resource is not conferred upon the moneyed who merely live in Childerley, at least not by other village residents. Those moneyed residents who are not considered to be real country people were described by one accepted member of the village's high society this way:

My great thing about the people who have come here, a lot of them since 1975, the majority of them have come in because they've moved up to a socially accepted position. So they've got a place in the country.

One woman, the daughter of a local farmworker, explained how she felt about the wealthier newcomers:

They come here and they say "oh it's a pretty village, nice countryside," and that's it for them. . . . It's like a place that they think about going out to as if its just like a holiday place. They treat it as, you know, nice things to look at, and things like that. And so they've bettered themselves coming out into the countryside. But us lot here, we've been here all our lives. . . . It's a home to us.

By bringing out into the open the issue of the positional benefits of country living for new moneyed residents, and by questioning their countryism and communalism, accepted country people selectively devalue the cultural capital claimed by residents who they do not accept as real country people.

A country identity is also a positional good for ordinary Childerleyans, which they marshal in a conflict with moneyed residents over housing. This conflict has arisen in the past 20 years as wealthier

people have moved into English exurban villages in ever larger numbers, as has been well documented (Connell 1978; Newby 1979). Through rejection of the moneyed people's formal communalism as inequalitarian, questioning of moneyed people's countryism as stilted (as one village man described it), and application of stricter standards of ruralism and localism, working class residents argue for their stronger rights to live in the village, as they are the real country people.

Charlotte Muckle is an unskilled worker from an old village family, some members of which still work on the local farms. She made the case for the greater legitimacy of the working class while criticizing the running of the annual harvest festival, now largely organized by moneyed residents.

They have the harvest festival. You can't afford the tickets to go, the ordinary people. Whereas before, it was a free thing for the workers, just to thank them for the harvest. . . . The people that have done all the work, the actual village people, can't afford to go. . . . And they think that's country life! But they've lost the atmosphere.

Another working class man, only two years in the village but still very much country because of his employment and rural background, argued the case for the working class's greater rights to village housing because they are the true country people and because they understand the real country ways:

It's a funny thing now that country people can't afford to live in the country, where we belong. It's all because of the yuppies coming in. They're driving us out, the working people. It takes the life out of everything.

Ordinary residents of English exurban villages have had some success in making these claims. Under the slogan of "village homes for village people," there is now a small, but growing, movement in many counties to pressure the British planning establishment to open up some land to build low-cost rural housing (Shucksmith 1991). Many moneyed residents in Childerley object to these efforts in their locality, saying it would ruin the village and lower property values, devaluing their own positional advantages.

Thus, both groups seek material benefits from their claims to country identities. But due to their different positions in society, those benefits are not the same and conflict emerges as a result. It is important to stress, though, that these positional implications of a country identity, for both ordinary and moneyed residents, cannot be dissociated from the acceptability of a claim to that identity. At least within the village, a person needs first to establish that claim to acquire the cultural and political capital of the countryside.

A natural right

A country identity, then, serves as a secure foundation for both the social-psychological and positional interests of Childerleyans. From their shared belief in the continuing importance of rural and urban differences, they gain both a sense of who they are and actual material benefits.

But why is this foundation such a culturally secure one, one that the residents find worth constructing? In part, I suspect, it stems from the persistence in Anglo-American literature and popular culture of the idea of the distinctiveness of rural and urban settings (Marx 1964; Mormont 1987; Williams 1973). Therefore it remains a widely available basis for ordering the world and finding one's place in it (Hummon 1986). But the same could be said of other cultural categories, many of which Childerleyans explicitly reject in their praise of the importance of the *gemeinschaft* of the countryside.

What gives a country identity its special force and attraction may be its natural associations. Nature, of course, is one of the most powerful and enduring concepts in Western thought (Collingwood 1981; Glacken 1967). And as the growing environmental movement attests, we in the West increasingly place a high value on what we regard as natural. Although what exactly nature is has long been the subject of vigorous debate, we accord a deeper truth to those matters we consider to be according to nature. As John Stuart Mill (1961: 452) observed, nature provides “. . . an external criterion of what we should do.” Nature thereby gives us “. . . an anchorage for the social and the historical in something outside of society and history . . .” (Béteille 1983:32). Here in this harbor, safe from social criticism, the realms of nature and the natural seem somehow more real.

One such realm is the countryside. The view that life in cities is further from nature and that life in the countryside is closer to it, what Lovejoy and Boas (1935) called primitivism, is an old one in the West. As the Roman poet Horace wrote two thousand years ago: “If life in harmony with Nature is a primal law, and we look for the land where we'll build our house, is anything better than the blissful country?” (Raffel 1983: Epistle I, 10).

Childerleyans continue to share this view. For example, Ruth Hill, a young housewife married to a higher-grade professional, used the principle of the naturalness of the countryside with its greater sense of community to justify her and her husband's recent choice to move out of the suburbs and into Childerley.

[In the town,] you've got these little boxes, haven't you, and these little people too busy to talk to each other in their little boxes. . . . It doesn't seem natural to me to live like that.

Reg Kitching, an older rural worker and lifelong resident of Childerley and nearby villages, made the same connection between what

he saw as the more moral character of country life and its closeness to nature. He did so by comparing the life-style of Native Americans to that of those he considers to be, like himself, real country people.

The world has changed, hasn't it? But we haven't. We still eat the rabbit. If we kill a deer, we share it with each other. We've always been that way with rabbit and the rest of it. They had a program on the telly about the Indians and about the ceremonies they had when they killed a moose. They shared it all, didn't waste anything. And I think we're like that, at least a bit like that. Whereas down in the towns it's all different.

Living close to the land and its products, I believe Reg was saying, naturally encourages a more moral and community-oriented style of living. Consequently, both Indians and real country people are not motivated by materialist desires for competitive and conspicuous consumption. They work together and consume only what is necessary. And they are more self-sufficient, more independent of the greedy industry of the city, which brings one closer to nature and demonstrates a lack of competitive materialist motives.

Nature thus sanctions the norms of country life. Closeness to nature's primal law, as a number of residents explained, puts country people in contact with a greater reality and more objective view of life. Growing up in the countryside, Simon Mason hoped his children would not become divorced from the reality of life, as noted earlier. Charles Bingham-Dana, a retired farmer, put it this way:

[In the country] one is capable of looking at England in a more objective way than the town person is. Because to start with, you're looking from nature into man-made environments, and you can judge that against nature. Whereas if you live in a town, you're only really dealing with man-made stuff.

Judging their lives in this way, the residents of Childerley feel they find that external criterion, that secure anchorage, for their social motives and identities.

Conclusion

In the words of Pahl (1966:322), "Any attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise." At most, as Dewey (1960) put it, the rural-urban continuum is relatively unimportant. Of community, Stacey (1969:134) stated that "... as a concept 'community' is not useful for serious sociological analysis." The 1988 *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (Abercrombie et al. 1988:44) reads; "The term community is

one of the most elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning," and Friedland (1989:4) has written of the "... exhausted ghost of *gemeinschaft*."

Childerleyans do not agree. For them, "community" is no ghost. They have no doubt that life in the real country is distinctive from that of cities. They hold that there life still largely follows the patterns of *gemeinschaft*.

And they find it very fruitful to do so. For Childerleyans, the idea of rural-urban differences is, as Mormont (1987:19) has described, "... an abstraction which is a principle for organization and a system of values." Based on this abstraction, the residents derive a source of identity as country people. Through its association with closeness to nature, they accord a special reality and moral security to this identity. Among the consequences of any identity are associated rights and status. Childerleyans are not unaware of these, and they often use these positional implications to their own material advantage.

What the residents doubt is whether Childerley and places like it come up to these ideals. In this they have much in common with sociologists who have criticized the concepts of community and the rural-urban continuum. But for the residents, it is these failings that underscore the importance of the rural-urban continuum in their lives and provide the idea with its social force. They turn their doubt and critique into a means for marking an important social boundary and allocating identities on either side of it. They would agree with Friedland (1982:593) that "... the shift of populations with an urban economic base and life-style reproduces the conditions of urban life in small communities." But at least for Childerleyans, the same shift that led to the overturning of the rural-urban continuum as an academic model has led to its reassertion as a popular one. Cohen (1985) has argued that, in response to economic, technological, and social processes of homogenization, people throughout the Western world are attempting to revive a sense of identity through the symbolic construction of social boundaries. What Childerleyans find in the rural-urban continuum, then, is a legitimate principle of social difference, a principle they regard as rooted in nature, still one of the most powerful forms of argument in Western thought.

And they are not alone in this. The work of Hummon (1986;1990) shows that the notion of rural and urban differences is a widely shared basis of what he calls community ideology in America too. Throughout the Anglo-American world, the rural-urban continuum remains an important source of legitimation, motivation, understanding, and identity. These are significant effects. It is true that geography no longer presents the same resistance to economics, migration, and communication it once did. It is true that, as Tönnies (1940:18) himself stressed, "... the essence of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* is found interwoven in all kinds of associations," not isolated from each

other in the countryside and in cities. But in the face of its continuing importance in people's beliefs and lives, these considerations make the rural-urban continuum only the more significant for sociological study, not less real. Ye shall know a tree by its fruit.

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