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Town--country relations

Town--country relations: the forms of conflict and cooperation between, and contrasting attitudes towards, town and country.

These relations constitute a spatial opposition of deep economic and cultural significance, one of the great axes along which social life is organized and understood. This entry describes how this axis is manifested in the images, social identities, communities, patterns of migration, economic development, and power relations of rural and urban America.

Images of Town and Country

"Fuscus, who lives in town and loves it, greeting from one who loves the country, and lives there!" With these words, written in the year 20 BCE, the Roman poet Horace began one of his many works advocating country living (Raffel 1984, 215). Horace's writings, along with Aesop's ancient fable of the town mouse and the country mouse, show that relations between town and country have been an issue for 2,000 years at least. Probably for as long as there have been towns and surrounding countryside, the residents of both have pondered their attitudes towards each other and the interests and sentiments that sometimes unite and sometimes divide them.

Yet for all their ancient significance, town and country are notoriously ambiguous terms. In America, "town" can refer to a city --- an urban settlement. It can as well refer to a

“small town” --- a settlement perceived to be culturally and economically rural, despite its concentration of population and businesses. By contrast, British usage see “town” as clearly urban and use the term “village” for most of the places Americans call “small towns.” Americans also use the term “village” at times, but for them the term “town” can cover both a village and a city --- and sometimes even the “country,” as in the use of “town” and “township” to demarcate local political boundaries in rural areas. The term “country” is no less indefinite. English speakers use it to refer to the open country of the wilderness, the farms and small towns of the rural countryside, and sometimes the quasi--rural landscape of exurbia and suburbia.

Despite these spatial and conceptual ambiguities, town and country do have distinct meanings, ultimately drawn from the opposition between culture and nature so central to Western thought. This distinction, imprecise and contradictory as it may often be, has been a central prop for many moral arguments. “Those who labour in the earth,” wrote Thomas Jefferson (1984 [1787], 290), “are the chosen people of God...whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” The Jeffersonian faith in the pastoral, natural, and democratic virtue of country folk has, however, often jostled uneasily against what Raymond Williams (1973) in *The Country and the City* called the “counter--pastoral” image of the countryside. Rather than a deposit of genuine virtue, the counter--pastoral sees the countryside as a repository of backwardness, isolationism, and small--mindedness.

Like country life, the values of town life have been both elevated and denigrated in American thought. The town has been praised as the seat of progress, civilization, and a sophisticated and open--minded lifestyle. And from Thoreau onward, it has also been regarded as a constraining jungle of laws, rules, greed, and competitiveness. Both town and country have been seen as the true site of individual freedom, freedom from social convention on the part of the country, and freedom from country gossip on the part of the

town. As well, both have been seen as the essential condition for real community, from the ethnic solidarity of “urban villages” to the helpfulness and neighborliness of country life.

Social Identity and Community

Given this range of available meanings, the distinction between town and country remains a valuable boundary upon which to establish a sense of identity. Many Americans continue to identify themselves as a “small town person” or a “city person,” and to take pride in the distinction. Part of the power of this distinction derives from people’s sense of its naturalness. The sheer physicality of place makes the country--town distinction an appealingly authoritative one. Moreover, the widely held notion that country places are closer to nature than urban areas, combined with the increasingly positive associations given to being closer to nature, makes a country identity especially secure and sought--after.

This spatial identification is central to what Hummon (1990, 11) called community ideologies, “systems of belief that legitimate the social and psychological interests of community residents.” For example, a person who can claim to be “a local” may gain both a rooted sense of self and greater political legitimacy in local conflicts. A commitment to a spatial locale also may serve as the principle around which an economic and social solidarity may be constructed. As Allen and Dillman (1994) in *Against All Odds* document for the small town of Bremer, Washington, a strong local community is possible even in an age in which information technologies shattered so many spatial boundaries.

Many scholars, however, have argued that the distinction between country life and town life in the modern world is, in the oft--quoted words of Richard Dewey (1960, 60), “real, but relatively unimportant.” Earlier scholarship argued for the existence of a rural--urban continuum, using Ferdinand Tönnies’s famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (communities based upon shared sentiments) and *Gesellschaft* (communities based upon interdependent interests). A host of studies have challenged the idea that *Gemeinschaft* is

more typical of rural communities and Gesellschaft of urban ones. William Friedland (2002) has also argued that the industrialization of agriculture is now so complete that it has become mainly an open-air assembly line, and that we are now seeing the “final separation” of agriculture and rurality. But despite these scholarly challenges, the American popular imagination still finds the distinction between country life and town life a fruitful one to make. To the extent that people still act on this distinction as a source of identity and ideology, it remains both real and important, at least in its consequences. In any event, commitment to the local community remains high in many rural and urban locales.

Migration

With these commitments has come population growth in both town and country. The twentieth-century decline in the US rural population reversed itself beginning about 1970, and with some ups and downs has continued since then. The rural population grew by 1.4 percent per year in the 1970s, fell back to 0.3 percent per year during the 1980s and the troubling years of the “farm crisis,” gained back to 1.0 percent per year in the 1990s, and at this writing is seeing growth of about 0.4 percent in the 2000s. But urban growth has been far faster than rural growth, aside from the 1970s, and is now running at about 3 times the rate of rural growth, leading to a steady decline in the percentage of Americans in rural areas, even as rural population has grown.

Moreover, the majority of rural growth since the “turn-around” in rural population began has been due to immigration, not natural increase among those already residing in rural areas. Typically, the rural growth is in those areas closest to centers of urban growth, as urbanites seek rural amenities within commuting distance of cities and suburbs. Consequently, two-thirds of the non-metropolitan population in the US now lives in counties adjacent to metropolitan counties. Many rural counties with special scenic value have also

experienced a significant influx of retirees and other originally urban people not so spatially tied to metropolitan workplaces.

Consequently, the Economic Research Service (2007) of the US Department of Agriculture reports that the category “rural” has become “harder to define.” Even where the rural population is growing, their employment is increasingly urban, as good roads and electronic media have increased the ease of commuting. Plus much of the rural population now lives in the remoter sections of counties that the Census defines as metropolitan overall, due to the presence of a significant urban center. Sonya Salamon’s 2002 *Newcomers to Old Towns* traces this process of rural suburbanization in central Illinois, and finds that the urban migrants are changing social relations as well. Increasingly, she writes, these areas are best described as “post-agrarian” in their values, sense of more far-flung community ties, and sources of income.

Town and Country as an Isolated State

These changing trends in America’s rural population show how crucial the patterns of economic development and technological change are to understanding town--country relations. In 1826 in *The Isolated State*, Johann Heinrich Von Thünen suggested a simple but powerful thought experiment about these patterns. Imagine an isolated world in which a single city sits in the midst of the hinterland from which it draws its resources. Such a city would be surrounded by concentric circles in which “with increasing distance from the Town, the land will be progressively given up to products cheap to transport in relation to their value” (Von Thünen 1966 [1826], 8). Perishable products (such as dairy, fruit, and vegetables) are expensive to transport, and so must command a high price and be produced close to town. This will raise the value of the land (what Von Thünen called “land rent”) on which these products are produced. Cheaper products easier to transport will be produced on

lower valued land farther from the town.

The real world, of course, is more complex. Cities and towns are not isolated from each other. Moreover, modern transportation technology greatly changed the economics of moving goods from Von Thünen's day, resulting in inter--regional agricultural specialization. A ham--and--cheese sandwich with lettuce and tomato served in New York City might have cheese from Dutchess County, some 50 miles away, as Von Thünen would have expected. The ham, however, probably came from Iowa, the wheat for the bread from South Dakota, and in an inversion of Von Thünen's zones of production and land rent, the lettuce and tomato from California. The cheese might have come from California too. Yet understanding the origin of real--world departures from an isolated state remains a valuable way to understand the dynamics of inter--regional competition and cooperation, the growth and decline of urban and rural populations, and the direction technological change has followed in the industrial period. Town--country relations have been greatly affected by efforts to get around the economic realities Von Thünen's model pointed out.

Yet despite these efforts, the general pattern of primary production (that is, agriculture, forestry, and quarrying) still follows Von Thünen's model. Eighty--six percent of America's fruits and vegetables and 63 percent of its dairy products are produced in metropolitan or metropolitan--influenced counties (American Farmland Trust 2002). Goods like grain and timber (which are relatively non--perishable, and therefore easier to transport) remain lower valued and produced further from cities on lower valued land, such as the grain land of Iowa, the Dakotas, and Nebraska, and the forest land of Montana, Oregon, Alabama, and Maine. The frequently depressed rural economies and continued rural population decline of these states reflects these lower values. In 1987, Deborah and Frank Popper made the highly controversial suggestion, still under vigorous discussion, that in some Western states, this amounts to a re--creation of the frontier, in which there is little population or economic

activity.

Von Thünen's model, however, presupposes the existence of a town. Walter Christaller sought to explain the town's origin with his Central Place Theory. A town, said Christaller (1966 [1933], 19), derives from the need for central goods and central services, goods and services "produced and offered at a few necessarily central points in order to be consumed at many scattered points." These goods and services are mainly those provided by government, industry, marketplaces, and the media. Christaller argued that there is a regional hierarchy of higher--order and lower--order central places, like satellites around a great planet. William Cronon's 1993 book *Nature's Metropolis* explores the history of these interconnections between Chicago and its hinterlands.

This sense of a world on the move is at the heart of the new "mobilities" and "flows" perspectives gaining interest among scholars, and largely based on the work of the British sociologist John Urry and the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells. "Global fluids" of materials, ideas, and people are transforming the old "moorings" of place, as we develop into a single, global "network society." Increasingly, because of these changes in technologies, economies, and cultures, we must recognize that few places, in the town or the country, can be deemed isolated anymore.

Power Relations Between Town and Country

These flows are "becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies," writes Castells (2000: 409). Moreover, the hierarchy of places and differentiation of function described by Christaller goes on, and promotes urban dominance over the countryside. Consequently, wealth tends to flow from periphery to center, argues the urban growth machine theory of Logan and Molotch and the world systems theory of Emmanuel Wallerstein. In order to maximize return on fixed capital, such as buildings and

machines and the relatively fixed capital of human resources, urban economic and political elites advocate pro--growth policies that circulate as much mobile capital as possible through cities and towns. The size and centrality of cities gives urban elites a political advantage when lobbying to create economic structures that will direct capital flows in their direction. The result is that, despite the frequent objections of local citizens, elites operate cities and towns as economic vacuum cleaners, drawing capital and population from each other and from the hinterlands.

Industrializing the countryside is one way that urban interests gain control over rural capital, with important consequences for rural areas. In one of the most famous works of rural sociology, *As You Sow*, Walter Goldschmidt (1947) argued that the structure of agriculture has a large impact on poverty and community life in farming--dependent counties. Based on a case study comparison of two California farming communities, Goldschmidt developed what has come to be called the "Goldschmidt hypothesis": That industrial farming leads to the deterioration of community well--being. Subsequent research generally upheld this conclusion, with the important caveat that rural poverty, the retention of rural social institutions, such as churches and schools, and rural depopulation depend on other factors as well.

Given these economic patterns, it is perhaps unsurprising that country people often feel a general hostility to town people and town things. These tensions emerge in the century--long debate over whether the structure of the U.S. political system gives too much power, or not enough, to rural interests. These tensions are probably also largely responsible for the continued salience many people find in claiming a town or a country identity. As well, there is now a resurgence of rural social movements around the world, from the Confédération Paysanne (Peasants Confederation) of France, to the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil, to the sustainable agriculture movement of the U.S.

But these new rural movements often draw strength from linking rural and urban concerns. The distinction between town and country is, in the final analysis, a mental construction that people choose to make, with real consequences for how they act. The likely persistence of economic tensions between central places and their hinterlands suggests that this is a construction that many people will continue to find significant to their lives, but perhaps also to reconfigure in ways that are beneficial to us all.

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Also See:

Community; Community, sense of; Development, community and economic; History, rural; Rural demography; Rural, definition of; Settlement patterns; Trade areas; Urbanization

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