

Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries

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Abstract

This review outlines several key aspects of the new rural-urban interface and the growing interpenetration of American rural and urban life. The historical coincidence of spatial and social boundaries in America is changing rapidly. This review highlights (*a*) the enormous scale of rural-urban interdependence and boundary crossing, shifting, and blurring—along many dimensions of community life—over the past several decades, and (*b*) the symmetrical rather than asymmetrical influences between urban and rural areas, i.e., on bidirectional relational aspects of spatial categories. These general points are illustrated by identifying 10 common conceptions of rural America that reflect both its social and economic diversity and its changing spatial and social boundaries. Here we emphasize symbolic and social boundaries—the distinctions between urban and rural communities and people and the processes by which boundaries are engaged. Placing behaviors or organizational forms along a rural-urban continuum (or within a metropolitan hierarchy of places) or drawing sharp rural-urban distinctions seems increasingly obsolete or even problematic. We conclude with a call for new research on rural America and greater conceptual and empirical integration of urban and rural scholarship, which remains disconnected and segregated institutionally.

INTRODUCTION

Rural America is in flux—buffeted by change that often originates from urban America and the larger global economy. The cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the nation's largest cities has been unmistakable over the past century (Fischer & Hout 2006, Kandel & Brown 2006). In 1900, more than 60% of Americans lived in rural areas, defined as small towns (population less than 2,500), the open countryside, and farms (U.S. Census Bureau 1995). Today, more than 80% of Americans live in urban areas; the largest 10 metropolitan areas alone account for more than 25% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). Whereas the rural share of the U.S. population has declined over time, the number of rural residents remains relatively stable at approximately 50 million, a large population by any measure. Unlike the past, however, the communities and people left behind in rural America are much less isolated from mainstream cultural and economic influences. Paradoxically, rural and small-town America is experiencing a new urbanization and urbanism.¹

A fundamental goal of this review is to outline several key aspects of the new rural-urban interface and the apparently growing interpenetration of rural and urban life. It also highlights the rapid changes now taking place in rural America and the blurring of rural-urban spatial and social boundaries. Unfortunately, rural areas and small towns often remain misunderstood and are too frequently ignored, overlooked, or reduced to stereotypes in the public and scholarly discourse. For most people, personal connections to rural America are infrequent or unrepresentative of the ordinary experiences of rural people or of the day-to-day conditions found in rural communities. Increasing numbers of Americans did not grow up in rural areas; their exposure

to rural life has been superficial—limited to vacation excursions (e.g., camping, hiking, skiing, hunting, golfing, surfing) or to passing through rural towns and the open countryside on their way to someplace else. In fact, many people have no direct experience with rural people and communities but encounter rural images, themes, and/or stereotypes mostly through the arts, media, and literature.

The historical coincidence of spatial and social boundaries is rapidly changing in America. This general point is illustrated here by identifying 10 common views (and, in some cases, misconceptions) of rural America that illustrate both the diversity of rural America and the increasing interdependence of rural and urban life. Placing behaviors or organizational forms along a rural-urban continuum (or even within a metropolitan hierarchy of places) or drawing sharp rural-urban distinctions seems increasingly obsolete or even problematic. This review identifies emerging issues at the rural-urban interface. It concludes with a call for greater conceptual and empirical integration of urban and rural scholarship, which often remains disconnected and institutionally segregated. A new sociology of space recognizes both boundary changes and emerging social and economic dependencies between urban and rural areas (Gieryn 2000, Lobao 1996).

THE NEW RURAL-URBAN INTERFACE

More than 50 years ago, Vidich & Bensman (1958), in *Small Town in Mass Society*, wrote about “Springdale,” a small town of roughly 3,000 people in upstate New York. The study focused on the large-scale cultural and institutional forces that had transformed community life over the town's history. Much of the discussion centered on the growing number of external and often invisible connections to mass society and influences on the pace and direction of social change in the community. Outside urban interests and political influences were transmitted directly by outsiders (e.g.,

¹Urbanization is a demographic process involving shifts of population from rural to urban territorial units, whereas urbanism refers to the sociocultural and even symbolic aspects of urban life (e.g., values or attitudes).

corporate salesmen and government experts) and newcomers to the community (e.g., urban-origin in-migrants), or indirectly by local community leaders linked to state and national governmental and nonprofit organizations, as well as to large urban corporations. Under the circumstances, the persistence of highly romanticized ideas about self-sufficient small towns and rural areas seems ironic.

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Obviously, a short review cannot resolve the many difficult conceptual and technical issues concerning modern definitions of rural or rurality (see Cloke 2006b). We focus instead on (a) the increasing scale of rural-urban interdependence and boundary crossing, shifting, and blurring—along many dimensions of community life—over the past few decades, and (b) the extent to which influences between urban and rural areas are symmetrical rather than asymmetrical, as is typically portrayed, i.e., on bidirectional relational aspects of spatial categories. Rapid urbanization quite literally means that a growing share of the nation's population depends on rural people and places for food (e.g., rural agrobusinesses), energy development (e.g., green jobs), and recreation and entertainment. The breakdown of rural-urban boundaries also means that nonspatial boundaries (e.g., racial and class divisions) within rural communities are changing in new and sometimes unexpected ways along with growing rural heterogeneity.

Rural-urban spatial interdependencies are not new (Sorokin & Zimmerman 1929); cities (and their elites) have always been viewed as the incubators of new ideas, technology, and mass opinion that spread outward to people living in small places and the countryside (Fischer 2010). What is different is the accelerated pace of changing spatial and social boundaries over recent American history. Growing rural-urban interdependencies are driven by rapidly changing information technology, globalization, and governmental devolution. For example, past technological innovations (e.g., railroads, interstate highways, and air transportation) have had large spatial impacts by virtue of improving the movement of products and people. Today's innovations have greatly facilitated the rapid (and relatively costless) movement of information and capital (e.g., Internet, cable and satellite TV, broadband), while stitching together America's rural and urban communities as never before. Technological advances have brought most aspects of rural life into the urban fold and linked rural

²Not surprisingly, such questions have fueled discussions about the state of rural sociology and its institutional future in land grant universities (Bell 2007, Krannich 2008). Lobao (1996, p. 77) claims that the "dimension of space gives rural sociology a sense of subject matter and boundary."

people and communities directly to the global economy.

Multinational corporations increasingly dominate local commerce and dictate the price of goods and services (Gereffi et al. 2001). Their fiduciary responsibility to international investors has placed many rural communities at increasing risk of offshoring, especially if they cannot compete with low production costs and cheap labor in developing countries. Cities, on the other hand, have become the main nodes in global economic networks, while having ever more dominion over rural and small-town economies (Massey 2007, Sassen 2000). This has occurred at the same time that the federal government's direct role in local affairs has fundamentally shifted. The Reagan revolution radically altered the nature of intergovernmental relationships in America, which often exacerbated spatial inequalities in local access to essential public services (Warner 2003). The Obama administration now recognizes that "rural communities will require a different place-policy approach" that better addresses the "evolution of interdependent and interconnected regions and ecosystems" over the past 40 years (Orszag et al. 2009, pp. 1–2).

In this review, we emphasize changing symbolic and social boundaries—the distinctions between urban and rural communities and people and the processes by which boundaries are engaged, i.e., boundary work (e.g., Lamont & Molnár 2002, Pachucki & Breiger 2010). Migrants between urban and rural areas are conceptualized as crossing spatial boundaries; new migrants (in either direction) represent cultural change agents or associational brokers that bridge rural and urban America. New technological and social policy regimes also influence boundary work by enhancing the flow of information, capital, and political and social influence among places. Geographic or spatial boundaries also can shift through metropolitan or urban expansion into previously rural territory (e.g., annexation and the incorporation of new urban places). And spatial boundaries are blurred at the rural-urban fringe or in exurbia, where commuters, consumers, and

local citizens interact on a daily basis on both sides of the rural-urban divide and where space is often highly contested.³

AMERICA'S RURAL AMERICAS

Common conceptions of rural life often do not match rural realities; facile generalizations are best avoided. America today contains many rural Americas, all of which are linked in fundamental but different ways with urban America and big cities. Below we identify 10 different but common conceptions of rural and small-town America, while highlighting changing spatial and social boundaries and the new rural-urban interface.

Rural America as Cultural Deposit Box

Rural America is sometimes viewed as a kind of safety deposit box that stores America's fundamental values. Americans often believe that rural communities represent the best of America, whereas big cities are dangerous, dirty, and different (Willits et al. 1990). For example, a 2001 national survey funded by the Kellogg Foundation showed that a majority of urban, suburban, and rural respondents characterized rural people as being hard working, having a strong sense of family, being committed to community, having strong religious beliefs, and being loyal to country (Kellogg Found. 2002). Americans often think of rural places as the "antithesis of the modern urban world—more moral, virtuous, and simple" than the rest of America (Brown & Kandel 2006). Logan (1996) argues that Americans value rural areas more than ever, precisely because of what may have been lost in the city as a result of massive urbanization.

³The United States uses two parallel statistical definitions of settlement structure: urban/rural and metropolitan/nonmetropolitan. The former is based on the size of nodal populations, whereas the latter is a county-based definition of regional economy. We use rural and nonmetropolitan interchangeably in this review, although most of the empirical evidence discussed utilizes the metropolitan/nonmetropolitan distinction.

Compared with the past, symbolic and social boundaries between urban and rural spatial units (at least in the aggregate) are not so easy to detect today. Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) generally indicate only small percentage differences between urban and rural people in attitudes and behaviors. For example, the conventional wisdom is that the strength and intimacy of personal relationships in rural areas exceed those found in urban areas. Beggs et al. (1996), using the GSS, found that personal relationships of rural residents were more intense and multiplex than those of urbanites. However, differences were generally small from a substantive standpoint, and effect sizes declined with the introduction of socioeconomic controls. For example, the average number of roles per social tie was 1.57 among nonmetropolitan respondents, compared with 1.46 among metropolitan residents. The percentage of maximally intense relations among alters (as a measure of network density) was 0.652 and 0.601 in nonmetro and metro areas, respectively. These are hardly big differences.

The Kellogg Foundation's (2002) national survey of American's perceptions of rural areas uncovered the mismatch between rural stereotypes and reality. Respondents' notions of rural America were dominated by images of "the family farm, crops and pastures" (Kellogg Found. 2002, p. 4). Agriculture played a predominant role in respondents' perceptions of rural, despite the small and declining share

of all rural employment in agriculture. Three-quarters of respondents also believed that rural residents had stronger families and kinship networks than people in the suburbs and cities. The reality is that rural family life looks remarkably similar to urban areas today, if measured by shares of single-parent families, nonmarital fertility, cohabitation, and divorce rates (Albrecht & Albrecht 2004, Brown & Synder 2006). Giving nostalgic or sentimental meaning to rural family life seems to reflect the view that rural people live simple and uncomplicated lives that somehow insulate them from the economic assaults and stresses of modern society. Recent statistics clearly tell us otherwise (Brown & Lichter 2004, Struthers & Bokemeier 2000).

Existing rural-urban differences on symbolic and social dimensions—whether they are small or large—beg several theoretical and methodological questions about their origins or the mechanisms that produce them. Differences along the rural-urban continuum today may have less to do with geographic location (i.e., contextual or community effects) than with other measured and unmeasured differences between people living in rural or urban places, at least as defined using conventional geographic categories (i.e., U.S. Census Bureau concepts).

.....Woods (2009), however, claims that urbanites prefer many of the lifestyle or ideational dimensions that are typically associated with rural living, such as neighboring and community solidarity, which urban planners and architects now often attempt to build into urban environments. Many urban people play at being rural. Urban gardening, sewing and quilting clubs, folk festivals, carnivals, and state and county fairs are some obvious examples. Other activities, such as horseback riding, canoeing, hunting and fishing, and picking strawberries, have their origins in rural America and traditional livelihood strategies. Distinctive rural symbols—clothing (e.g., cowboy boots) and music (e.g., country music)—are embraced by some segments of the urban population. Cowboy movies and Westerns were popular precisely because urban America identified with the toughness, independence, and unsailable virtues of its heroes (e.g., John Wayne). To establish his connection to ordinary people, George W. Bush purchased a ranch in rural Crawford, Texas, shortly before running for president. Rural values and lifestyles clearly have a cultural grip on urban people.

Rural America as Backwater

An interesting cultural contradiction to notions of rural America as a repository of America values is the view of rural America as a backwater. Rural Americans are commonly viewed by big-city dwellers as hicks, hayseeds, or rubes, derisive labels that unfairly paint rural people as unsophisticated, uncultured, and uneducated. In remote rural and mountainous parts of Appalachia, for example, generation after generation of social and cultural isolation presumably has bred both suspicion of outsiders (including the government) and elaborate

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Some caricatures of rural people and places have been propagated by Hollywood and the news media. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, popular television programs, such as *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Mayberry R.F.D.*, and *Green Acres*, conveyed similar images of the country bumpkin—unpolished, naïve, and out of touch with the faster pace of urban society. Urban America laughed. Although these programs remain firmly etched in the public mind, they often had a short shelf life at the time, perhaps because stereotypical images of rural people or places were increasingly out of touch with the day-to-day experiences of younger Americans living in big cities and suburban communities. More recently, the tables have turned. Socialite Paris Hilton starred in a reality television show called *The Simple Life*, which during its first year showed the trials and tribulations of living with a dairy farm family in rural Arkansas. It was rural America's turn to laugh.

A more charitable and accurate alternative to conventional stereotypes is that rural people are simply more culturally conservative than the rest of America—perhaps a reflection of deep-seated religiosity and the lack of direct exposure to urban ideas, values, and institutions. Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin cultivated the rural vote in the 2008 election by celebrating “real Americans”—commonsense patriots living in small towns who happened to be mostly white (Klein 2009). Others—people other than real Americans—lived in big cities.

Yet, the empirical evidence is often mixed on the conventional view that rurality per se is linked directly to conservatism. For example, opposition to abortion has historically been stronger in rural areas (Arney & Trescher 1976). Fennelly & Federico (2007) likewise found that rural people were most likely to hold strong anti-immigrant attitudes. On the other hand, Dillon & Savage (2006), using GSS data, found that religion and living in the South trumped rural residence in explaining attitudes toward abortion and same-sex relationships. And urban people were more likely than rural people to support the death penalty, once other variables were controlled in a multivariate analysis (Unnever & Cullen 2007).

Still, America's rural backwater areas have long been associated with right-wing antigovernment extremist groups that espouse white supremacist and anti-immigrant views (e.g., Klu Klux Klan, local anti-immigrant militias, and other quasi-military groups). Ruby Ridge easily comes to mind. Chicago-born Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber, lived alone in a cabin in rural Montana and terrorized America with letter bombs for 20 years. If measured by the number of recent journalistic accounts, hate groups have been resurgent since the election of America's first African American president. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2009) calls this the second wave, yet rural antigovernment movements and hate groups remain an understudied topic in sociology.

Kimmel & Ferber (2000) have explored the rural origins of America's militia movement and its connection to white supremacist groups. They argued that these organizations are overwhelmingly comprised of men whose "vision of masculinity, particularly a self-reliant, self-made masculinity endemic to American history, is the theme unifying both the ideology and the organization of rural militias with the militant right-wing continuum" (Kimmel & Ferber 2000, p. 582). One cross-state study (Van Dyke & Soule 2002) found that declines in the number of family farms were strongly associated with the mobilization of patriot or militia groups, a statistical result suggesting

that reactive movements are a response to threats to traditional lifestyles and values (also see Freilich & Pridemore 2007).

In the end, symbolic aspects of distinct U.S. geographies are neither easy to identify nor easy to separate neatly into rural and urban. Traditional stereotypes of rural America as a backwater are breaking down with new interdependencies of rural and urban places and peoples and with the continuing massification of American cultural memes and behavioral repertoires.

Rural America as an Engine of Urbanization

Past and current migration patterns are at the heart of changing spatial and cultural boundaries that often separate America's rural from urban places. The history of the U.S. population redistribution is defined by massive urbanization, a process marked by the emergence and rapid growth of urban places and the population living in them (Fuguitt et al. 1989). The growth of urban places historically has been fueled largely by in-migration from rural areas (including from other countries), where high fertility rates and the mechanization and consolidation of agricultural production created a large surplus labor pool at risk of rural out-migration to cities.

Migration and suburbanization have reshaped U.S. settlement patterns, while obscuring narrow technical definitions of urban and rural places and people.

...rates of out-migration from nonmetropolitan areas are much higher than from metropolitan areas (Economic Research Service 2009); a comparatively small rural population is exporting a much larger share of its population than is the urban population. For most of the 2000s, metropolitan areas have grown at roughly three times the rate of nonmetropolitan areas, largely because of high immigration from abroad and natural increase (i.e., the excess of births over deaths).

From a boundary perspective, recurring population movements back and forth between rural and urban areas create durable dependencies and social relationships that closely link rural areas with their urban counterparts. Migrants are cultural carriers.

Rural and urban cultural and economic distinctions are also shaped by the

sociodemographic composition of migration streams (Domina 2006, Weber et al. 2007). The selective nature of migration historically has exacerbated traditional rural-urban differences and spatial inequality. For example, rural America continues to lose its best and brightest to metropolitan areas, leaving behind the least educated and least skilled (Lichter et al. 1995). Using data from the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics*, Weber et al. (2007) reported that nearly one-third of college-educated Americans out-migrated from rural areas to urban areas, compared with less than 20% among high school graduates. Domina (2006) similarly showed with census data a continuing pattern of high rates of out-migration among its youngest and most highly educated—a rural brain drain. Returns to education and other forms of human capital remain much higher in urban than rural areas, which may reduce incentives for educational attainment and discourage rural community investments in education. Low economic returns to education also motivate out-migration of the most educated or those with high educational and occupational aspirations (Carr & Kefalas 2009). For the least educated, however, spatial differentials in wage rates are often small, which anchors low-skilled rural residents to place, while elevating the relative importance of other factors (such as family and friends) in making decisions to stay or leave rural areas.

..... there also is a rapidly developing literature on the integration of newcomers from urban areas into rural communities, which typically focuses on how recent arrivals upset the local power and stratification system and bring different values and attitudes to the community (Salamon 2003, Smith & Krannich 2000). Persistent rural out-migration reinforces cultural homogeneity and shared social values among those left behind; rural heterogeneity and change come from immigration. Not

surprisingly, in-migration often leads to cultural clashes between urban newcomers and longtime rural residents (Salamon 2003). In some cases, in-migrants endeavor to “pull up gangplank,” seeking to halt new growth lest the community lose the special appeal that first attracted them. Urban and rural values often collide in the form of contentious local politics, leading to community conflict and accommodation and to a blurring of traditional urban and rural distinctions.

Rural America as Exurbia

The outward expansion or suburbanization of big-city populations converts farmland and the open countryside into urban and other built-up residential and commercial uses. Moreover, urban expansion brings rural communities and people living there into close and continuous contact with the urban economy and society. Of course, much of the new growth at urban’s edge is planned and managed.⁴ Suburbanites—those living in metropolitan areas outside of central cities—now account for more than 50% of the U.S. population. Between 2008 and 2009 alone, metropolitan principal cities sent 4.8 million people to suburban areas and received only 2.6 million in return, resulting in a suburban net population gain of 2.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b). The net exchange with non-metropolitan areas also favored suburban areas by nearly 242,000 people. America’s population is simultaneously concentrating into metro areas but deconcentrating within these regions.

Conceptually, suburbs represent a rapidly growing associational bridge between big cities and nearby rural communities and the countryside. Suburban residents operate daily on either side of the rural-urban divide; as such, they blur conventional spatial and

social boundaries. More recently, new rural housing developments and unincorporated places have sprung up in close proximity to big cities but outside the built-up urban development adjacent to them. Such growth is variously referred to as urban sprawl, rural suburbanization, exurbia, or the rural-urban fringe. Exurbia transcends traditional geographic classifications schemes, i.e., those that distinguish urban from rural or metropolitan from nonmetropolitan areas (Clark et al. 2009, Woods 2009). Woods (2009, p. 853) has argued that exurban areas are “hybrid spaces, in which rural and urban values, cultures and landscapes have become fused.” The bright boundaries that have defined urban and rural areas—and people—have dimmed over the recent past.

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<sup>4</sup>According to the USDA, approximately 1.4 million acres of rural land were converted to urban uses per year from 1992–1997, but the total urban area is still less than 3% of the nation’s total. The USDA concluded that “[s]hifting farmland to urban uses has posed no threat to U.S. food and fiber production” (Nickerson 2005, p. 3).

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Rural-urban boundaries at the fringe are also blurred by changing patterns of commuting, i.e., living in rural areas or at the rural-urban fringe but working elsewhere (Champion et al. 2009, Morrill et al. 1999). Rural-urban commuting connects the social and economic activities of rural and urban people and places (Partridge et al. 2010). Goetz et al. (2010) view urban regions as having ever-expanding and dense commuting networks that effectively integrate rural, suburban, and urban people; businesses; and communities.

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## Rural America as Place of Consumption

Economic restructuring in rural America represents the ongoing transformation from production (e.g., agriculture and manufacturing) to consumption (Green 2001). Many rural areas—ocean and mountain resort areas, retirement communities, cultural or historic sites, and national parks and recreational areas—have become places of consumption, where rural goods and services are directed toward and consumed disproportionately by people with strong ties to urban and big-city populations. Amenity-related growth and ecotourism are sometimes part of the new lexicon of economic development strategies (Morgan et al. 2009), which further erode distinctions between urban and rural areas and create new economic interdependencies that are rapidly changing leisure patterns and urban lifestyles.

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Rural places of consumption provide spatial arenas for interaction between rural natives and urban visitors. For example, many urban dwellers own second homes and pay local property taxes in rural areas rich in natural amenities (e.g., along a lake or seashore). Between 1980 and 2000, second homes increased from 1.9% to 3.4% of all housing units in the United States, and they were much more prevalent in rural than in urban communities (Steadman et al. 2006). The seasonal use of second homes brings urban owners into close contact with local rural residents, while boosting the local economy and tax revenues.

Amenity-based rural economies attract in-migrants who enhance human capital and often invigorate local community organizations and civic culture (Brown & Glasgow 2008). Recreation and tourism generate positive income multiplier effects on the local rural economy. ....

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Outdoor and cultural amenities are attractive features to increasingly footloose older retirees with good pensions and social security. Rand McNally's *Places Rated Retirement Guide* includes many rural communities among its top-ranked places. Brown & Glasgow (2008) have characterized older in-migrants as "gray gold," but they also observe that benefits come with some costs in the case of rural retirement communities. ....

In-migration to retirement destinations and other high-amenity rural areas blurs the boundaries that separate urban and rural people and places. Most in-migrants originate from metropolitan areas (Cuba 1989, Glasgow 1995, Johnson & Stewart 2011). ...

## Rural America as New Immigrant Destination

A common image of rural America is one of racial and ethnic homogeneity—rural places are mostly where white people live. This image is now shaken by the widespread geographic diffusion of new immigrants, especially from Mexico and Latin America, into many rural destination communities (Johnson & Lichter 2008, Kandel & Cromartie 2004, Nelson et al. 2009). Johnson & Lichter (2008) have reported that Hispanics represented only 5.4% of the non-metropolitan population in 2000 but accounted for 44% of its growth between 2000 and 2005. Moreover, 221 nonmetropolitan counties would have experienced absolute population decline in the absence of Hispanic growth.

Hispanics have historically been America's most urbanized ethnic or racial group; 90% reside in metropolitan counties. The geographic dispersion of new immigration has thus had a large urbanizing effect on rural America, if measured by growing ethno-racial and cultural heterogeneity. Most newly arrived rural immigrants originate from urban gateways, but increasing shares are now bypassing gateway areas altogether and moving directly into rural areas (Farmer & Moon 2009, Lichter & Johnson 2009). ....

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New rural immigration clearly is linked to the changing global economy, especially the global agro-food system. Immigrant farm workers have for decades picked America's fruits and vegetables. Today, low-skilled and often undocumented immigrant workers also are increasingly recruited to work in rural meat- and food-processing plants, construction, and service jobs (Kandel & Parrado 2005). ....

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## Rural America as Ghetto

☞ In nonmetro America, more than 386 counties—almost 20%—have had poverty rates of 20% or more each decade from 1970 through 2000 (Beale 2004, Farrigan 2004). Approximately 28% of people living in completely rural counties were also residing in persistently poor counties (Jolliffe 2004). This compares

with only 7.5% of the population living in the most urbanized nonmetropolitan counties, i.e., those with urban populations of 20,000 or more and adjacent to a metropolitan area. America's rural poor people and families are spatially concentrated, geographically isolated, and seemingly resistant to effective policy interventions (Lichter et al. 2008, Partridge & Rickman 2006).

With the exception of Appalachia, which is overwhelmingly white in racial composition, persistently poor rural counties also are distinguished by the spatial concentration of racial and ethnic minority populations (Lichter et al. 2008). According to Beale (2004), 210 (47%) of the high-poverty counties are predominantly black, 74 (17%) are Hispanic, and 40 (9%) counties reflect the low incomes of Native Americans.<sup>5</sup> In communities on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, for example, poverty rates often exceed 50% (Lichter & Crowley 2002, Pickering 2000). Among rural African Americans, more than 50% live in counties with poverty rates exceeding 20% or more, and 45% of them live in persistently poor counties (Lichter & Johnson 2007). .....

..... The 1996 welfare reform bill program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families—its framing and policy prescriptions—does not easily fit rural America (Lichter & Jensen 2002, Weber et al. 2002). The problems of rural single mothers often are linked to shortages of rural employment opportunities and other barriers to employment. The lack of rural transportation, affordable high-quality daycare, and other social services (e.g., job training) also affect rural poor women's ability to transition from welfare to work.

However, changing patterns of concentrated poverty also reflect rural-urban boundary crossing, shifts, and blurring. Most obviously, the in-migration of poor people and the out-migration of nonpoor people effectively concentrate America's poor spatially (Foulkes & Newbold 2008, Quillian 1999). .....

Boundary shifting—where rural areas are reclassified as urban—also has implications for concentrated poverty. At the macroscale level, economically prosperous and rapidly growing nonmetropolitan areas (those at the metropolitan fringe and nascent small metro areas) tend to be reclassified as metropolitan, along with the disproportionate share of nonpoor people living in them. That is, nonpoor rural people and

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<sup>5</sup>Minority-defined high-poverty areas are identified when more than half of the poor population is a racial minority or high-minority poverty pushes the county's poverty rate over 20% (i.e., the white population's poverty rate is less than 20%).



places are reclassified as nonpoor urban people and places.

Rural America's social issues historically have become urban America's social issues by virtue of the flow of human populations between areas (e.g., the historical movement of southern rural blacks to northern cities with the Great Migration). ....Changing spatial and social boundaries mean that the causal roots of poverty are increasingly shared across rural and urban areas. Causal explanations of urban poverty can no longer be divorced or considered in isolation of changing rural poverty (and vice versa).

## Rural America as Food Basket

The interdependency of urban and rural America is perhaps illustrated best in the relationship of each to America's agricultural sector. Rapid urbanization and the growth of large metropolitan cities and regions are possible only because agricultural production in rural areas provides a food surplus. Modernization and economic development have gone hand in hand with ever-increasing efficiencies and productivity in the U.S. agricultural sector. Agricultural production and modern agro-food systems (i.e., food processing, marketing, and commercial distribution) are fundamental aspects of the spatial and economic division of labor in modern societies.<sup>6</sup> Many rural communities today are being reshaped by new technologies (e.g., biofuels, aquaculture, and biotechnology) and agricultural movements (e.g., organic farming and sustainable agriculture) (see Lobao & Meyer 2001 for a review). Most contemporary research is now guided by a new food-systems framework that involves a complex set of social, economic, and biophysical relationships (Lyson 2004, Lyson & Green 1999). This framework stresses the difficulty of examining U.S. farming in isolation from other aspects of the U.S. and global economy.

<sup>6</sup>In 2007, agriculture and related services accounted for 4.6% of the U.S. gross domestic product, and nearly 10% of disposable income is spent on food. Roughly 26 million civilians, or 18% of the U.S. civilian labor force, are involved in the food and fiber sectors, which are broadly construed to include all up- and downstream activities (Economic Research Service 2010).

Research on the impact of agricultural industrialization on rural people and communities has had a lively history, beginning with Goldschmidt's (1978) comparative study of two matched communities located in the San Joaquin Valley of California. One community was surrounded by family farms and the other by large commercialized farms. The family farming community enjoyed a superior quality of life, better public services, less poverty and population decline, and more social interaction and political participation (see Lasley et al. 1993, Lobao et al. 1993 for reviews of this literature). The replacement of family farms with corporate agriculture has seemingly eroded many of the most salient aspects of rural and small-town community life in America. Unsurprisingly, saving the family farm has become a topic of continuing political debate about agriculture policy and the U.S. Farm Bill.

The expansion of urban agricultural interests into rural America provides many examples of boundary shifting, crossing, and blurring. ....

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The increased consumer demand for fresh, local produce has led to a new symbiosis between city and countryside that benefits both small farmers and urban people. An increasing share of the nation's specialty crops are produced in the cities' shadows. The metropolitan farmer is not an oxymoron. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, 41% of U.S. farms and 24% of farmland are located in metropolitan counties, and the majority of fruits, vegetables, and greenhouse and nursery crop sales originated on metropolitan farms (Bills et al. 2005). Two-thirds of direct sales to consumers and half of organic production sales originated on metropolitan farms. Urban agrarianism is alive and well.

Paradoxically, the rural-urban blurring of agricultural production has occurred in concert with the growth of so-called food deserts in rural areas. Fewer rural people grow their own food, while the introduction of large regional retailers such as Wal-Mart has forced many locally owned grocery stores out of business. ....Residents in remote rural places often must travel long distances to shop for food in ur-ban commercial centers; not surprisingly, food deserts have been linked to poverty, food insecurity, and obesity (Morton et al. 2005, Schafft et al. 2009).

With the consolidation of agricultural production has come the growth of off-farm (and urban) employment, especially among farm women (McCoy & Filson 1996). Unlike in the past, farm income increasingly comes from both agricultural and nonagricultural pursuits. Unsurprisingly, earned off-farm income is

inversely associated with the dollar value of farm output, as financial viability of smaller farms has increasingly depended on income from nonfarm employment (O'Donoghue & Hoppe 2004). Off-farm employment links farming directly to the urban economy, while contributing to the viability of the farming operation and the economic security of farm families.

## Rural America as Repository of Natural Resources

The well-being of rural communities and people has depended historically on cultivating the land, extracting minerals, and cutting timber for urban consumption. Rural America, which accounts for 80% of the total U.S. land area, is the nation's repository of energy resources, timber, soil and water, precious metals, open space, and wildlife habitat. Much of the iconography of rural communities is associated with landscapes rich in natural and cultural amenities such as mountains, lakes, rivers, seashores, farms, village squares, battlefields, and other historical monuments. Most Americans know rural areas indirectly, i.e., from a distance rather than through direct experience (Logan 1996). It is these landscape images, however, that underline the deep and enduring prorural (and antiurban) attitudes among the American population (Brown et al. 1997, Willits et al. 1990).

Rural America's abundant natural amenities affect rural-urban relationships in numerous ways. As McGranahan (1999) has shown, climate, topography, and water area are strongly associated with rural county population change during recent decades. Between 1970 and 1996, average population growth in rural counties rich in amenities was 120%, compared with essentially no growth among rural counties lacking amenities

Although rural-urban economic interdependencies concerning natural resources are longstanding and continuing, they have taken on new saliency in contemporary policy debates. The BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the quest for energy independence ("Drill, baby, drill"), and the need to curb carbon emissions has refocused the spotlight on new sources of domestic energy and environmental protection (Molnar 2010). Most solutions to the nation's energy problems reside in rural areas. These include new plant-based feedstocks (e.g., switchgrass) for ethanol; wind generation of electricity; and the use of new technologies, such as hydrofracturing (fracking), to extract gas from rock formations deep underground. Each brings different economic and community interests into potential conflict. As in the past, new energy technologies feature the rural infusion of capital from metropolitan and global sources, while highlighting persistent rural-urban imbalances in political and economic power and control (Molnar 2010).

Nowhere is this illustrated more vividly than in the Marcellus Shale region of Pennsylvania, New York, West Virginia, and Ohio. Big gas is promising significant employment and income benefits to these economically hard-pressed rural regions, even as environmental and health impacts remain poorly understood. These concerns were further heightened in June 2010 when 35,000 gallons of hydraulic fracturing fluids spilled into the forested area in rural Clearfield County, Pennsylvania.

In contrast to previous eras (e.g., Appalachian energy extraction), many small towns are pushing back against outside corporate economic interests. In the case of hydraulic fracturing of shale, environmental social movements (e.g., Shaleshock) have formed to effectively slow the permitting process until economic,

health, and environmental impacts have been thoroughly examined.<sup>7</sup> Although unequal relationships between metropolitan power centers and rural resource locations remain, some rural communities are now resisting in ways that were uncharacteristic in the past. Such movements are often infused with monies and technical assistance from urban-based environmental organizations and other outsiders (Fortmann & Kusel 1990). In the global era, rural communities with effective local institutions, responsive governance and civic engagement, and strong links to extralocal environmental groups may be best able to establish productive relationships with energy companies that arguably have had a sordid history of exploiting rural energy resources, often at the expense of powerless rural communities.

Ironically, most previous studies have shown that urban residents are more concerned than rural residents about environmental issues and support land-use planning and control (Fortmann & Kusel 1990, Freudenberg 1991). This has led to a growing literature in environmental sociology about the social basis for environmental concerns (Harris & Bailey 2002, Sharp & Adua 2009). ....

....

Rural America—and its connections to the urban and global economy—is at the forefront of national debates about the environment and natural resource development. The human dimensions of climate change have increasingly attracted the attention of sociologists, who have provided a counterweight to natural scientists and narrowly technical solutions to the problem (see Molnar 2010, Nagel et al. 2009). The urbanization of rural America may in fact be contributing to climate change (Jiang & Hardee 2011). Dunlap (2010) calls for a fundamental sociological reorientation that better highlights the inequitable distribution of climate change and sociospatial impacts, which are borne disproportionately by rural areas (e.g., climate change on crop yields or weather variability on skiing communities).

### Rural America as Dumping Ground

Prisons, slaughterhouses, feedlots, landfills, and hazardous and toxic waste sites are increasingly located in rural areas. To some observers, rural America has become a dumping ground for urban America. Environmental injustice is closely linked to new spatial interdependencies and boundary blurring, especially as many rural areas have become home to unwanted urban refuse and dangerous people (e.g., imprisoned criminals). The siting of locally undesirable land uses (LULUs) typically preys on relatively powerless and poor people, especially minorities. Poor places and people in rural areas have been especially vulnerable in this regard (Kurtz 2003, Shriver & Webb 2009).

....

<sup>7</sup>This has led to a moratorium on gas drilling in New York. Pennsylvania, however, has a much more permissive attitude toward energy extraction, and hydrofracturing is moving ahead.

.... the re-structuring of meat production and processing has changed rural America. To accommodate the nation's appetite for animal protein, giant commercial feedlots and slaughterhouses now expose rural residents to noxious fumes, potential health hazards, and water pollution (e.g., waste-water runoff and contamination). ....The nation's slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants are increasingly owned by large multinational corporations such as Iowa Beef Processing, Cargill, and ConAgra (see Fitzgerald 2010 for a social history of

... For some rural communities, their long-term economic fortunes are closely linked to urban corporate profitability.

## RURAL AMERICA AT THE CROSSROADS

In the final analysis, no review of recent scholarship on rural America does justice to its diversity and growing interdependence with urban American values and institutions. Forty years ago, in his presidential address to the Rural Sociological Society, Fuguitt (1971) emphasized the plight of rural places left behind, especially as urbanization and industrialization proceeded apace. Today, fewer rural places have been left behind in an increasingly spatially integrated national and global economy. Yet, Americans continue to embrace the rural idyll. Rather than being a bright, discrete boundary separating urban and rural America, the new rural-urban interface is an interstitial zone that is dense in social, political, and economic relationships. These relationships have been transformed by broad-scale social and economic changes, including economic restructuring, globalization, technological innovation, and the changing relationships between levels of government. Boundaries may divide people, but they also bring people together in intense patterns of social and economic interaction.

We have argued that the social and spatial boundaries that have divided rural from urban America historically are rapidly shifting, blurring, and being crossed. Rural-urban interactions also are increasingly symmetrical rather than asymmetrical, with mutual interdependencies and reciprocal flows of people, goods and services, and information. Ironically, the blurring of rural-urban spatial boundaries

has been accompanied by the hardening of aspatial boundaries (e.g., race and class). Still, an immense literature focuses, perhaps inappropriately, on rural-urban differences or on variation along a rural-urban continuum. Other published articles—across the social sciences—mechanically include a control variable for rural (or urban) residence, undoubtedly believing that rural (or urban) people are somehow different (because of selection or context) on a host of unobserved variables not included in the statistical models. Rural and urban are usually treated as tightly circumscribed spatial containers where other important things happen. A general lesson from our review is that spatial and social boundaries are diverging and that rural and urban America are increasingly interdependent. It is more difficult than ever to discuss social change in rural (or urban) America without acknowledging the other.

Finally, the study of rural America has been marginalized in American social sciences, but this may be changing (Woods 2009). In the past, the study of rural issues in sociology was largely segregated in rural sociology departments closely linked to land-grant universities and the missions of outreach and extension. With changing rural-urban boundaries (and budgetary considerations), many traditional rural sociology departments have either disbanded (e.g., Texas A&M, Washington State University) or have changed their names (e.g., Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison or the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University). Universities have responded programmatically to the new urbanization of rural America by downsizing, arguably at the same time that rural concerns have become ever more important to America's well-being and future. Happily, the topics that have mattered most to rural sociologists—poverty, agriculture and the food system, family and the life course, community organization, migration, and so on—have been increasingly embraced and studied by urban-oriented sociologists or other social scientists, who usually eschew the rural



sociology moniker. A resurgent environmental sociology, for example, is driven in part by sustainability (and funding) and represents an overlapping interest area in traditional sociology and rural sociology. Intellectual boundaries have blurred, and a new scholarly dialogue is being forged along the rural-urban divide.

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