THE INTERPENETRATION OF RURAL AND URBAN AMERICA

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While there can be no question that rural and small town America exists, its nature, its dimensions, and its extent are problematic. Scholarly and policy discussions teeter on the three-legged definitional stool of rural-urban, metro-nonmetro, and agricultural-non agricultural. Yet who can doubt that most of the Mississippi Delta inhabits this realm, as do portions of upstate New York and the Dakotas? On the other hand, who can be certain that a seaside or skiing resort in season does, or what is one to think of a collection of hamlets in southern New Hampshire where there is a congregation of programming firms, magazine editorial offices, and computer mail-order houses? In this paper I will pose some questions concerning the definition of rural and urban America to which I have no answers, but which I hope will stimulate new ways of looking at these traditional topics.

A reading of the relevant literature makes clear the ambiguities of the definition of this realm, and that those who deal with the subject are keenly aware of these ambiguities. Ten years ago Amos Hawley and Sara Mazie wondered whether "in the end one might expect a disappearance of the distinction between nonmetro and metro sectors."[1] I think that the distinction will not disappear, because there is reality to it. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale (1989) come closer to the mark when they say that "rural and small town America has come to be an integral part of the highly urban and metropolitan society that the United States is today."[2] But this reality is

not captured by the concepts we are now using, which are awkward and ill-fitting.

Since 1910 a place has been classified as "urban," in effect, if 2,500 or more people sleep there. Some two-fifths of the nation's population classified as "rural" population lived in metropolitan areas in 1980; and about the same proportion of the nonmetropolitan population was classified as "urban." Fuguitt, Brown and Beale (1989), commenting on the migration turnaround, note that "using a constant area approach with metropolitan-nonmetropolitan county designation at the beginning of each decade, the largest nonmetropolitan growth in this century is for 1970-1980...[Yet when the 1980 definition is used] the nonmetropolitan population actually experienced its most severe decline during the turnaround decade of more than 10 percent!"[3] This is an Alice in Wonderland world, where words mean vaguely what we want them to mean, rather than exactly, no more and no less.

The literature on rural America (I will follow standard practice using the words "rural" and "nonmetro" interchangeably) also stresses the diversity, the heterogeneity of this realm. But the analysis of this diversity seems limited mostly to tabulation by broad regions, economic specialty, adjacency to metropolitan areas, and the like. To an outsider, like myself, what is surprising is that so much of the mainstream work in this field uses totals and averages based on this diverse and poorly bounded universe and -- in spite of the protestations of rural diversity -- does not look nearly enough either at the deviations from these central values, or at the patterns of these deviations.

Part of the problem is that most of the defining of rural America is done by default, as a residual category. "Nonmetropolitan" is the quintessence of a residual category; but so is "rural," which effectively is nowadays defined as that which is not urban. The current definition of "rural" in effect is by a criterion of small populations or low densities is a sensible and traditional approach, but we all know that the definition of an area's population or density is terribly sensitive to how the boundaries of that area are drawn. For many purposes these questions were not so difficult in earlier times, when people walked or used animals for transportation, and even perhaps in the days of the railroads and the early automobile. But the definitions of the relevant population and of density have become more problematic with successive improvements in transportation and communications, each of which has made more difficult to precise the relation of what the "here" of a place is. As the realm of the "here" becomes more extensive, the concepts of the population or the density of a place becomes more ill-defined for many purposes and interactions, and thus lose much of their usefulness.

It seems to me, for instance, that an astronomical observatory atop an isolated mountain cannot be said to be rural. Many other instances are difficult to categorize (such as executive retreats, certain resorts, some military installations) and people may reasonably disagree as to what they are. The difficulty lies, of course, in that these activities basically involve urban people (for whom the "here" can be very extensive) in low density settings, and because they also often involve their interaction with a permanent local population which is not urban (and whose "here" is much more restricted).

Neither is defining rural by life style very productive. Granted that the social diversity of rural areas is vast, on average nonmetro life style indicators (such as the prevalence of traditional families, reproductive behavior, and attitudes towards social issues) are still more traditional than those of metropolitan residents, but not by a great deal; and, while differences remain, They appear to be converging further. Louis Wirth wrote in 1938 an influential essay called "Urbanism as a way of life,"[4] which argued that being urban did not depend on density or population size, but on "way of life"--what is now is called a life style. By Wirth's criterion much of rural and small town America is now urban, and becoming more so.

This is a credible case, in that there is on average an evident statistical homogenization across the nation of culture and consumption, of family patterns and life-courses.[5] But it is a case built on a neo-Platonic ideal type of what urban life is. In actuality, urban life styles are themselves extremely varied and urban populations heterogenous: they range from ethnic blue-collar to yuppie, from brahmin to underclass. Thus, the simple graded dichotomies or ideal types of traditional sociology, of the rural-urban continuum, or of gemeinschaft and gesselschaft, do not today seem very effective for sorting rural from urban, both because there is very little interclass variation and because the intraclass variation is great.

If, for defining characteristics of what is rural, neither population size, nor density, nor life style are terribly useful, what about economic structure? Here, again, we draw a blank. Agriculture now is a minute portion of rural or nonmetropolitan employment, and there are nearly as many agricultural workers in metropolitan areas as in nonmetropolitan ones. Looking at the grosser categories of industrial employment provides no help,

for although rural areas fall a little short in some and are a little heavier in others, the differences are not great -- and indeed some, such as the greater share of manufacturing employment in rural areas, may be said to run counter to popular conceptions.

Obviously, in these considerations of what is rural vs what is urban (or nonmetro vs metro), I have been contrasting a general, intuitive, culturally-conditioned understanding of what these categories may mean with the possible results of formal statistical classificatory schemes. It may well be that the intuitive understanding is wrong and that such formal classificatory schemes will serve, but I do not think so. We need to match better what we mean with what we do.

We need to begin a process of rethinking the human geography of well-to-do nations. The ideas of sociology and the censal categorizations, developed earlier in this century and epitomized in Burgess's zonal metropolis, are now obsolete and misleading. They are premised on a metropolitan area consisting of a central city and a suburban ring, and beyond this a rural hinterland dotted with small towns and cities. This is the way the vast majority of censal and related information is organized and presented, and therefore the spectacles through which we see the world around us. And it is on the basis of this imagery that we do our analysis, diagnose situations, formulate policy and design programs.

This picture was essentially correct until the end of World War II, when a second stage of metropolitan dispersion took off. The economic activity of the metropolis now extends much further in geographic space, and is distributed in a constellation of clusters (of which the traditional center is still the major one) linked primarily by highways and by an

invisible communications network. Residential areas are relatively continuous in the older portions of the metropolis, but beyond that they have diffused over a vast area, and many clusters are surrounded by open space. The growing ease of movement and communication has reduced the friction of space, and the metropolitan elements need no longer be tightly packed. They can now interact across relatively empty spaces, or across spaces whose population and activities are not tightly integrated with the metropolis; that is to say, across rural spaces. Thus the urban and the rural interpenetrate, and the distinction between the country and the city is blurred over much of the urban field. While there are many large regions in this country which are distinctly rural, over much of the United States the geographic reach of the functional metropolis has become so large that the functional hinterland of one metropolitan area overlaps with that of another.

The existing censal categories are misleading because they present a vision of the United States as a territory tiled with convex, continuous, mutually exclusive types of regions, while the reality is one of a great deal of interpenetration, much of it rather fine-grained.

How can this interpenetration be measured and represented? Two possible approaches come to mind, which may be used singly or in combination, and which are more possible today as they were not just a few years ago because of computers and advances in geographic information systems. One of these may be called the archipelago approach and the other the shadings approach. The archipelago approach consists of relaxing the requirements of spatial continuity, and permitting an urban region to continue into adjacent rural areas as an archipelago of urban clusters or islets; and conversely to allow rural islets within metropolitan areas. This is

to some degree what the urban-rural distinction does today, but its operational definitions or what is urban and what is rural are quite unsatisfactory, and it is overwhelmed operationally by the metropolitan-non-metropolitan dichotomy.

The shadings approach is to abandon the use of exclusive categories for areas, and to concede that a particular small area may have a population some of which may be usefully categorized as rural and some as urban (or whatever labels are used). Areas would then not be classified as urban or rural exclusively, but characterized by their relative degrees in these dimensions. (And, of course, the dimensions by which areas are characterized need not be limited to two.)

Whatever the intellectual merits of these approaches, they present formidable, although not insuperable, problems for analysis. For instance, a map of urban and rural America combining the archipelago and the shadings approach (limited to two categories) might look somewhat like a topographic map which shows land (eg, urban) by different shades of brown which become darker with altitude, and water bodies (eg, rural) by different shades of blue which become darker with depth. Such a map really displays a single variable (altitude) over the earth's surface, but by convention and the laws of physics, it is divided into the realm above and the realm below the water line. Comparably, such a map might divide brown from blue by the preponderance of urban from rural population.

This is well and good, and students of Edward Tufte[6] can surely improve on these suggestions for mapping additional information. But what about handling other simple traditional forms of analysis? For instance, there is considerable use of tables which show migration streams between

metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas among regions. How can such a table be built if some areas are somewhat metropolitan and others less or more? Such tables require categorical data, so that whatever is being counted clearly belongs to one category at the beginning to another (or the same) at the end. Perhaps these problems can be handled to some degree through improved coding of records, developing interval-based categories, using fuzzy sets, and so forth; but it will not be as methodologically simple as it is with today's categorizations.

Too much of the analysis of what is happening to rural America, it seems to me, is devoted to computing numbers organized by obsolete definitions, and too little is devoted to developing concepts and tools for the new realities.

Too much attention, if I may say so, is devoted to whether the nonmetropolitan areas are outstripping metros demographically or losing ground. Much of the literature sounds like sports fans gloating or moaning over how their team is doing. I find particularly troubling the concern in this literature about population growth or net migration as to whether we (the rurals) are winning or losing. The concern should be about how people are doing, not about where they are or where they are going. More effort should be spent in understanding the emerging territorial structures and interactions.

In developing new concepts and ways of picturing the world today, we will not be able to rely only on high tech -- TIGER files, PUMS, statistical wizardry, and computer mapping. I suspect that in order to map behavior better and understand its significance, there will also be need for more field studies (of the type which flourished in the early days of central place

theory) and some ethnographic work. The development of new categories and variables, or the confirmation of the old ones, cannot but benefit from a complement of close observation and a natural history approach.

I must be clear that, however quixotic my suggestions, I have no illusions that the endeavor will be easy or quick. Social learning never is. We are talking here of many years, lots of effort, many false starts.

Moreover, the current categories are embedded not only in our minds, but also in our governance. HUD does metro, and Ag nonmetro. HSS and Transportation use different regulations and standards according to the classification of an area. Some years ago, OMB became aware of the pervasiveness of this reliance on censal classifications in legislation, administrative practices, and regulations. It set out to find out the extent of this reliance but had to give up because the job was unmanageable.

In talking of new ways of conceptualizing our new geography, we are therefore not talking only about knowledge and information, but also about control and allocation; and so we are talking about powerful and conflictive political interests.

Because of this, I am sure that twenty years from now we will have official statistics of metro and nonmetro, rural and urban, changed very little from today.

But one can hope that, by then, urban and rural scholars will have an alternative set of concepts and techniques more suited to the evolving realities of today's human geography. And perhaps this understanding will help develop policies which are more effective, less wasteful, and more humane.

NOTES

1. Hawley, Amos H and Sara Mills Mazie (eds). 1981. Nonmetropolitan America in Transition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

2. Fuguitt, Glen V., David L. Brown and Calvin L. Beale. 1989. Rural and Small Town America. N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, p. 427.

3. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale, p. 24. The nonmetropolitan population according to the 1980 designation is 17.3 million people smaller because it excludes counties designated as metropolitan in 1980 but not in 1970. These may be counties adjacent to the 1970 metropolitan areas or in newly-designated metropolitan areas. The great majority of these people did not change county of residence during the decade, and it is an open question whether or not their lives became functionally metropolitan during the course of the decade. To take account of the reclassification for migration, one would need to adjust metro-to-nonmetro flows by: (1) deducting the decade's migrants from metropolitan areas to these counties; and (2) adding the migrants from these counties to nonmetropolitan counties. The nonmetro-to-metro flows would need to be adjusted by (1) deducting the migrants from these counties to metropolitan areas; and (2) adding the migrants from nonmetropolitan areas to these counties. These adjustments would use, in each case, 1980 designations. To my knowledge such calculations have not been made, but they would in all probability increase the nonmetro-to-metro flows and reduce the metro-to-nonmetro for the decade.

4. Wirth, Louis. 1938. "Urbanism as a way of life" American Journal of Sociology 44: 1-24.

5. See, in this volume, Tim B. Heaton "Family and Household Structure and Change in Rural America."

6. See Edward R. Tufte, Envisioning Information, Cheshire CT: Graphics Press, 1990, and The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, Cheshire CT: Graphics Press, 1983.