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THE NEW RURAL HISTORY: DEFINING THE PARAMETERS

ROBERT P. SWIERENGA

In the last ten years the “new social history” and its stepchild the “new urban history” have become the dominant subfields within the history discipline; but the “new rural history” remains an orphan child with little recognized place as yet in academic curricula or historical writings.¹ Unlike urban history, which is studied as a coherent whole, aspects of rural history are usually discussed under such rubrics as the westward movement, agricultural history, land history, frontier development, Indian history, and so forth.

The implicit assumption behind this disjointed scholarly perception is that rural history is an incongruity in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is true that electricity and the automobile have virtually wiped out the boundary line between rural and urban communities, and the rural economy is intertwined with urban industry and commerce.

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Rurality as a distinct way of life is on the decline and may well disappear in our lifetime. Nevertheless, until the late nineteenth century, most Americans lived in rural communities. To study the development and subsequent history of these communities is vital to an understanding of American history. Urban historians and geographers certainly recognize the importance of the rural environs in which their cities emerged and acknowledge the interdependence of cities and hinterland. Even at the present time, nonmetropolitan communities, which contain one-third of the total United States population and 90 percent of the land area, remain an important national force, politically and socially.²

REASONS FOR NEGLECT

There are cultural, historiographical, and methodological reasons for the scholarly neglect of rural life. The cultural reason is that most professional historians since World War II are urban-oriented. They live and teach in urban universities and naturally respond to urban issues and problems. Eugen Weber, professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles and a leading historian of rural

France, frankly admitted to this bias in a 1976 book:

The history I thought and taught and wrote about went on chiefly in cities; the countryside and little towns were a *mere appendage* of that history, following, echoing, or simply standing by to watch what was going on, but scarcely relevant on their own account.³

There is also a historiographical bias. The consensus school of American history, which gained dominance in the profession in the 1950s under the leadership of Richard Hofstadter, lauded the liberal reform tradition, especially the urban progressives and New Dealers. Urbanites were reformers by tradition, in this view, whereas rural Americans were reactionaries, seeking to restore the lost world of Thomas Jefferson. They were wounded yeomen who espoused anti-Semitism and used conspiracy theories to explain their suffering in the new international economic order. Rural Americans were also anti-intellectual book burners, religious fundamentalists, prudish Victorians, and teetotaling moralists who foisted their lifestyle on hapless urbanites with the Prohibition Amendment. At the same time, Hofstadter's demeaning portrayal of rural Americans is puzzling, given his insightful and often quoted statement that "the United States was born in the country and moved to the city."⁴

While the liberal tradition has denigrated farmers at the expense of urbanites, scholars of agricultural history and the westward movement remain captive to an older tradition of frontier individualism and democracy. This legacy from the towering figure of Frederick Jackson Turner stresses environmental forces in the early evolutionary stages of the frontier process but neglects the more important story—the rise and decline of rural communities as they cope with the disintegrating forces of modern mass society. Thus, rural historians have suffered from a distorted perspective of the meaning of rural life.

Finally, rural historians have been stymied by an inadequate methodology. Historians traditionally relied heavily on narrative (or

literary) sources, which are inherently elitist. Few rural Americans kept diaries, letters, or personal memorabilia. Manuscript collections dealing with the everyday activities of ordinary people were almost nonexistent for rural people, who comprised the inarticulate "bottom half" of society. The records that do exist are the work of outsiders—bureaucrats, parish priests, local police, teachers—who recorded what they observed as directed by law for civil administrative purposes. Fortunately, with the aid of computer technology and quantitative methods, and with the use of behavioral theories borrowed from sociology, demography, and ethnology, we have recently found that the illiterate were not, in fact, inarticulate. The interpretation of behavioral data, cultural artifacts, and folk traditions (songs, dances, tales, limericks, and pictures) reveals that the fund of facts is much richer than we supposed even a generation ago. Of course, public documents have always been replete with systematic data on rural Americans, but until the introduction of quantitative methods, historians were incapable of mining the rich lodes of serial records in county courthouses—census manuscripts, land and tax records, and civil registries.

DEFINITION OF RURAL HISTORY

I define the new rural history as the systematic study of human behavior over time in the rural environment. This definition has four parts.

The first phrase is *systematic study*. Systematic methods in history include the use of theory to determine the questions to be addressed, the analysis of quantitative data as well as descriptive sources, and a comparative and interdisciplinary focus. The goal is to explain social behavior in a variety of rural historical settings on the basis of a broad interdisciplinary body of data, analytic methods, and social science theories.

The second phrase is *human behavior*. The emphasis is on historical experience "as it was actually lived" by people in the past. Rural history centers on the life-style and activities

of farmers and villagers, their family patterns, farming practices, social structures, and community institutions. The effects of economic, political, and environmental forces on human behavior are considered as part of the larger picture. The end is a unified conception of rural life, a holistic history in which human behavior is the key variable.

The third phrase—*over time*—distinguishes rural history from rural sociology. Historians are primarily concerned with change; they study social behavioral change from one generation or historical era to the next.

The last phrase in the definition is *rural environment*. What is rural? In common usage, rural means simply “outside the large cities” or outside “urban areas.”⁵ It is difficult, of course, to delineate urban-rural geographic boundaries or cultural borders, or even to specify simple statistical categories. In quantitative studies, many scholars use the arbitrary census definition—rural Americans are those living in towns of 2,500 inhabitants or less or engaged in agriculture as their chief source of income. This definition rests on two criteria: residence in an area of low population density and chief livelihood earned by farming.⁶

While this definition is workable or operational, it fails to account for the essential fact that “rural” denotes not merely an area but a form of society. Rural life, as distinct from urban living, involves physical if not social isolation, large family networks, family work patterns, seasonal labor requirements, and other features.⁷ Historians of rural life must study these distinguishing marks of rurality, because rural America is characterized by social processes as much as by geographical place.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW RURAL HISTORY

Several writers have tried to synthesize all aspects of the rural world. The first attempt was by a French scholar, Marc Bloch, a founding father of the famous *Annales* tradition.⁸ Bloch did pioneering studies in French rural history in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than

limiting himself to the traditional institutional and legal aspects, he sought to understand the totality of French rural history. No Paris arm-chair scholar, he roamed over rural France to penetrate the peasant mentality, learn the daily routine of farming, and capture the smell of hogs, hay, and manure. His ideal was to unite historical perspective with local knowledge and experience. He immersed himself in the literature of all disciplines relating to land and agrarian communities—agronomy, cartography, economics, geography, philology, psychology, sociology, and folklore—and he asked “why” questions. Why did hamlets develop in one place and nucleated villages in another? Why were some farmers innovators? Why did crop patterns differ from one area to another? Bloch’s innovative approach revolutionized the study of agrarian history in Europe and captivated countless young scholars who continued his work when World War II cut short his brilliant career.

The Kansas agricultural historian James C. Malin is perhaps the closest American counterpart to Bloch. Malin, interestingly, had no acquaintance with Bloch’s work,⁹ but he likewise urged colleagues to study history “as a whole” and to examine each topic “in relation to the cultural totality to which it belongs.”¹⁰ Practicing what he preached, Malin offered an ecological explanation of midwestern rural history in a number of books in the 1940s and 1950s, notably *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas* (1944) and *The Grasslands of North America* (1947).¹¹ Drawing on many related disciplines, as Bloch had done a decade earlier, Malin developed a fresh historical model of the process of adaptation in the grasslands region. The model integrated the human actors within the total cultural milieu and especially stressed the adjustments forced upon the farmer by the prairie-plains environment. Malin was also innovative in methodology. One of the first (along with Frank Owsley of Vanderbilt University) to aggregate manuscript census data, he studied population behavior and turnover among Kansas farmers.¹² Nevertheless, Malin was no Bloch. His environmental

perspective was far narrower than Bloch's holistic approach—Malin emphasized the natural sciences at the expense of the social—and his influence on the profession, unfortunately, was limited for many years by his personal idiosyncracies.¹³

One other possible model, which does stress social life, is Merle Curti's innovative work in the 1950s on the rural county of Trempealeau, Wisconsin.¹⁴ Curti and his team of graduate assistants transferred to IBM cards the information on every adult inhabitant in the manuscript population and agricultural censuses of Trempealeau County from 1850 through 1880. But Curti's dependent variable was democracy, not community. He viewed his study as an empirical test of Turner's frontier thesis "at the grass roots" rather than a study of changes in human behavior at the grass roots in a rural community.¹⁵

Since American agrarian historians have no "home-grown" model to follow in developing the field of rural history, they have used an eclectic approach, picking and choosing theories, concepts, and methods from other fields of history and from related disciplines in the social sciences. There are at least seven contributing traditions or disciplines: Turnerian theory, new social history, the *Annales* school, ethnocultural history, new economic history, Marxian theory, and rural sociology.

THE TURNERIAN TRADITION

From the Turnerian tradition has come an abiding interest in the process of rural community formation and the socioeconomic equality (or lack of it) that resulted from that process. Malin, Owsley, Curti, Gates, Bogue, Fite—indeed, most agricultural historians—stand on Turner's shoulders.¹⁶

Allan Bogue and his students offer a number of examples of this work. Bogue was a student of Paul Wallace Gates, the distinguished land and agricultural historian at Cornell University, but he also did postdoctoral work with James Malin at Kansas, where he learned to appreciate

Malin's stress on human behavior and social processes.

Bogue's model study, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (1963) was explicitly behavioral. Rejecting the narrow economic focus of most agricultural historians, Bogue centered his attention on the challenges farmers faced in taking virgin land, and by trial and error, bringing it into full production. Bogue's students subsequently explored various parts of the story in greater detail. Robert Dykstra discovered the "hidden dimension" of conflict within rural society between farmers and villages, as distinct from the well-known rural-urban clashes, and my books on Iowa land sales and delinquent tax auctions illustrate that the intricate credit networks in rural America were far more harmonious than frontier folklore leads one to believe.¹⁷ Donald Winters reached the same conclusion in his analyses of farm tenants, owner-operators, and landlords in frontier Iowa.¹⁸ Other Bogue students have undertaken population studies to determine social and economic mobility in rural Iowa communities, as Malin and Curti had previously done.¹⁹ Each of these works employed quantitative methods to study the behavior of thousands of individuals who were members of various functional groups. For those bothered by the group approach, Winters observes: "Faceless the people may be; absent they are not."²⁰

THE NEW SOCIAL HISTORY

The new social history, with its emphasis on past human behavior, has provided rural historians with another strong tradition. Samuel Hays is the nestor of the group. In a lecture to Iowa secondary school teachers in 1959 titled "History as Human Behavior," Hays urged teachers to revitalize their courses by focusing on the "human side of the past" rather than on formal institutions and "presidential history." "By systematically studying human experience and behavior," he declared, "solid and concrete generalizations" will emerge regarding past

human experience.²¹ Hays devoted much of his subsequent career to expanding on these seminal ideas, which he called the "behavioral approach" to history.

The new urban historians, led by Stephen Thernstrom, first linked Hays's behavioral concepts and the census research methods of Malin, Owsley, and Curti. But it was American colonial historians who demonstrated the exciting possibilities in rural history. In 1970, three major books by colonialists were published, each of which used social science theories and quantitative techniques to delineate the structures of social existence in the small rural communities of New England. These books are Philip Greven's study of Andover, Kenneth Lockridge's of Dedham, and John Demos's of Plymouth.²² All were based on local records and emphasized behavior—within the family, the church, the marketplace, and the body politic. So excited did younger scholars become with these works that by 1978 there were nearly sixty dissertations in the Greven-Demos-Lockridge mold. More than half were set in Massachusetts communities, which is not surprising, since much of the new work originated in the history department of Harvard University. The remainder were equally divided between the Middle Colonies and Chesapeake area. None were of the Southern colonies.²³ These studies have provided a remarkably complete picture of colonial wealth distribution and social mobility; of rates of birth, marriage, and death; of inheritance patterns, officeholding, and church membership. Most use modernization as the connecting theme and try to highlight behavioral changes in response to changing community structures. Given all this attention, it is not surprising that preindustrial rural communities are now better understood than modern rural communities.

The primary conclusion of these community studies is that American society before 1820 was familial and communal, not individualistic in the Turnerian frontier sense. Residence patterns bear this out. Persons of nearly every ethnic and religious group settled together in clustered communities among their own kind.

Dedham, for example, was a Yankee Congregational community. The Dutch Reformed concentrated themselves in the Hackensack and Raritan River valleys of northern New Jersey. German Lutherans favored southeastern Pennsylvania, especially Lancaster and Chester counties. Even families that lived in isolated homesteads rather than in nucleated villages chose to settle near family and friends because they felt the need to maintain native languages and religious beliefs. Although they lived alone, they accepted the informal communal bonds of language and creed, and patronized shops and mills of fellow church members.

The commitment to the family and community was so strong in preindustrial America that many young men who had no immediate prospect of obtaining a farm remained at home as farm laborers or renters instead of migrating west to find land of their own. James Lemon, in his social geographical study of southeastern Pennsylvania, *The Best Poor Man's Country* (1972), found that 45 percent of the adult men were landless (two-thirds of these were married, one-third were single). Rather than move west or rebel in anger and frustration at the lack of opportunity, nearly half the people were willing to remain and wait patiently for their patrimony, either the family farm or part of it. In preindustrial agricultural communities, economic success and security was rare before age 40 or 45. This was the social reality of life in an age-stratified society where age, wealth, status, and power went together.²⁴

FRENCH RURAL HISTORY (THE ANNALISTES)

Within the past few years the *Annales* tradition has rather suddenly come to the attention of American scholars. Now available in English translation, the works of Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, and Marc Bloch have become must reading. The French scholars, as I noted earlier, try to relate how everyday lives were lived from the Middle Ages until the modern era. Their books usually describe "the way things were" in preindustrial

societies—the uncouth life-style, the sway of superstition, subsistence farming and a barter economy, geographical isolation, lawlessness, illiteracy, and poor health. Then they describe the “agencies of chance” in the nineteenth century, that is, the institutions that undermined and gradually destroyed the traditional peasant mind-set (*mentalité*), such as roads and railroads, a market economy, national political campaigns, village schools, seasonal and international labor migration, compulsory military service, and war.

James Henretta, a leading colonial economic historian, has most effectively applied the *Annales* concept of *mentalité* to understanding preindustrial America.²⁵ The crucial indicator of community values and aspirations, Henretta suggested, was the “behavior of the farm population” in the productive tasks that dominated their daily lives—obtaining food, clothing, and shelter. This will show, Henretta maintained, that the family was the primary economic and social unit. Farm work was arranged within the extended family and property was “communal” within the family, but the parents’ (usually the father’s) legal control of the family farm gave them the power to control the terms and timing of passing the “family land” to the next generation. Family welfare took precedence over individual rights. Henretta summarized his thesis in this way:

The agricultural family remained an extended lineal one; each generation lived in a separate household, but the character of production and inheritance linked these conjugal units through a myriad of legal, moral, and customary bonds. Rights and responsibilities stretched across generations. The financial welfare of both parents and children was rooted in the land and in the equipment and labor needed to farm it. Parents therefore influenced their children’s choice of marriage partners. Their welfare, or that of their other children, might otherwise be compromised by the premature division of assets which an early marriage entailed. The line was more important than the individual; the patrimony was to be conserved for lineal purposes.²⁶

From the *Annales*, therefore, we have learned that the lineal family was the basic unit of entrepreneurial activity and capitalist enterprise in agrarian America.

ETHNOCULTURAL THEMES

American historical geographers have added the ethnic and religious dimension to the new rural history. From the time of settlement to the present, nearly every nationality and church group, in greater or lesser degree, has been represented in the farming population. Rural America, especially the upper Middle West during the nineteenth century, had a remarkable cultural diversity, traces of which still exist today in the countryside.²⁷

Scholars have identified three major ethnic settlement streams in rural America—New England Yankees, Scotch-Irish, and Germans. Scandinavians comprised a lesser stream. The Yankees migrated in stages across much of the northern states, from New England to western New York and Ohio, then to Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and finally Oregon. The Yankee frontiersmen usually arrived first, chose the rich glaciated soils, and transplanted intact their culture, churches, and schools. The Scotch-Irish spread from their initial base in Pennsylvania and the Carolinas into the hilly, unglaciated areas of the interior South and the Ohio Valley, and eventually moved west of the Mississippi River into Missouri and Iowa. They stamped the south central states with a common ethnic and cultural identity that was unique in the nation.

The Germans, who were by far the largest non-English-speaking immigrant group, settled the lowland soils of Pennsylvania and then moved west after the Revolution into the fertile, glaciated “oak openings” and prairies of the Midwest stretching from northern Ohio to Kansas and the Dakotas. Scandinavians, Canadians, Dutch, Swiss, and Irish, by contrast, were concentrated in the upper Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes region.

Having discovered the major ethnocultural settlement areas, historians inevitably posed

the *why* question. To what degree did differences in cultural background influence the immigrants' choice of settlement areas and affect their farming practices? The literature of rural history is replete with contemporary comments and observations about the relationship between cultural background and farming behavior. The earliest generalizations were "national character" stereotypes, such as the view of Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin that Germans were superior in their farming practices to all other ethnic groups. German farmers, according to this venerated tradition, were described as "earth animals," superior to all other nationality groups in land selection, agricultural skills, animal husbandry, barn construction, product specialization, soil conversion, consumption habits, and labor-intensive family work teams.

Frederick Jackson Turner, the most respected historian in the early twentieth century, completely rejected the nationalist views of Rush, Franklin, and other European-oriented historians. For Turner the frontier was a democratic melting pot, the great economic leveler, a place that destroyed the European "cultural baggage" of the immigrant pioneers. The land and not the culture of the immigrant was the significant factor in acculturation. Turner believed that, after a very short period of settlement, immigrant farmers became indistinguishable from their American-born neighbors in the operation of their farming businesses. Immigrants may initially have drawn upon their particular Old World skills and modes of husbandry, but the geographical "givens" in the region where they settled quickly undermined attempts for cultural maintenance.

A second, related aspect of cultural transference in rural America is the process of ethnic identity and adaptation among rural immigrant settlements. Did immigrant enclaves in rural America stimulate ethnic consciousness and group identity, as it did in urban neighborhoods, and did similar forces of acculturation and assimilation operate in the countryside? We yet await answers to many aspects of rural ethnicity. As Kathleen Conzen has noted,

"Rural counterparts of the urban ethnic community studies which have appeared in such profusion in recent years are lacking."²⁸ The Turnerian assumption of frontier individualism and the necessity for adaptation to a hostile environment seemed to obviate the need to study cultural persistence. But this tradition ignored the fact that the isolated rural environment also allowed foreign colonies on the frontier to maintain their cultures for generations. Conzen's theoretical and methodological discussion of rural ethnicity and her investigation of a German settlement in frontier Minnesota are among a number of signs of renewed scholarly interest in rural ethnic history.²⁹

At present, ethnic farming patterns have attracted the most attention. Bogue set the agenda for the new work by distilling two key propositions from the modern literature on midwestern agriculture.³⁰ The first is that various ethnic groups, when learning to farm in America, initially drew upon their particular Old World skills and modes of husbandry, thereby introducing specific crops and farming techniques into American agriculture. The second hypothesis is that certain ethnic groups in the same geographical region farmed for generations in ways significantly different from their neighbors' methods, within the limits of the common constraints imposed by climate and soils in each region. Bogue believed the first proposition more plausible than the second, but noted that neither was sufficiently tested by systematic research. Only since the 1960s have scholars attempted comparative studies of ethnic cropping patterns, animal husbandry, technological skills, tenure differences, and mobility and persistence rates.

The first modern studies, based upon the manuscript population and agricultural census lists, seem to confirm Turner's thesis of rapid assimilation and cultural conformity among immigrant farmers. Curti found that in Trempealeau County the value of immigrants' farms, within one generation, nearly equaled that of farms owned by the native-born.³¹ Bogue concluded that in Illinois and Iowa there was a tendency for foreign-born farmers to favor

wheat and for the native-born to raise more corn and hogs, but the foreigners soon switched to corn and hogs, too.³² Robert Ostergren's study of Scandinavian farmers in Minnesota indicated that cultural factors had only a minimal impact on crop decisions and livestock enterprises. Immigrants readily conformed to existing farm practices, as indicated by geographic and environmental conditions in the community.

Ostergren also went to the unusual effort of tracing one group of Swedes back to their Old Country parish and comparing their farming practices before and after migration.³³ This thoroughly innovative technique revealed that in Rattvik, Sweden, barley had been the primary crop and that oats were the second most important. In Minnesota, by contrast, wheat (which had never been raised in Sweden) was the primary crop, with oats secondary. The Rattvik colonists thus transplanted their institutions, Ostergren concluded, but not their farming practices. "When it came to making a living it seems that the immigrants were faced with little choice but to adapt as quickly as possible to the American system. . . . In fact," said Ostergren, "there is little evidence that there ever was much resistance to the dictates of the new environment and the local market economy. The situation was so different from home, that one probably did not even seriously contemplate farming in the same manner." Aidan McQuillan reached the same conclusion in a Kansas study, as did Terry Jordan in a detailed book on Texas German farming and Brian Baltensperger in a case study of three Nebraska counties.³⁴ Convergence, rather than divergence, was the common pattern. However, within a generation or even sooner, some distinctive traits often reappeared through a process Jordan called "cultural rebound."³⁵ While most distinctive ethnic patterns and methods disappeared, therefore, a few ethnic farming practices remained for generations among highly homogeneous immigrant groups, such as the Volga Germans.

This census research provides the first solid evidence regarding ethnic patterns in

agriculture. But all of the studies suffer from two limitations, which are inherent in the census sources. The first is that all farmers of a given nationality are lumped together, without consideration of local and regional differences in the motherland. The censuses record only the country of birth, and therefore it would be impossible in most cases to link the United States census with foreign records at the local level. Yet in nineteenth-century Europe, farming practices, life-styles, and even languages often differed widely between two adjacent provinces in the same country or even between two parishes in the same province. The second limitation is that the early studies slight the importance of religious group differences, again because the censuses do not report religious or denominational affiliation. Thousands of close-knit, church-centered ethnic communities dotted the landscape of rural America a century ago. These homogeneous clusters of people often had common origins in the Old Country, and they deliberately sought to create isolated settlements in hopes of preserving their cultural identity and retaining the mother tongue for generations to come. Such cohesive sectarian communities differed greatly from settlements composed of a mixture of main-line "church" groups, even if all were Protestant.³⁶

Several recent microstudies, all by geographers, take into account the parish background of American immigrant farmers. These are highly rewarding and suggestive of the direction of future research in agricultural history. The best example is John Rice's study of farming patterns in a six-township area of frontier Minnesota (Kandiyohi County), which was settled by Swedes, Norwegians, Irish, and Americans from the East.³⁷ Each of the nationality groups was diverse in origin, except for one group of Swedes who came from the same parish, Gagnef, in Dalarna Province. Rice's findings, based on both Swedish and American sources, reveal that farmers from all the nationality groups, except the Swedes of the church-centered Gagnef parish, were similar in their cropping patterns, livestock holdings, persistence

rates, and economic status. All the groups concentrated on wheat. The Scandinavians (including the Norwegians) raised more livestock, especially sheep, than the Irish and Americans. But the Gagnef parishioners stand out as unique. They retained their oxen as draught animals into the 1880s, long after the other farmers in the area had switched to horses. The Gagnef community was the most stable by far, and they prospered economically, advancing from the poorest of the Swedish settlements to the wealthiest. In sum, the agricultural experience of the homogeneous religious group, transplanted en masse from Sweden, differed markedly from the neighboring immigrant settlements, including those of Swedes and Norwegians. Religion and its cultural trappings, not nationality per se, may have determined farming behavior among Minnesota Swedes and among other immigrant groups as well.

THE NEW ECONOMIC HISTORY

From economic historians and geographers, rural historians have come to understand the interrelationships between growing cities and their hinterlands. Despite the admittedly close ties between urban and rural communities, the new urban historians have limited their studies to the "city," however defined.³⁸ Some rural historians have questioned this parochialism. James Malin phrased the question this way in a letter to me: "How far is it valid to attempt to write integrated rural history or integrated urban history when rural and urban life were not lived in such segregated forms? The country town had affinities for its farm patrons as well as for the activities of the metropolitan city." Malin answered this sage question by posing a challenge: "The hazards are great, but what about experimenting with a novel point of view and organizing principle—make the combined rural-urban and mixed conceptions the central theme of historical study? Familiar facts might then stimulate startling consequences."³⁹

Exemplars of Malin's idea of exploring the nexus between town, countryside, and

metropolis are Michael Conzen's book on the impact of the growth of Madison, Wisconsin, on the adjoining agricultural township of Blooming Grove and Roberta Miller's book on the frontier county of Onandaga, New York.⁴⁰ Miller used census, tax, land, geneological, and church records to assess the impact of transportation and socioeconomic changes within the county, caused mainly by the Erie Canal and the growing city of Syracuse. Her sophisticated concept of integrated regional development—"city and hinterland"—will be a model for future studies of the frontier prairies.

MARXIST THEORY

Second-generation members of the *Annales* school such as Ernest Labrousse, English Marxists E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, and radical (New Left) American historians such as Eugene Genovese and Jesse Lemisch have emphasized dialectic forces in society, the inner contradictions and historical discontinuities, class conflict, and the alienated groups comprising the "underside" of society. Several of the Southern rural historians and scholars of agrarian protest movements have employed Marxist theory in order to understand socioeconomic structures such as slavery, sharecropping, tenancy, and farm riots and rebellions.⁴¹ Apart from these limited examples, Marxist theory has not gained a large following among American rural historians.

RURAL SOCIOLOGY

From rural sociology, historians have adapted the concept of the "agrarian transition"—the process by which isolated rural communities are transformed into modern cosmopolitan societies. Rural sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies gave agrarian transition a fancier label, *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, that is, the cultural shift from community to society. The terms refer to the change from isolated, homogeneous, and self-sufficient farming communities with their rituals of local bonding such as neighborhood threshing rings and barnraisings

(*Gemeinschaft*), to individualistic, impersonal, and commercialized societies (*Gesellschaft*) that are merely a microcosm of urban mass culture.⁴²

The history of rural communities, therefore, is the process of adjustment to the destructive forces of modernization and the consequent loss of close and intensive personal relationships. Community has always been a declining phenomenon in rural America. The historian's task is to analyze the changing characteristics of a place and the impact of those changes on the lives of its residents and on society at large.

John Shover's *First Majority—Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America* is the premier example of a book that uses this concept of historic process.⁴³ Using case studies of two counties (Bedford County, Pennsylvania, and Scioto County, Ohio) and two farm families in Michigan and Iowa, Shover describes the social disintegration of the yeoman farmer republic and its replacement in the years after World War II by the agri-industrial empire. The technical revolution in American agriculture after 1945, which Shover called the "Great Disjuncture," has been so pervasive and radical that rural life as it was known for hundreds of years passed away. With the triumph of agribusiness, the localistic and personalistic frame of reference for describing farming and country life became obsolete.

CONCLUSION

If this is so, it provides all the more reason for preserving and studying the history of rural life and agriculture in America. Edward Pessen once observed that his students' knowledge of the nation's agricultural history "consists largely of . . . myth."⁴⁴ This generalization applies to most college students.

The study of agricultural history among academic historians in the United States is also at a low ebb. Of the thousands of articles published in American history in 1979, as cited in the "Recent Articles" section of the *Journal of American History*, only thirty-four

specifically deal with agriculture, and most of these are centered on institutional or political aspects rather than on farm life. The thirty-four citations include a dozen or so articles that appear yearly in *Agricultural History*, the journal of the Agricultural History Society edited at the Agricultural History Center at the University of California at Davis. Judging from the journal literature, where fresh ideas usually first appear, one can only conclude that the impact of the new rural historians is still minimal. Indeed, there are fewer than a half-dozen college courses nationwide specifically titled "rural history."⁴⁵ By default, the exciting new work in rural history is largely in the hands of cultural geographers, economists, and ethnologists.

The countryside is a serious subject for historical study. The Frenchman Bloch and his successors have proved that an interdisciplinary approach that analyzes rural life over the centuries will provide an integrating theme for understanding the evolution of any nation. By restoring the human dimension, or in Peter Argersinger's words, "the record of ordinary people living out their lives in mundane activities,"⁴⁶ some of the excitement in the study of history that has been lacking in recent years may be renewed.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Northeastern Regional Seminar of the American Association for State and Local History, New Haven, Connecticut, November 1980.

1. Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. by Michael Kammen (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 335-36; Robert P. Swierenga, "Towards the New Rural History: A Review Essay," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 6 (June 1973): 111-12; see also Peter H. Argersinger, "The People's Past: Teaching American Rural History," *History Teacher* 10 (May 1977): 403-24.

2. In 1970, there were in the United States 243 metropolitan areas containing 68 percent of the population and 10 percent of the land area. Metropolitan areas include at least one central city with a population of 50,000 or more, together with satellite suburbs and the economically integrated hinterland; Marion Clawson, "The Future of Rural America, A Plan for Population Regrouping," *Current*, February 1973, pp. 23-28, esp. p. 24.

3. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976), p. xi.

4. Quoted in Argersinger, "People's Past," p. 406.

5. Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History," in *Past Before Us*, ed. by Kammen, p. 280.

6. Alvin L. Bertrand, ed., *Rural Sociology: An Analysis of Contemporary Rural Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), pp. 9-10. Also helpful is Olaf F. Larson, "Rural Society," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 13 (1968): 580-88.

7. Argersinger, "People's Past," p. 407.

8. Swierenga, "Towards the New Rural History," pp. 11-22; Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Troian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976); Samuel Kinser, "Annaliste Paradigm? The Geohistorical Structuralism of Fernand Braudel," *American Historical Review* 86 (February 1981): 63-105; Roy L. Willis, "Contributions of the Annales School to Agrarian History," *Agricultural History* 52 (October 1978): 538-48; Robert Forster, "Achievements of the Annales School," *Journal of Economic History* 38 (March 1978): 58-76; James A. Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *American Historical Review* 84 (December 1979): 1293-1333. Key works by second-generation *Annalistes* are: Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York:

Braziller, 1978); Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). American scholars in the *Annales* tradition are Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, and Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

9. Letter to the author, September 15, 1973: "I am not familiar with the work of Marc Bloch as a model for agricultural history, although I am familiar with the French geographer's emphasis on regional and other local studies in geography."

10. I am indebted to Robert Johannsen for pointing out this quote from Malin's *Essays on Historiography*, in "James C. Malin: An Appreciation," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1972): 460.

11. James C. Malin, *The Grasslands of North America: Prolegomena to its History* (Lawrence, Kansas: Privately printed, 1947; reprinted, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), and *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas: A Study in Adaptation to Subhumid Geographical Environment* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1944). For analyses of Malin's writings and significance, see Thomas H. LeDuc, "An Ecological Interpretation of Grasslands History: The Work of James C. Malin as Historian and as Critic of Historians," *Nebraska History* 31 (September 1950): 226-33; Robert Galen Bell, "James C. Malin and the Grasslands of North America," *Agricultural History* 46 (July 1972): 414-24; Allan G. Bogue, "The Heirs of James C. Malin: A Grassland Historiography," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981): 105-31.

12. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4 (November 1935): 339-72; Frank L. and Harriet C. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).

13. The best discussions are Bell, "James C. Malin," and Bogue, "Heirs of James C. Malin."

14. Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

15. The point is cogently made by Conzen in "Community Studies," p. 279.

16. For a detailed review of this literature, see Robert P. Swierenga, "Quantitative Methods in Rural Land Holding and Tenancy Studies" (Paper presented to the Soviet-American Conference on Quantitative History, Tallin, USSR, May 1981).
17. Robert R. Dykstra, "Town-Country Conflict: A Hidden Dimension in American Social History," *Agricultural History* 38 (October 1964): 195; Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968); Swierenga, *Acres for Cents: Delinquent Tax Auctions in Frontier Iowa* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976).
18. Donald L. Winters, *Farmers Without Farms: Agricultural Tenancy in Nineteenth-Century Iowa* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978).
19. Seddie Cogswell, Jr., *Tenure, Nativity and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture, 1850-1880* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975); Rodney Davis, "Prairie Emporium: Clarence, Iowa, 1860-1880, A Study of Population Trends," *Mid-America* 51 (April 1969): 130-39; William L. Bowers, "Crawford Township, 1850-1870: A Population Study of a Pioneer Community," *Iowa Journal of History* 58 (January 1960): 1-29; Charles Stephenson, "Tracing Those Who Left: Mobility Studies and the Soundex Indexes to the U.S. Census," *Journal of Urban History* 1 (November 1974): 73-84.
20. Winters, *Farmers Without Farms*, p. 9.
21. Samuel P. Hays, "History as Human Behavior," *Iowa Journal of History* 58 (July 1960): 193-206, quotes from p. 193.
22. Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
23. Conzen, "Community Studies," p. 277.
24. James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early South-eastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 43, 83-85, 94-95.
25. James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: Mentalitè in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (January 1978): 20.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
27. Robert P. Swierenga, "Ethnicity and American Agriculture," *Ohio History* 89 (Summer 1980): 323-44. A number of passages in this section are derived from this article.
28. Kathleen Niels Conzen, "Historical Approaches to the Study of Rural Ethnic Communities," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. by Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 1-18. Several other articles in this volume relate to similar themes, notably J. Allen Williams, Jr., et al., "Ethnic Assimilation and Pluralism in Nebraska," pp. 210-29.
29. Kathleen Niels Conzen, "Farm and Family: A German Settlement on the Minnesota Frontier" (Paper presented to the American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., 1976). Other evidences of interest are the new series, *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, which began in 1978; the decision of the Italian American Historical Association to devote its 1981 annual conference to the theme of "Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America"; and the proposed research of Richard Jensen and Mark Friedberger on Iowa farm wealth transmission and inheritance patterns, "Growing Wealthy in the Cornbelt" (Paper presented to the Cliometrics Conference, University of Iowa, 1981).
30. Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 237.
31. Curti, *Making of an American Community*, pp. 80-83, 91-97, 179-97.
32. Bogue, *Prairie to Cornbelt*, pp. 237-38.
33. Robert Ostergren, "Rättvik to Isanti: A Community Transplanted" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1976), pp. 107-40; and Ostergren, "A Community Transplanted: The Formative Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Community in the Upper Middle West," *Journal of Historical Geography* 5 (April 1979): 189-212.

34. David Aidan McQuillan, "Adaptation of Three Immigration Groups to Farming in Central Kansas, 1875-1925" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1975); and McQuillan, "Farm Size and Work Ethic: Measuring the Success of Immigrant Farmers on the American Grasslands, 1875-1925," *Journal of Historical Geography* 4 (January 1978): 57-76; Terry G. Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth Century Texas* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1966); Brian Baltensperger, "Agricultural Change among Nebraska Immigrants, 1880-1980," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. by Luebke, pp. 170-89. See also Terry G. Jordan, "A Religious Geography of the Hill Country Germans of Texas," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. by Luebke, pp. 109-28; Jon Gjerde, "The Effect of Community on Migration: Three Minnesota Townships, 1885-1905," *Journal of Historical Geography* 5 (October 1979): 403-22.
35. Jordan, *German Seed*, p. 192.
36. This is the perceptive approach of Marianne Wokeck in her dissertation in progress at Temple University. See Wokeck, "Cultural Persistence and Adaptation: The Germans of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 1729-76," in *Business and Economic History Papers Presented at the Twenty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Business History Conference*, ed. by Paul Uselding (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
37. John G. Rice, *Patterns of Ethnicity in a Minnesota County, 1880-1905*, University of Umeå Geographical Reports, no. 4 (Umeå, Sweden, 1973); Rice, "The Role of Culture and Community in Frontier Prairie Farming," *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (April 1977): 155-75.
38. See Bruce M. Stave, "A Conversation with Stephen Thernstrom," *Journal of Social History* 1 (February 1975): 198.
39. James Malin to the author, October 16, 1973.
40. Michael P. Conzen, *Frontier Farming in an Urban Shadow: The Influence of Madison's Proximity on Agricultural Development of Blooming Grove, Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971); Roberta Balstad Miller, *City and Hinterland: A Case Study of Urban Growth and Regional Development* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979). For a geographer's application of central place theory, see John C. Hudson, "The Plains Country Town," in *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, ed. by Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), pp. 99-118.
41. Robert McMath, Jr., "Durkheim, Marx, and Dixie: Toward a Paradigm for Rural Southern History, 1865-1940" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, University of Pennsylvania, 1976).
42. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, trans. and ed. by Charles P. Loomis (1887; reprint ed., New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963).
43. John Shover, *First Majority—Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976).
44. Quoted in Shover, *First Majority*, p. 405.
45. There are chairs in agricultural history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Georgia, and Iowa State University. Courses entitled "rural history" are known to be taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana; the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; and Southwest State University, Marshall, Minnesota. Undoubtedly there are closely related courses in rural society, peasant cultures, etc., at other universities.
46. Argersinger, "People's Past," pp. 419-20.