

Rural Community Development:

A New Paradigm?

I want to argue that we move from a paradigm of promoting rural development through a kind of small scale urbanization to a paradigm that supports the development of sustainable working landscapes. I think this is both eminently pragmatic and possibly hopelessly idealistic at the same time, but I think we should explore it. It means wedding our concern for the livelihoods of rural people and the resiliency of rural communities to the broader national and global concern for environmental stewardship and health (gaining new political allies for rural development). It means building an economy that can sustain a middle class on the signature characteristic of all rural areas: the natural resource base, and moving into the 21st century with the knowledge that this resource base must be sustained for future generations, and with growing evidence that it is critical for the health of current generations. It means moving beyond constantly reminding the rest of America that rural is not just about agriculture any more, beyond the dead-end of rural “me-tooism”: we want roads too, we want hospitals and clinics too, our schools need support too – to a position of strength.

It means saying “Hey urban America, hey global leaders: you care about the environment, you need natural resources. We are your stewards and your

producers *at the same time.*" We will manage the nation's watersheds, forests, waterways and marine resources, and do so sustainably.

But we need to be able to *use* these resources, in part to provide goods and services that sustain urban populations, and to make our own communities viable. Efforts to protect natural areas and wildlife cannot always be at the expense of working people who have relied on those areas for generations – whether in the Amazon, the northwestern timber areas, or the northeastern forests and fisheries.

- Working forests
- Working waterfronts
- Sustainable agriculture
- Equitable development in high amenity rural areas (where retirees are migrating, and second home development and tourism are growing)

For much of history and even today in much of the world, rural has been regarded as a kind of "backward, left out" place where subsistence level lives are patched together. Rural is the past, cities and modernization are the future. Indeed, my discipline, sociology, grew out of the modernization and industrialization that swept the western world in the late 1800s. Rural was both bucolic and backward – simple and natural, the past, not the future. There is some truth to this stereotype – I interviewed people in the 1990s in the Delta and Appalachia whom I would call "rough." Who were illiterate, had struggled to

survive, who had a hard time articulating those struggles... Others bring greater personal and family resources but are still hampered in seeking work by the limits of what they have seen and learned and can imagine.

Caroline, in my Delta chapter of my book, describes going to Chicago as a young 16 year old and getting lost when she ran away from an abusive husband:

“He was terrible, awful. He started beating me. It was awful. Then one day – after we been there about a month – when he was high, he put a knife to my throat, said he was going to cut my throat, going to kill me. ... I just left. And I was lost in big old Chicago. But being in the city! Think what that was like! You never been anywhere. Stayed in the country, hardly ever come to town. Come to town sometimes on a Saturday, taking turns, my sister would go one Saturday, I’d go another, my brother go the next Saturday. That’s the way we’d do, the way we went to town. I hadn’t ever come out of the country, and all of a sudden I end up in a big city.

In Worlds Apart I use Swidler’s idea of a cultural tool kit to try to understand the connection between the context in which people grow up and their aspirations and abilities. Our values and ambitions are shaped by what we know and what it tells us about where we fit – that’s one reason studies have shown that mentors can make a difference for poor kids in bad neighborhoods. We have all read about or seen newly arrived country migrants, looking for work in urban areas, rough, unfamiliar and vulnerable.

And similarly we know that rural residents often more conservative politically and religiously. Powerful forces often exploit this conservatism for their own ends, whether the forces are white elites in the Deep South or whether the exploitation is taking place in Apartheid South Africa or in India's tumultuous political climate. The have-nots in rural areas are dependent and vulnerable, and know how their communities work. Those with get up and go, get up and go – what rural area doesn't lament the loss of young people? What rural area is not dependent on the ties those outmigrants maintain, with remittances and family reunions and homecomings, in some cases even infrastructure development. You know the statistics: steadily the world and the US have become more urban and more suburban.

Every week we see stories in the paper about rural-like situations in developing countries – stories of environmental degradation and of out-migration. For example, in fall 2004 two stories in *The New York Times* reflected these powerful trends: one documenting catastrophic pollution in rural China, with people dying of cancer at phenomenal rates and the natural resources on which they rely destroyed by unregulated dangerous manufacturing that moved out of urban areas where middle class residents were complaining to vulnerable rural areas, where people were desperate for jobs and local regulators were corrupt. The other story described rural outmigration to cities that is unparalleled in the world's history. And a new book called *The Great Divide* pits "retro" versus "metro" ... it seems the authors are arguing that the

democrats can win with just the urbane urban voters, and should stop worrying about the “backward folks” in rural areas.

This is the same kind of thinking that could imagine a reality show on Appalachians moving to Beverly Hills or on an Amish family coping with non Amish life, before Dee Davis and Rural Strategies took them on. A recent survey describes perceptions of rural life as bucolic but economically struggling, friendly, but plagued by poverty, low wages, and limited job opportunities. But finally, as their summary of media coverage noted – as a “vestige of the past.” Again, we need to pay attention to these views.

It has often seemed to me that rural advocates and rural analysts who understand life in rural communities talk to themselves, and when in conversation with urban analysts cannot resist falling into a kind of righteous indignation about being misunderstood and left out. But we can learn something from those who look at rural areas for the first time, and bring an urban lens. When the Rural Policy Research Institute held a conference on rural poverty last spring, they commissioned a leading urban poverty analyst, Rebecca Blank, to develop a paper on poverty and place.

Professor Blank reviewed the literature and thought about the conditions that might explain rural poverty, and came up with a good set of themes that resonate with the research of our long time rural scholars:

- The natural environment matters –[she refers to both natural resources and geography] – it affects industry, and the potential for diverse economic activity, and of course, remoteness is a disadvantage for economic integration into the mainstream
- Economic structure matters – especially as it affects human capital: when industry is limited, low skills and low wages are the result, lowering educational aspiration and encouraging outmigration
- Community institutions matter – schools, health care, other institutions that bring people together and ensure open opportunity
- Strong norms about how to behave: “what we do here” – positive and negative

But looking at all these community-level factors, and the related demographic characteristics of individuals in rural communities, this urban poverty expert ends up being puzzled by the “choice” factor: Who stays and who leaves? To what extent are we looking at how characteristics of rural places affect who stays and who leaves, and to what extent are we looking at how those who stay determine the nature of rural places (and for Blank, rural poverty)? Blank’s question is important for us: who stays and who leaves, and why? We might also ask, who comes?

Some leave with regret, because they seek economic opportunity that is not available in the rural community they call home. Soldiers serving in Iraq are a good contemporary example. Journalist Bill Bishop and others have shown a

disproportionate number of those who have died in Iraq are from rural communities, and other news reports on soldiers who are enlisting focus on young people seeking opportunity for income and – importantly – for money to pay for education when they enlist. Some leave because they are seeking more excitement, the bright lights and diversity and even anonymity of city life. They would probably leave whether or not there were good jobs in rural communities. And, as we all know, a good many people stay and make a living patching together livelihood, choosing place and community over career.

But economic opportunity, the economic engine of a place, is still a *sine qua non* – The one thing you can't do without. People move to opportunity if they can't find it where they are, if they can. And the one consistent, common advantage rural communities have economically is natural resources.

What is going on in rural America?

Some like to say if you've seen one rural community, you've seen one rural community. But I don't think that's right – there are patterns, and there are similarities across all smaller rural communities that we recognize, that bring a group like this together and that help members of a group like this find common purpose and strategic insights from talking together. I was struck again by this commonality at the Rural LISC meeting last May – people who know rural draw on similar canvases and recognize each others' worlds, whether in North Dakota, Alabama, Arizona, or Maine.

There are the strengths: The friendliness of small communities – everyone knows everyone else. One community leader I interviewed described it as openness and lack of guile:

You really feel good talking to people. You don't have your guard up, you're not in there trying to negotiate something, you're not looking for something. There's no hidden agenda. You know the people next door and you trust the people next door. We're a small, somewhat isolated community, and therefore, people tend to get along, are open with each other.

Another talked about mutual support and inclusiveness:

Everybody needs each other. The fact that we maybe have more money or more education isn't going to help me at all in a snow storm or when my car is broken down or whatever. There's not so much of any of us that we can all afford to live sort of separately. There's not sort of a service class here and the others who live on the hill. There's just not enough of us to make that distinction.

And there are the hard parts, the smallness of small communities where everyone knows everyone else, where the great majority of people still live where they were born and grew up. Family name matters.

A lot of times you can hear somebody's last name and before you even meet, you've already got the idea that they're either a good person or they're sorry as can be." Those that have a family with a horrible name, when they come in, we know them, and they're not worth two cents. They're sorry as can be – Stealing, selling dope, bootlegging, picked up for driving drunk, in and out of bankruptcy

Everyone can identify the “families that run things,” and people are wary of them.

You have to be very careful here. You have to be extremely careful. If you're not careful, you'll make enemies, and you don't want to make enemies-especially if you don't have importance. You can make some real bad enemies here and you'll never get a job. If they blackball you, you will not be able to get a job flipping burgers.

Longstanding patterns of dependency and deference hang on in places with historical inequality. A black leader explained:

Blacks who have known only the plantation and a life in which they relied on the bossman will vote with him out of habit and deference. ... uneducated people need to go through someone, they need to get help from Toms that have been there for a long time and the whites have gained control of them.

Ordinary working people struggle to get by, holding on to hope that things will be better for their kids:

I want them not to drop out, not to end up sitting on the porch all day. I want my girl not to marry and get pregnant too young, but to have a good family when she is ready. If she does marry, I would like her to have her own job and a car of her own, know how to drive, and not to be totally dependent on a man.

And then my boys, I don't want them to have children and then go to work, and barely be able to feed them, or barely be able to put diapers on them, and just have to scrounge, like Billy and myself. My boys, I don't want them in the mines. I want them to do better for themselves. You know, they don't have to be doctors or lawyers. They can be teachers, nurses, social workers. Even like the restaurant work, maybe they may want to get to be the operator or owner of it, but not just work in it as a hard, scrounging, everyday job to get by."

In my study I found real differences in rural communities depending on the extent of inequality – places with a large middle class were more likely to be places where those from the “wrong side of the tracks” or “way down the end of the road” could find opportunity to leave poverty and move into the middle class. Those community institutions we all know matter worked for everyone, not just a small elite. And often those in the middle class are working in natural resource related sectors. My study of fishermen in Maine showed that these families are at the heart of communities’ civic culture – they coach the hockey teams, serve the church suppers, engage in debate at selectmen and planning meetings. They are the communities’ civic engine.

Poor places have too few of these middle class salt of the earth civic players. You all have seen the Department of Agriculture maps of persistent poverty: the Appalachian coalfields, the black belt of the deep south, the Texas Mexico border, Indian reservations... places where a combination of racism, exploitation and powerful interests have diminished opportunity for generations

of rural families, and where the middle class and middle class aspirers have to leave to make a good life for their families.

Other rural areas have their “pockets” as well – the north countries, northern kingdoms, western and northern Maine, now the great plains and heartland as agriculture once again struggles, and the Carolinas where textile and other manufacturing jobs are suddenly and dramatically disappearing. The rural economy is restructuring again.

Regional distinctions are valid – but characteristics of those regions are changing. In a recent article in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* describing results of the 2000 Census, demographer Bill Frey argues that (and I am paraphrasing) “for much of the 20th century the terms urban, suburban and rural could be used as shorthand for ways of life – and people could travel between the worlds for commuting, shopping, recreation and visiting relatives.” The 2000 Census, Frey argues, shows that these local cultural boundaries are fading while increasingly sharp regional divisions are emerging instead: 1. a new Sunbelt of suburbs, 2. a new diverse melting pot, and 3. an aging, slow growing heartland. That is rural America. An aging slow growing heartland – “heartland” used pretty loosely, to refer to 28 states and the District of Columbia; 39% of the population; all the northeastern and Midwestern states that are not a melting pot; and selected southern and western states that are lagging in population growth. Places where people are older, mostly white and black, blue collar; more born in the state where they now reside, few in-migrants.

But this analysis is about migration. This is about who leaves and who stays, and, in this case, who comes. At a Brookings conference on the Census a couple years ago all the demographers agreed that immigrants are synonymous with growth and development, and woe to those places that were not getting new folks.

USDA's Economic Research Service studies track changes in rural communities for us. They tell us that while many rural counties did alright over all in the first half of the 1990s, the second half brought a more complicated picture: (1) on the frontiers/great plains; in poor southern areas, mining dependent: outmigration, decline; (2) amenity rich areas - like the northwest, Rockies, northeast... grew, and now face suburbanization pressures, displacement, threats to long term residents, changing communities; and (3) related rural sprawl within the metropolitan embrace. Demographers are warning everyone about the need to prepare for the baby boomers move into retirement and old age, but those in rural communities are in particular jeopardy as this aging of the population occurs.

Challenges

Where are the stable economic opportunities for working families who want to stay, as the economy changes? How do we improve education and engagement opportunities for young people, so they can choose where they live, including in rural communities? Who is going to provide health care for a rapidly aging population? And, the related problem of who is going to pick up the mantle of

civic leadership? Finally, the problem **and opportunity** of environmental stewardship.

To address these questions we need to ask what “rules” guiding public and private investment need to change? Who is organizing and building movements to demand those rule changes and then holding the policy makers and implementers accountable? In both the US and overseas, in both urban and rural communities, it seemed to me we were seeing the need and opportunity to build alliances between environmentalists and those who care about livelihoods or community economic development. Development economist Albert Hirschman talked about the three choices that people in such places have: “loyalty, exit, or voiceⁱ.” Loyalty may seem like an odd term to use for just accepting things as they are – but he was referring to loyalty to the status quo and the powers that be; Exit, of course, meant leaving – as many “with get up and go” have, moving to areas of opportunity, leaving behind those with fewer personal and family resources. And voice: staying and working for change, becoming politically engaged to insist on investment in these poor places that widens opportunities.

In the past, environmental sustainability was treated as something apart from community development, especially in cities – but it is related to the need to take into account larger regional decisions about investment rules. This regional perspective links environmental stewardship and community economic development.

Development scholar Amartya Sen argues that the market is not good at ensuring equity nor at ensuring investment in public goods, especially investment in education and “environmental, preservation, epidemiology, and public health.” We need policies that ensure public investment in the larger public good – education to increase open opportunity, and environmental protection to ensure a sustainable planet. We need to build truly effective partnerships between those who now think primarily about the environment and smart growth and those who think primarily about poverty alleviation and justice.

Any kind of development and change is fundamentally political, engaging in making the rules for who gets what and how they get it, for where public and private investments go. The mainstream environmental movement, and now the smart growth advocates, come largely from the upper middle class, often professionals. Community development and social justice advocates are primarily part of a movement of and for the poor. We need to demonstrate that community development and ensuring mobility into the middle class are essential for stopping sprawl and achieving effective environmental stewardship, and vice versa. We need to build a political moment for sustainable development that is just and equitable and ensures stewardship of the natural environment. It’s not a luxury or easy rhetoric to suggest this strategy – now it is

the only way to move forward on both environmental and community economic development goals.
