STUDIES IN URBANORMATIVITY
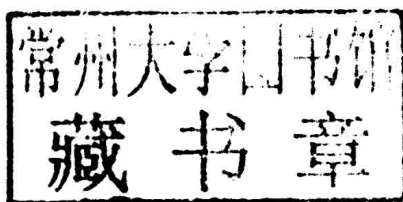
Rural Community in Urban Society

Edited by GREGORY M. FULKERSON
and ALEXANDER R. THOMAS

Studies in Urbanormativity

Rural Community in Urban Society

Edited by
Gregory M. Fulkerson
and Alexander R. Thomas

Studies in Urbanormativity

For

Ronald C. Wimberley

Mentor and Friend

Contents

Introduction

Alexander R. Thomas
Gregory M. Fulkerson

The scene was as non-rural as anyone can imagine. There that November day special towers had been erected by the police to keep an eye on Zucotti Park. Months earlier, a number of unemployed college graduates and social justice activists had begun to camp in the park as part of the movement that became known as "Occupy Wall Street." Within weeks, the focus of the nation peered at the misdeeds of the top 1 percent of income earners who continued to profit even as the fortunes of the bottom 99 percent fared more humbly. By Veteran's Day, the block of Lower Manhattan, in the heart of the financial district and one of the most urbanized locations on earth, had attracted not only those concerned with the plight of "the rest of us," but with a range of other causes as well. It should have come as no surprise, then, when we witnessed a series of signs quite familiar around the countryside of the city's Catskill Mountain hinterland: Don't Frack New York.

On the surface, the common cause between New Yorkers concerned about the potential environmental degradation caused by hydraulic fracturing—a process of extracting natural gas from the shale formations of the northern Appalachians that involves a range of dangerous chemicals—was seemingly one of philosophical agreement among progressive activists. Within an hour's drive of Cooperstown, the boyhood home of James Fenimore Cooper, America's first novelist who built an international reputation extolling the virtues of New York's natural environment, a drop of rain can flow north to the Gulf of Saint Lawrence or south to Chesapeake Bay, depending on where exactly the drop lands. In the Catskills, the headwaters of the Delaware River have been dammed and today provide a substantial amount of the city's drinking water. The accidental contamination of the waters in this part of New York State could potentially impact people living anywhere from Quebec to Virginia and everywhere in between: an unlikely but nevertheless possible Black Swan event that occurs only once every thousand years or so. Beneath the surface, however, was another form of conflict: that found between one of the great cities of the world and its hinterland.

The good intentions of the activists aside, the danger of fracking was defined in very pragmatic terms: contamination of "the city's" drinking water would be devastating to "the city." Of secondary concern was the potential devastating effect of such contamination for the residents of the mountains themselves; in conversation after conversation, the assumption that the Catskills water somehow belonged to New York was never challenged but simply assumed. As such, the threat posed by fracking in the region was defined in terms of its effects on the city and its residents, and this perhaps explains why a number of government officials have argued for a ban within the city's watershed but not in the region as a whole: if contaminated water could pollute New York, ban it; if it could pollute Binghamton's water supply, well, that's not so bad. Here, in the shadows of gleaming office towers was found not only a conflict between America's elites and the rest of us, but between urban and rural interests as well. The fact that this latter conflict is so seldom recognized by social scientists and the public at large is a product of an assumption that urban life, urban values, and urban concerns are of primary importance. That is, it is an excellent example of urbanormativity.

The readings contained in this volume are meant to explore the status of rural places and rural people living in an urban society. Each of the authors argues, in their own way, that being "rural" in urban society has consequences—cultural, economic, and even medical—and is thus deserving of social scientific analysis. The first chapter, "Urbanization, Urbanormativity, and Place-Structuration" by Greg Fulkerson and Alex Thomas, serves as an introduction to this volume by introducing the reader to basic concepts for understanding urbanormativity and its consequences. The second chapter, "Critical Concepts for Studying Communities and their Built Environments" by Elizabeth Seale and Greg Fulkerson, expands on this first introduction by providing additional concepts and methodological considerations.

In "Historic Hartwick," Alex Thomas explores how the decisions of the past inform how a community looks today. Karen Hayden continues the theme of how space can stratify and implicate one's reputation in "Stigma, Reputation, and Place Structuration in a Coastal New England Town." Stephanie Bennett similarly explores the role of space in the creation of spas acclaimed for the health benefits in "Taking the Cure." Aimee Vieira then turns our attention to the problems faced by members of the English-speaking minority in rural Quebec in "Minority Groups and the Informal Economy."

Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed then take us on a tour of urban restaurants and their attempt to market themselves based on a motif of rural exoticism in "Eaten Up." Continuing with the theme of culture and food, Brian Lowe explores a series of conflicts as they are found in rural areas, including that of the production of *foie gras*, and the potential of cultural innovation found in rural communities in "Fracture Lines." Chris Stapel examines the role of queer theory for both understanding rural communities and the LGBTQ community in the hinterlands in "'Fagging' the Countryside." Polly Smith compares the presentation of rural life in one rural village in two novels written 150 years apart with

modern ethnographic research in "Return to Ridgfield Corners." Karen Hayden rounds out our discussion of culture by examining the presentation of rural life and people as being "inbred" in "Inbred Horror."

The last three chapters in this volume all contribute to understanding the structural conditions that underlie urbanormativity. Gretchen Thompson and colleagues explore the role of social inequality in North Carolina on rural residents' access to drug treatment in "Matrixed Inequality, Rurality, and Access to Substance Abuse Treatment." In "Eliminating Organizational Tensions, Disembedding Farmers," Tom Gray and Curtis Stofferahn explore the role of cultural discourse on the way agricultural cooperatives operate in the Dakotas. And finally, Laura McKinney explores the role of entropy for understanding sustainability and urban-rural relationships in "A Study of Sustainability: Entropy and the Urban/Rural Transition." We finish with a summary of the book's findings and themes.

1

Urbanization, Urbanormativity, and Place-Structuration

Gregory M. Fulkerson
Alexander R. Thomas

In the year 2008 humanity witnessed one of its most historic, significant, and defining moments. Oddly, for most people the significance of this year went by completely unnoticed. The news media either ignored it altogether or gave it minimal acknowledgment as a trivial fact for the history books. In spite of the underwhelming lack of appreciation for the gravity of 2008, its significance is sure to play out over the next several decades in profound ways. The year 2008 should be remembered as the year in which the global human population tipped more heavily to the urban side for the first—and possibly last—time ever (Wimberley et al. 2007). In other words, there are now more people living in cities than ever before. The remaining shrinking half of the planet that lives in a rural area will be more heavily depended upon for supplying the food and other resources required to support this growing urban population.

Three years later, during May and June 2011, the floodgates of the Mississippi River were opened during the worst flooding in the south in decades. In northern Louisiana the waters poured through the gates onto the agricultural fields downstream, a torrent intentionally set to save the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans from the catastrophic floods that would result without relieving the pressure of the bulging river. Many news stories covered the events and noted the flooding of the rural population, some skipping over to the possible significance of the events on national produce prices. Few if any acknowledged that this was a sacrifice of rural interests in favor of urban interests, and fewer still questioned the logic of flooding people in rural communities in order to save those living in cities. The logic supports the city: the events sacrificed the few in order to save the many (see Thomas 2005). Yet without acknowledging the sacrifice, the idea of developing flood systems capable of accommodating the interests of both urban and rural people was missed. The events were the result of a culture that assumes that the interests of cities are of paramount importance, that urban cultural norms and values are not only dominant but superior as well. Cities are associated with a range of positive values: prosperity and

progress, education and refinement, cosmopolitanism and diversity. In contrast, those living in the country are associated with poverty and backwardness, ignorance and crudeness, boredom and homogeneity. And as the world becomes increasingly urban, the effect is not only demographic but cultural as well.

So why the complacency and apathy about 2008? Is the current path toward global urbanization so inevitable that its milestones are undeserving of recognition? Is anyone stopping to consider if this path is sustainable, desirable, or even possible? How is this reality understood culturally? How does it find expression at the local level to create different outcomes? These are some of the central questions that inform the discussion that follows. Before we can begin to approach the answers, we must start by thinking about what we mean by the terms urban and rural and consider how these questions have been addressed in the past.

The Meaning and Investigation of Rural and Urban: Old and New Ideas

Typically, when one thinks about rural places they imagine large swathes of physical space, occupied by a few people engaged in simple and honest hard work. This work is usually thought to be in some kind of extractive industry like farming or mining, and life is imagined to be pure, wholesome, and carefree, while at times difficult to endure. In reality, rural life is remarkably more diverse and varied than most people imagine, making such broad generalizations difficult to apply. Yet, physical space does present itself as something to be contended with daily in most if not all rural areas. Simple tasks like going to the grocery store, driving to work, dropping the kids off at school, going to the doctor, picking up the dry cleaning, or just stopping by to say hello to a friend, are major time and resource commitments for rural people. The ability to survive rural life is greatly influenced by the means people have for taking advantage of transportation and communication technologies.

Perhaps more importantly, rural people from all corners of the planet are bound by the shared fact that their existence is being threatened by the continual expansion and invasion of urban systems, designed to support cities at their systemic center by absorbing rural territory and resources on the periphery. Along the way these urban systems absorb or destroy rural identities, cultures, and ways of life. Urbanization—the expansion of urban systems—is driven by the inherent need cities have to obtain rural resources such as food, fiber, wood, minerals, fuel sources, and land in order to accommodate their swelling numbers. Thomas (2010) referred to this dynamic as "urban dependency": without these resources cities could not survive as they are incapable of being self-sufficient (see also Chew 2001; Boone and Modarres 2006; Wimberly and Morris 2006). Arguably, the fact that the global urban population now surpasses the global rural population signifies that the hinterlands are being exhausted of their resources and that urban population centers are growing too large.

It should be noted that the invasion and exploitation of urbanization is not necessarily the result of cruel intentions or evil plans on the part of urbanites. Rather, urbanization unfolds as a seemingly inevitable natural progression (Thomas 2010). This idea is the result of an "urbanormative" cultural ideology that justifies rural invasion/exploitation as signs of progress, modernization, or perhaps even the extension of manifest destiny itself. Viewed in this light, urbanization is understood to be the savior of rural communities, offering a more worthy and meaningful existence. Since many urbanites will never encounter a truly rural setting or person, their ideas and representations are left to be informed by what is portrayed on television, in movies, music, literature, and art. To a large extent the story told by popular (mass) culture is either based on a reality that was long ago transformed or on an idealized reality that never existed. This means that the portrayal of rural people and places is not fair or accurate, and the value and worth of rural knowledge and experience are therefore either overlooked or under-appreciated. As the world grows increasingly urbanized, direct experience with and personal understanding of rural life becomes distorted further, and rustics (Ching and Creed 1997) must contend with an urbanormative culture replete with prejudicial attitudes that make them the target of subtle or blatant forms of discrimination.

The conditions of urbanization and urbanormativity, the structural and cultural invasion of rural space, combine to set the stage for ongoing conflicts of a political, economic, cultural, and environmental nature. Remarkably, scholars and students of rural structure, space, and culture will find scant social scientific attention is currently given to these issues in a coherent and systematic way, particularly at the local level. Early American sociology and rural sociology started with this focus, but interest has since waned. This early scholarship took the shape of what is now known as the rural-urban continuum framework (Redfield 1930; Sorokin and Zimmerman 1929). Rooted in the theoretical insights of Simmel, Tonnies, and Weber, the rural-urban continuum gave intellectual credence to studying the overlap of structure, space, and culture, and contributed a number of useful and interesting ideas.

By the 1950s-1960s, critics of the continuum (Dewey 1960; Miner 1952) grew convinced of its inadequacy as it was evident that life in rural places was being turned upside down by urbanization in general and in particular by the rise of industrial agriculture, the demise of labor intensive farming, and the shift away from small and medium scale farming toward large consolidations. Other extractive rural communities, such as the coal towns in West Virginia and the timber communities of the Pacific Northwest, experienced similar challenges as technological changes led to capital, rather than labor, intensive production processes. In turn, rural-urban continuum studies appeared futile since they were unable to produce conclusion with lasting value. For example, follow up research to Redfield's folk culture analysis revealed that massive change had taken place, rendering Redfield's original analysis obsolete and reversing many of his conclusions. However, rather than viewing such setbacks of the failure of the rural-urban continuum framework as an opportunity to develop a superior (and

more dynamic) paradigm that could account for such changes, scholars viewed this as the death knell for rural and community sociology as theretofore conceived (Newby and Buttel 1980; Pahl 1966), causing a massive disciplinary identity crisis that pushed rural and community studies further from the canon of sociology itself.

In fact, rural places did experience seismic and, in many cases, catastrophic changes rooted in dynamic political economic processes originating from central urban centers located far away from where their impacts were felt in the hinterland. Commodity markets, controlled by enormous urban agribusinesses, fueled the devaluation of farm products, by encouraging a greater reliance on chemical and mechanical inputs to improve productivity and increase the supply and boost profits. The result was an increasingly high cost of farming that many producers could not afford, plummeting prices for food and fiber, and greatly exacerbated negative environmental impacts of farming making it a less desirable land use in general. Today, only about 2 percent of the American population is employed in farming (Lobao and Meyer 2001), and with the loss of the family-based farming structure, a particular way of life and brand of rural culture was lost.

Because many people associate rural with agriculture and farm life, they have come to imagine that the demise of family-based agriculture has meant a corresponding demise of rural communities. Nevertheless, rural communities have adapted and changed in diverse and creative ways, allowing new forms to arise in the wake of the old. Wider shifts in employment in the service sector have found new forms in rural places, and many have even found themselves with a sizable creative class (Florida 2004, 2007, 2008). Such communities fashion themselves as art bastions, antique havens, music scenes, as tourist destinations, or as some combination of these. With this political economic re-shuffling of the cards, we see new kinds of rural cultures springing up everywhere, but in a much more heterogeneous manner than was the case in the old agricultural countryside. As a result, any attempt to paint "rural" with broad brush strokes, to cobble together a singular monolithic description, or to place it on a unidimensional continuum, is bound for failure. Just as the rural population must learn to adapt to the realities of the urbanizing world as it becomes global in scale, so too must scholars adapt their models for understanding rural places that accommodate the fact that rural areas are more diverse in both population and culture.

From the standpoint of scholars studying these social changes, we do not think a return to the rural-urban continuum framework is in order, but we also do not believe that the proverbial baby should be thrown out with the bath water. The intersections of structure, space, and culture in local spaces continue to matter and to an even greater extent, even while its social scientific investigation has grown complex and difficult to pin down. The gap we seek to fill in the literature is the formulation of a theoretical perspective and empirical toolkit that will equip one to study rural structure-space-culture dynamics in novel, complex, and

sophisticated ways that acknowledge the value of past approaches without being limited by their shortcomings.

The theoretical framework upon which we build our ideas rests on the claim that a complete analysis of rural-urban relations requires simultaneous attention to the structure of urbanization, mass culture, and urbanormativity, and the way these fuse together in space in a process we call place-structuration. This framework maintains a dynamic and nested systems view that is missing in the more static rural-urban continuum framework, and reflects contemporary thinking about the general process of structuration (Giddens 1986) and the way it is applied to communities of place (e.g., Pred 1984; Molotch et al. 2000). We will briefly introduce what we mean by structure, culture, and space before providing greater depth.

Structure

The structure component of our theoretical framework refers to the process of urbanization that dates back to the earliest urban system several millennia ago (Thomas 2010, 2012) and continues with great momentum through the present day. Urban systems can be defined as population centers that survive by organizing trade networks to pull in resources from the outer hinterlands. Initially, transportation and communication technologies limited these networks to adjacent hinterlands, but in the era of globalization these networks can span nearly any distances. By definition, urban systems are reliant on their hinterlands for survival, so as hinterland resources become scarce and population centers grow larger, urban systems must expand outward. Alternatively, as population centers shrink or if hinterland resources become abundant, the urban system may remain stable or even contract inward. In effect, this means that the boundaries of urban systems are constantly in flux. Outward expansion implies that rural areas will be absorbed and urbanized, while inward contraction means that urbanized areas on the fringe may become de-urbanized, and possibly return to a state of rurality once more.

Many urban systems have grown extremely large and have had to develop ever more complex trade networks to survive, experiencing what seems to be a non-stop outward expansion. This is particularly the case in those urban systems identified by Sassen to be "global cities" (Sassen 2001, 2011). Though this is important, we should also note the declining urban systems whose trade networks have failed to support their population centers. An example of this would be the urban systems located along the Erie Canal in upstate New York. With the rise of rail and highway networks, these urban systems lost their systemic linkages to the larger urban system of New York City, and have witnessed declining population centers, and decreased pressure on adjacent rural hinterlands. Many of these once agricultural rural areas have returned to a more natural condition as former fields filled with trees and brush.

Culture

In addition to examining the structure of urbanization and urban systems, we believe it necessary to have a concomitant focus on culture as encompassed by the ideology of urbanormativity. Alluded to earlier, urbanormativity grows out of a popular culture that distorts rural reality and contributes to the idea that urban is the way forward while rural is the way backward. Ideas about what is normal, acceptable, and desirable have an inherent urban character, and rural itself has come to be defined as deviant. In order for the utter structural domination of rural people and places to be carried out without protest it is important that everyone involved be convinced of the fact that urbanization equals progress and the promise of a better life.

In the best case, this will mean that rural culture and character will be viewed as desirable from the standpoint that they represent simplicity and escape from the rat-race of urban life. In the worst case, rural will be viewed paternalistically as symbolizing the uneducated, backward, and wild, and thus in need of being educated and tamed. For example, European attitudes about rural Native Americans embody most of these characteristics. This negative viewpoint led to various forms of "taming" from forced enrollment in schools and Christianization in churches, to the more extreme population transfers to reservations and genocide. The positive view some Europeans held toward Native Americans has come to be known as the "noble savage" view that encompasses the envy Europeans have for the Native American way of life and what it represents, even while rejecting it as a possible future reality. Thus, even when viewed in a positive light, rural remains to be understood as inferior to urban inasmuch as the march of progress continues to mean the sacrifice of rural character, culture, and life at the altar of urban expansion.

Space

The way urbanization and urbanormativity unfold and combine in particular physical spaces under different historical and contextual conditions drives the process we call place-structuration. Because "urban" is inherently exploitative of "rural," the process of place-structuration typically reflects this exploitation in varying ways. For example, we have identified the "rural simulacra" (Thomas et al. 2011) as the phenomenon that results from a rural community that becomes transformed from being authentic to what is effectively a simulated community designed to appeal to the tastes of urbanites. This is achieved by capitalizing on urban cultural notions about what is desirable about rural settings and hiding or downplaying those aspects that are not consistent. Generally, we believe that we need a better understanding of where ideas of rurality originate, the emergence of rural simulacra, and the discovery of other forms of urban-rural exploitation.

We now turn our focus to a long view of human history in order to gain some context about the planetary transition toward urbanization beginning with