The New Rural-Urban Interface

Background

The cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the nation’s largest cities has been unmistakable over the past century. Indeed, most Americans – taxpayers, scholars, pundits, and policy makers – have had a decidedly urban-centric world view. Big cities and suburbs are where most of us live and work. Urban issues and interests understandably dominate our everyday discussions; they also define America’s problems and policy solutions. Urban America is where culture is shaped and reshaped by politics, media, and money, where new jobs and technology are incubated, and where big ideas start and flourish. Rural Americans – all 46 million of them – are often left on the sidelines, presumably waiting to develop, prosper, and join the American mainstream. They are largely invisible or, worse, characterized as backward, hicks, or hillbillies.

The cultural contradiction is that the people and places in rural America have perhaps never been more important in contemporary American society. Rural America represents over 70 percent of the land area. It is the nation’s bread basket. Urban America has prospered and grown only because rural agricultural productivity has exceeded our most optimistic forecasts. Rural areas fuel the nation’s economy – quite literally. They provide a reliable energy supply, from oil and gas, biofuels (from corn), and wind and hydroelectric power. Rural areas increasingly are places of consumption – recreation and retirement – for big city dwellers. They are destinations — mountains, lakes, and ocean coastlines – to visit, spend money, and enjoy. They are increasingly places to retire in the golden years, when the fast pace of urban life is traded for a simpler, quieter, and less expensive lifestyle.

Yet, rural America is too often ignored in the social sciences. Interestingly enough, the majority of all rural Americans (51%), as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, live in metropolitan areas. Metropolitan regions are expanding outward into the rural hinterland. Historically, rural-oriented scholarship and research has been segregated or devalued in the broader university and policy communities. But this is now changing with the growing recognition that “rural” and “urban” represent flipsides of the same coin. They need to be treated as such, as interdependent and mutually dependent. To address this overarching aspiration for spatial inclusion, we are proposing a small two-day conference, with the paper presentations combined into a special issue of the ANNALS. The singular goal is to provide the most definitive, authoritative, and up-to-date statement on the state of rural America and the new rural-urban interface. The conference and special issue would be titled “The New Rural-Urban Interface: Rural America at the Crossroads.”

It is well past time to evaluate the scholarly profile of theory and research on emerging rural social problems and issues. The paradox – one that will be emphasized in the conference papers and ANNALS – is that rural and urban America are highly interconnected and embedded in a rapidly globalizing world. Rural-related theory and research must be integrated with urban and global perspectives, and vice versa. The rural social sciences cannot be relegated to the intellectual backwaters of American universities and public policy groups, devalued and ghettoized administratively. Today’s societal and global problems often have a large rural dimension (e.g., labor mobility, energy development, climate change, waste disposal) that imposes new challenges that affect all Americans. The social sciences require a new research synthesis that acknowledges the shared destinies of rural and urban people and places in a rapidly globalizing and interconnected world.
Overview

The rural-urban interface is given new meaning and shape by the increasing back and forth flows of capital, labor, population, information and ideas, and material goods. The “new” rural America is marked by growing spatial interdependence – a blurring of traditional rural-urban spatial and symbolic boundaries. A simple binary view of urban vs. rural represents a conceptual and empirical roadblock to addressing underdevelopment. Viewing “rural” and “urban” as competing rather than complementary sectors obscures fundamental spatial interrelationships that often drive rural economic development. In fact, the rural-urban interface is a zone of interdependence, not a clear border that neatly separates rural from urban people and places.

The conference will bring together both rural-oriented and urban-oriented social scientists in sociology, demography, political science, and geography who are working on topics that bridge the urban and rural scholarly divide. The conference conveners and special issue editors will be Dr. Daniel T. Lichter, Ferris Family Professor in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management, Professor of Sociology, and Director of Cornell’s Institute for the Social Sciences; and Dr. James Ziliak, Gatton Endowed Chair in Microeconomics and Director of the Center for Poverty Research, University of Kentucky.

A central task of the editors will be to identify 4 themes that frame the conference and special issue of ANNALS (see below). Up to 12 participants will be solicited through a general call for papers. It will be especially important to identify both urban- and rural-oriented scholars, who can learn from each other (i.e., blur the scholarly boundaries) and come to share a common goal of spatial inclusivity. Submissions are encouraged from both junior and senior scholars across the social sciences.

The review process – both the initial selection and subsequent editorial process that leads to publication in the ANNALS – will be handled by the co-editors. After the conference, feedback will be provided both by the co-editors and external reviewers (who may also have been participants at the conference). The conference will be held at the University of Pennsylvania Campus in fall 2016, although logistics may dictate considering other times or venues, including the university home of the co-editors. The entire issue in draft form will tentatively be completed in time for publication in the ANNALS in July 2017.

Structure and Content

The various themes of the conference and special issue of ANNALS will be organized and developed around the general concept of spatial and symbolic “boundaries.” Changing rural-urban boundaries reflect processes of shifting, crossing, and blurring. Boundary shifting refers to the redefinition of the boundary itself. For example, some rural areas, as a result of urbanization, metropolitan expansion, and annexation, have become redefined as urban or metropolitan. Indeed, depopulation characterized 1,261 (or 64 percent) of all nonmetro counties for the 2010 to 2012 period, a fact that reflects chronic out-migration of young people (of reproductive ages) and rapid population aging. But it also reflects the fact that many nonmetropolitan counties were redefined as metropolitan, leaving behind slow-growing or declining nonmetropolitan areas. Urban-rural boundaries shifted.

Boundary crossing refers to the back-and-forth movement of people, ideas, and money between rural and urban areas. For example, from a demographic perspective, urban-to-rural
migrants by definition cross the rural-urban divide to live and work. They bring “urban” to the countryside in terms of population (i.e., growth and density), culture, and economic development. Likewise, absentee owners from urban areas or big cities (e.g., food processing companies or mining companies) invest in rural communities, changing them forever. People living in rural “bedroom” communities may commute to jobs in the city. Rural or urban areas often represent “places of consumption,” where people living elsewhere do their shopping, seek entertainment, or recreate (even own second homes). Rural America also is sometimes thought of as a “dumping ground” for urban people (e.g., in the form of urban-generated toxic waste or prison populations), while also serving as a mode of economic development.

*Blurring* refers to the fact that rural-urban boundaries can be “bright” or “dim,” both spatially and socially. For example, rural-urban boundaries at the periphery of major cities represent a zone of interdependence rather than separation, where residents live in a kind of interstitial zone, operating on either side of the rural-urban divide and enjoying the best of both worlds. Contrast this with the “bright” boundaries that separate rural central Appalachia from big cities in the region (e.g., Pittsburgh). Culturally, rural people are increasingly like their urban counterparts. They watch the same programs on TV, eat the same fast foods, and shop on-line for the same consumer goods. Information and money travel quickly, eroding the “friction of space” and stitching together the fabric of rural and urban America as never before. Some scholars even suggest that there is no “rural” left in America as urbanism has diffused throughout the country.

The conference and volume will be structured around four separate but interrelated themes that build on the idea of rural and urban “boundaries.”

(1) *Cultural Dimensions.* From a cultural standpoint, rural America is often viewed as a cultural safe haven where “real Americans” live and where traditional values of family and kin are stored and protected. Self-reliance and virtue abound, epitomized by the family farm and by the neighborliness of close-knit small towns. Urban areas instead are viewed as alienating, crime-ridden, and a threat to traditional American values and the rural idyll. The cultural contradiction, of course, is that rural places also are often seen as a cultural backwater, where only the unsophisticated and ill-breed live, whereas urbanites represent high-culture and sophistication.

(2) *Demographic Dimensions.* Shifting, crossing, and blurring of boundaries have a decidedly demographic component. This includes theory and research on rural-urban systems of classification; internal migration (i.e., rural-urban migration), suburbanization, and exurbanization; the new geography and spatial diffusion of immigration (from the global south); commuting to work between urban and rural areas; and land use patterns and politics at the urban-rural fringe, to name a few topics of current interest. From a demographic perspective, what does it mean to be rural (e.g., density, population size, underdevelopment) in an urban society?

(3) *Economic Dimensions.* We ordinarily think of the economic hegemony of urban areas, an issue that sometimes takes form in diverse literatures emphasizing internal colonization and urban exploitation of rural resources, horizontal and vertical integration (e.g., in the food system), resource and recreational development (e.g., newcomers and old-timers in retirement villages), regional development policies (e.g., regional planning offices, consolidated school
districts, and regional ambulances, hospitals, and police and fire departments), branch offices and rural commercial activities (e.g., banking and insurance). The influences between urban and rural areas are hardly asymmetrical. The biggest retailer in the world – Walmart – has its corporate headquarters in rural Arkansas.

(4) Political Dimensions. “Is Rural America Still Politically Relevant?” was the headline for a 2012 article in *The Economist*. Indeed, America is well into another presidential election cycle, one that is likely to be highly polarized by geography (i.e., “Red State, Blue State”). The Red States are overwhelming rural (i.e., much of the South, Great Plains, and Mountain West), while the Blue States are concentrated in the old “rust belt,” with its big cities and large populations of racial minorities and immigrants. In democratic-leaning Blue States like New York and Pennsylvania, their large rural populations (in upstate New York and central Pennsylvania) are culturally and economically conservative, often voting Republican. In Red State Texas, however, its biggest cities – those with large minority and immigrant populations – typically support progressive political candidates and issues. Other states, largely as a result of rapid demographic and economic changes (see above), have become Purple States that reflect the blurring of political boundaries that map onto rural-urban boundaries. Electoral politics have changed with urbanization, regional population flows, and growing diversity.