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AUTHOR Belcher, John C.
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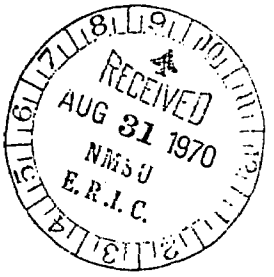
ABSTRACT

Modern human ecologists, the scientific saviors of the day, are likely to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, discredited decades ago, who borrowed the concepts and theories of the biological ecologists and attempted to apply them directly to urban life. If human ecology is to be re-established as a scientific discipline it needs to use as basic data the kinds of studies rural sociologists have been making since the founding of the discipline. Work by rural sociologists on such topics as settlement patterns, migratory labor, locality groups, and trade and service areas can all provide the data from which a modern social ecology can develop. (Author/DJE)



RURAL SOCIOLOGY: THE BASIS FOR A NEW SOCIAL ECOLOGY

by
John C. Belcher

Both rural sociology and human ecology trace their origins to Galpin's study of Walworth County, Wisconsin.[1] Human ecology as represented by the Chicago school has been dormant for nearly thirty years because it was based on inadequate theories. Rural sociology has floundered because of a dearth of theories.

The recent mushrooming of interest in ecology with concern about the environment will no doubt result in a new wave of human ecological studies. Almost inevitably this research will depart from the urban structural approach of the Chicago school and broaden its scope to include both rural and suburban areas.

Already there is evidence that the biologically oriented human ecologists will make the same conceptual and theoretical errors that brought about the demise of human ecology among social scientists a generation ago.

The theme of this paper is that a new human ecology must be based on the kinds of research that rural sociologists have been doing for half a century.

The concepts and methods used by Galpin in his study of Walworth County, Wisconsin contributed to the development of the Chicago's school's ecological approach which dominated American Sociology for a quarter of a century.[2] Empirical research of rural sociological nature has this (common) origin. Rural sociologists through the years have continued to conduct a large number of empirical studies, but have contributed relatively little to the theoretical mainstream of American sociology.[3] They are inclined to subscribe to what may be termed a neo-positivist approach that has been discarded by most social scientists.

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R. E. Park based his ideas of human ecology largely upon the works of Charles Darwin and Haeckel.[4] He felt there were two processes that underlie and organize human life. These were (1) competition, which he considered an abstract, impersonal, non-social process common to all living things; and (2) communication, which he viewed as a human process that ties man to society. However, he assumed that man in society is basically an animal and that the social order is a superstructure upon the competitive order. The classical ecologists assume that humans are organized in the same impersonal, competitive way as plants and non-human animals.

Human ecology presented a systematic body of theory and concepts that provided an answer to everything. The Chicago approach to sociological phenomena came from borrowing the concepts and theories of the biological ecologists and attempting to apply them in urban life. The best known products of this school were descriptive studies including Thrasher's The Gang,[5] Wirth's The Ghetto[6] and Zorbaugh's Gold Coast and the Slum.[7]

Eventually, the Chicago school fell into disrepute when empirical studies proved natural ecological theories inadequate for the study of human behavior. Alihan, in her well known analysis published in 1938, tore to shreds the basic theories and concepts.[8] She was joined by Hollingshead, Gettys and others during the next years.[9]

Alihan pointed out that the fundamental assumption of ecologists is that every action or phenomenon is territorially based. The attributes of community are the territorial basis and reactions at the animal level. With the distinction between society and the community there is the inference that some human actions have a more specific relationship to territory than others. In the research situation this distinction cannot be maintained. Alihan emphasized

that contrary to the theories in actual practice, no distinction was made in well known studies of the Chicago school such as Anderson's The Hobo, Cressey's The Taxi Dance Hall and Shaw's Delinquency Areas. All of these studies, according to her, are general sociological studies where territorial distribution is considered (rather than of "community") as formulated by ecologists.[10]

After Alihan, Warner Gettys viewed social ecology as "confined to a rather small group of scholars which produced no published work to speak of beyond numerous scattered articles in the journals, occasional papers read at the meetings of the American Sociological Society, and somewhat incidental treatment in a few introductory textbooks in sociology."[11] He then went on to state that there was considerable evidence that the ecologists hold to a theory of biological and/or geographical determinism of human behavior.

He noted that ecological theory is based on many dichotomies that have no utility when attempting empirical studies of human behavior. For example, the bifurcation of the processes of interaction into ecological and social is forced and misrepresentative of the facts of experience.

Gettys concluded that it was a serious mistake to be so much dependent upon "natural" science and that if human ecology would center its attention upon the description, measurement, and explanation of spatial and temporal distribution of social and cultural data, it might become in truth a significant social discipline.[12]

During the nineteen-forties others joined the rank of those criticizing the human ecological approach. Some of them indicated directions to be taken if it were to become a truly scientific discipline.[13]

Human ecology developed from a model of urban structure that was rapidly disappearing. Chicago conforms to theoretical model of the nineteenth century

American city. This model has little relevance to the developing post-World War-II metropolitan structure with its modern shopping centers, apartment complexes, and super-highways. Most of the descriptive studies by sociologists that have been labeled human ecology have only historical value today. Human ecology has been largely ignored by sociologists since, for a generation. Proposed new approaches did not revive it and general sociologists have pursued other paths.

The development of rural sociology has probably been handicapped by the borrowing of theories and concepts of the ecologist, but rural sociologists ignored the criticism of the Chicago school. For example, the major distinction of T. Lynn Smith's text was framing its approach within the context of the ecological processes; cooperation; assimilation; conflict, and competition.[14] Even after the devastating criticisms of human ecology by Gettys, Hollingshead, Fiery, and especially Alihan, several rural sociology tests have used the same approach including Nelson and Bertrand.[15] Zopf's revision of Smiths's text this year tends to adhere to the old outline.[16] General sociology texts for about a quarter of a century have almost completely ignored this old ecological approach as a viable source of concepts and ideas. Probably no subdiscipline within sociology has more of a natural affinity for ecology than that of rural sociology. The area has floundered of recent years because it has failed to discard an approach that has little more than historical significance to the development of modern social sciences.

Through the years, however, rural sociologists have investigated community and regional social structure, land settlement patterns, "suitcase" farming, shifting cultivation, neighborhoods, migratory labor, and population growth.

These studies provide the basis for a new human ecology based on empirical fact, rather than on hypotheses derived from the disproved theories of human behavior. There are a number of potential areas where the student of "grounded theories"[17] can create a new syntheses using the data of rural sociologists.

Almost any well known work by a rural sociologist contains some analysis or data that can be used in the developing of a modern social ecology. The following are a few examples:

The basic organization of Carl C. Taylor et.al.'s Rural Life in the United States[18] is about types of farming areas. These areas and the factors in their development give a perspective that can be broadened to encompass an understanding of the ecology, not only of the United States but of the entire world.

Some of the ideas of Taylor are further developed by Carl Zimmerman and by Richard DuWors in his Graphic Regional Sociology[19]. Although they did not consider urban structure in all types of farming regions, they developed models for the corn belt, the winter wheat section, and the West of the United States.

T. Lynn Smith's study of the influence of settlement patterns and land division on the life of rural people is well known. Probably the greatest contribution of his The Sociology of Rural Life[20] to the sociological world is the analysis of these two topics.

Following the tradition of Galpin, Kolb and Burnner's approach is A Study of Rural Society[21] from an analysis of locality groups. Especially significant is the treatment of neighborhoods which is an outgrowth of Kolb's study of "Rural Primary Groups" which was published in 1951.[22]

One student of Robert E. Park, Dwight Sanderson, had a tremendous impact on the thinking of rural sociologists with his early work, The Rural Community.[23]

In this book, Sanderson compares what he termed the "village community" cross-culturally. His insights, published over a generation ago, have more relevance for modern sociologists than most works by contemporary experts on the community.

The first textbook in rural sociology by Thomas Gillette had six chapters he labelled "ecological conditions" of rural life.[24]

Numerous rural sociologists through the years have made studies of trade and service patterns, starting with the early work of Galpin.[25]

Many other illustrations could be given. The principal point is that a very large proportion of all work done by rural sociologists has been concerned with the "spatial and temporal distribution of man and his services." No other branch of sociology has had this type of concentration except for "urban sociology" in its early day.

Human ecology has been viewed by many as a distinct discipline. Yet, if one examines a textbook like Hawley's[26], he discovers that most of the topics discussed are traditional areas of research by rural sociologists: population, population growth, population composition, community structure, settlement patterns, migration, and urbanization. Many of the studies cited, however, were derived from biological theories of ecology that cannot be substantiated by empirical research.

Rural sociologists have, through the years, made thousands of small-scale empirical studies following a neo-positivist tradition that many have dismissed as "trivia." Even so, the scientifically tested facts remain. Anderson stated, "Although rural sociology avoids the sterility of rootless theorizing, it is impaled on the other and equally sterile horn of the dilemma: to think without data is easy and exhilarating; to collect data without purpose is easy."[27]

He did, however express the belief that the "rich ore buried in the mountain of publications would have been more widely discovered if rural sociologists had possessed a propensity for generalization."[28]

Through the codification and synthesization of data relevant to ecology, rural sociologists can make generalizations vital in the modern era.

A few years ago Walter T. Martin developed a model that rural sociologists could have tested in their research but have tended to ignore. "In this model industry develops in and is concentrated in urban centers while agriculture is dispersed over the rural area. As industrialization progresses the urban-industrial sector steadily increases its share of the nation labor force... because of continuously increasing agricultural productivity." As a consequence he predicted changes in the satellite rural areas of this model following two principles: 1) "The extent of urban-influenced changes in rural areas varies inversely with distance to the nearest city and directly with the size of that city." and 2) "The extent of specialization of function and differentiation of subareas in rural territory varies inversely with distance to the nearest city and directly with the size of that city." [29]

Martin does appear to assume that the structure of the city follows a Burgess concentric model with a single nucleus. With a dispersed poly-nucleated city the model and the gradient principles of Martin would not be adequate. Still, his ideas do provide the basis by which new models could be constructed which are more compatible with the empirical world.

Much of rural sociology has been based on the contrast between the rural and the urban worlds. When it became apparent that rural and urban were constructed types the theme shifted to a continuum between these "ideal" types. The continuum orientation also has serious limitations for places such as the

United States where new structures are being created that can be classed neither as rural nor urban.

In 1950 Jerome K. Myers wrote: "The dissonance between 'classical' ecological theory and empirical investigation has led, during the past decade, to the development of a school of ecological thought known as 'sociocultural' ecology."[30]

Potentially such a school of though would include most of the work done by rural sociologists. Certainly, it could be theoretically more relevant than old theories. However, it has failed to develop. The collection of readings by Theodorsen does point the way but dormacy has prevailed.

Alvin Boskoff in a 1949 article in Rural Sociology made several suggestions for "An Ecological Approach to Rural Society."[31] However, texts on rural sociology that have been published subsequently completely ignore this analysis.

Natural scientists with interests in plant and animal ecology, however, have become aware that the environments with which they are concerned are modified by man. For the past twenty-five years they have increasingly expressed concern about "over-population." Their model is essentially that which social scientists discarded as inadequate decades ago. The only modification from the approach of R. E. Park is that it is based upon a neo-Malthusian value system.

The mushrooming of interest in pollution during 1969 coupled with the existing concern over the population explosion gave rise to the belief that ecology would save the world.

Today the scientific fad is ecology. Inevitably there will be a flood of ecological studies. Many social scientists including sociologists will be swept into the stream of the times and repeat the mistakes of the human ecologists of nearly half a century ago.

Through the years rural sociologists have been making their discreet, empirical studies of land settlement patterns, neighborhoods, trade and service patterns, commuting, suburbanization, suit-case farming, and community studies of all kinds. Few theories, or even general hypotheses, have been generated. However, if human ecology is to be re-established as a scientific discipline, it needs to use as basic data the kinds of studies rural sociologists have been making since the founding of the discipline.

There are two current barriers to rural sociologists producing the kind of research and syntheses required for the development of a modern social ecology: One is the tendency to reify "community" as a territorially based social system. The other is that rural sociologists may be swept up by the hysteria about environmental quality.

It cannot be denied that there are problems with pollution faced by man today and also situations where productive resources are being destroyed. Rural sociologists have long been aware of many such conditions. There today exists the danger that they will succumb to the current religion of natural ecologists which considers numbers of people as the cause of all problems of mankind. Population determinism is no more defensible than earlier refuted determinisms, be they geographical, racial or what have you. A science of ecology is needed that is consistent with the fact that human behavior is cultural in nature. Rural sociologists must not forsake the principles of science to become the slaves of a dynamic social movement that labels itself ecology.

As Anderson pointed out, the "study of the community has always been central in rural sociology; it was in this area that sustained interest in theory first arose and has persisted longest."[32] Social ecology cannot be divorced from the

study of the community. However, the fact that people occupy space does not inevitably mean that there is a viable unit of social structure that corresponds with the conceptual requirements of community.

Several years ago Slocum and Case questioned whether neighborhoods actually existed in much of rural America.[33] Today the same question can be raised regarding communities if we define them as having a locality base. Just as Slocum and Case felt the time had come to consider neighborhood primarily as an ideal type, useful for heuristic purposes but not as a basis for action programs.

In a recent article et al. call for a conceptual reorientation of community.[34] Such must be considered a first step in developing a new social ecology. This statement does not mean to ignore all the researches done by rural sociologists in the past. Perhaps one of the strengths that rural sociology has in developing ecology is that it has been so weak in theory. There is consequently a tremendous body of facts not encumbered by discarded theories.

Decades of work by rural sociologists provide a background for the development of a new theoretical orientation to the distribution of man and services spacially and temporally.

The rebirth of interest in ecology during the last few months could create the needed catalyst for a needed synthesis of these researches. Nearly everything that is now being published under the label of Human Ecology is the product of natural scientists who cling to the inadequate concepts and theories of the 19th century. There have not been sufficient studies in urban areas by sociologists for the development of adequate ecological theory. On the other hand, work by rural sociologists on such topics as settlement patterns, migratory labor, locality groups, trade and service areas can all provide the data from which a

modern social ecology can develop. Such information is essential for a social ecology with universal applicability. If there is to be a social ecology based on empirical fact rather than theories not compatible with reality, rural sociologists would appear to be the ones to develop it.

FOOTNOTES

[1]C. Arnold Anderson, "Trends in Rural Sociology," in Robert K. Merton et. al. (Eds.) Sociology Today (New York: Basic Books, Inc.), p. 362.

[2]Robert Ezra Park, "Urbanization as Measured by Newspaper Circulation," American Journal of Sociology, XXXV (July, 1929), 60-79.

[3]Anderson, op. cit., p. 362.

[4]Robert Ezra Park, "Human Ecology," The American Journal of Sociology, XLII (July, 1936), 1-15.

[5]Frederic M. Thrasher, The Gang (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

[6]Louis Wirth, The Ghetto (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928).

[7]Harvey W. Zorbaugh, The Gold Coast and the Slum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929).

[8]Milla A. Alihan, Social Ecology (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938).

[9]See George A. Theodorson (Ed.) Studies in Human Ecology (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 77-122 for several critical appraisals of the classical school of human ecology.

[10]See Alihan, op. cit.

[11]Warner E. Gettys, "Human Ecology and Social Theory," Social Forces, XVII (May, 1940), 469-76.

[12]Ibid.

[13]See Theodorson, op. cit., pp. 129-154.

[14]T. Lynn Smith, The Sociology of Rural Life (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940).

[15]Lowry Nelson, Rural Sociology (New York: American Book Company, 1948) and Alvin L. Bertrand, Rural Sociology, (1958).

[16]T. Lynn Smith and Paul E. Zopf, Jr., Principles of Inductive Rural (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1970).

[17]Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

[18]Carl C. Taylor et. al., Rural Life in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

[19]Carle C. Zimmerman and Richard E. DuWars, Graphic Regional Sociology (Cambridge: Phillips Book Store, 1952).

[20]Smith, op. cit.

[21]John H. Kolb and Edmund deS. Brunner, A Study of Rural Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935).

[22]John H. Kolb, Rural Primary Groups (Madison: Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 51, 1921).

[23]Dwight Sanderson, The Rural Community (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1932).

[24]John M. Gillette, Rural Sociology (New York: Sturgis and Walton Co., 1913).

[25]For example see: John H. Kolb and Edmund deS. Brunner, A Study of Rural Society (Fourth Ed.), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), pp. 181-260.

[26]Amos H. Hawley, Human Ecology (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950).

[27]Anderson, op. cit., p. 375.

[28]Ibid., p. 367.

[29]Walter T. Martin, "Ecological Change in Satellite Rural Areas," American Sociological Review, XXII (April, 1957), 173-83.

[30]Jerome K. Myers, "Assimilation to the Ecological and Social Systems of a Community," American Sociological Review, XV (June, 1950), 367.

[31]Alvin Boskoff, "An Ecological Approach to Rural Society," Rural Sociology, XIV (December, 1949), 306-316.

[32]Anderson, op. cit., p. 368.

[33]Walter L. Slocum and Herman M. Case, "Are Neighborhoods Meaningful Social Groups Throughout Rural America," Rural Sociology, XVIII (March, 1953), 52-59.

[34]Gene F. Summers et. al., "The Renewal of Community Sociology," XXXV (June, 1970), 218-231.