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SEP 8 1969

NEW ENGLAND
AGRICULTURAL
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COUNCIL

PROCEEDINGS
1968



UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

JUNE 17, 18, 19, 1968

A SOCIOLOGIST LOOKS AT:
BARRIERS TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR
ADJUSTMENTS IN RURAL NEW ENGLAND COMMUNITIES

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An artist reflects his view of the world in some plastic medium. Unlike the world he is reflecting, his statement becomes fixed. We can look at it, garner impressions and leave its presence. Any discussion of the complex social dynamic is itself a representation, a reflection and like a work of art it should stimulate impressions. As in the case of a painting or a piece of sculpture the viewer brings to the form his experiences, his attitudes, his perceptions. A sociological impression attempts to include a multiplicity of views in molding its particular medium. When the sociological artist looks at his world and attempts to represent it in his medium, he too must realize that his statements, as statements, when recorded, become fixed - and yet his subject is dynamic. Any set of impressions are imperfect. They are necessary for they are the stuff that judgements are made of. We must attempt to put together a collage of views in hopes of building a useful, though admittedly imperfect impression of our subject.

My choice of medium imposes limits on what I can build. I will not develop lists of statistics for you concerning rural New England communities. This kind of demographic information is available to you through other sources. If there were no evidence that we have problems there would be no need for this discussion. I will not waste your time berating the people whose attitudes stand in the way of our creating their utopia for them. I do not believe in utopia and their study is only useful in highlighting their omissions. I will not select convenient whipping boys to blame for our current state of affairs. Instead I would like to share with you impressions, perceptions set in useful categories for analysis.

When we consider "what's going on here" in rural New England we must look hard at the effects of at least the following:

- Urbanization
- Social Change
- Community Development

The 19th century idea of "rural" is appropos of only a limited portion of our nation and especially to New England. The effects of megalopolis have made themselves felt far beyond the soot belching factories and salt box suburbs. I am referring to the social fact of an urbanized society. The fact that no matter where we live we more or less dress alike, love alike, hate alike, share the same values, hopes and fears. We can all watch television, eat Wise potato chips, and hate Ho Chi Min. I am not merely referring to the statistics that point out what percentage of our population lives in cities or metropolitan areas, nor am I concerned here with the rise of rural non-farm economic activity. I am referring to how people

live, what goes on in their lives. Sociologists call this "life style", and "life space". How we live, and what we do with our meager slice of eternity is the issue. Increasingly the people in the country do things in the same way as people in the city (please do not worry about the academic danger of the generalization).

In his book, "the Machine in the Garden", Leo Marx undertakes an analysis of literary approaches which highlight the pastoral ideal in America.¹ The work points out our national attitudinal schizophrenia. Somewhere in the psyche of man is the desire for the bucolic and yet he finds himself rushing headlong into the turmoil of metropolis. Perhaps he has no real choice. We cannot return to the Golden Age. We must fashion our Eden out of what is left.

Megopolitan growth corridors abound and the "folks know it". Certainly there are pockets of isolation where hill-folks have not felt the prongs of urbanization poking into their lives. These cases are of limited consequence in this analysis. The over-whelming evidence points toward a sociogenic as well as geographic extension of urban trends. We no longer have to live in New York city to know with some degree of certainty what life is like there.

Urbanization is only one of the indices of a revolution of sorts. Revolution in that we are witness to vast basic structural changes in our world. In good anthropological fashion we can expect organizational changes to follow. The mass media have accomplished all I'd wish to in making a case for the hypothesis that our society is undergoing significant growing pains. I need only call your attention to daily news broadcasts which most vividly and often to our collective chagrin indicate the facts of change in our world.

I would like to turn attention to the social components, "institution" and "attitudes", the jungle gym and see-saw of the sociologist's playground.

Institutions are those arrangements between people, those groups of behaviors that give order and predictability to our society. In that they are the fabric of our society they must be resilient, tough if you will. This creates a curious condition. Our society is alleged to be a dynamic-change-oriented one---yet it is the function of institutions in a society to give order, stability to that society. Institutions resist change - our culture is change oriented - somewhere there is going to be conflict. Witness our crises in government, education, and race relations to name but a few of the more obvious.

Attitudes like institutions give substance and order to our lives. They are beliefs, dispositions to an idea, a behavior, a person, a group. Attitudes, if deeply affirmed determine behavior. Often they are merely linguistic conventions, dispositions given lip service only. Attitudes are developed over long periods of time. They don't change over night. People depend on their beliefs. These beliefs give rationale to people's action. They establish categories to which people can relate. They make life possible. That being the case they do not change easily. In order for attitudes to change the holder must be "educated" as to why they should

change. People live by what they know, what they believe. In the North Country these beliefs are deeply rooted in people's personalities. They reflect hopes and fears, dreams and dreads. When we attempt to change attitudes we may be challenging the very foundations of people's lives.

During periods of rapid change existing attitudes and institutions are challenged, shaken. If there is to be significant change, these pervasive social components must bend or face the probability of death. Herein lies one of the most basic barriers to adjustment in rural New England. The going assumption is that people want change. That change means merely the acquisition of material benefits - a T.V., a washing machine. I would suggest that we have been operating on a somewhat misguided assumption. People in rural America are generally resisting change, resisting the 20th century, if you will - certainly not the material aspects, but certainly the non-material, the institutional, the attitudinal. "Negroes are not welcomed in 'blank' county". Any rural New Englander need only turn on his T.V. at 5 each evening to be reminded of what is just-down-the-pike. If he doesn't watch out, if he doesn't protect his county, his town, his home, it could happen to him. The mass media have provided instant video replay, the lesson has been learned. And yet change abounds in the land. Resistance is a reality. Conflict is all too apparent. We cannot hold back the forces of change forever. Their energies are far too strong. We cannot reverse the cumulative developmental demands of history.

What can be done to preserve what is good? What can work along side the forces of change in rural New England? Is there any hope or even reason for saving rural areas whose youth leave as soon as they reach the age of freedom? Can areas that have been declining, according to all the standard measures of growth, be salvaged? Can rural America in general and rural New England, in particular, provide a viable alternative to the frenzy and function of megalopolis?

Answers to these complex questions can be found in part, in a consideration of the issue of "community". It must be pointed out that no two communities are alike and any "laws" we establish in community change patterns are only referents, models from which each particular case will depart.

If rural New England is to adapt to the demands of change-and I submit that it must to survive, there will have to be a spirit of community renewal alive in the land. Recognized leaders in small towns must be committed to adjustment. If the leaders lack faith in their communities, where shall we find it? IN THE PEOPLE. We must make use of the tools and skills of "Community Development". We now know how communities organize themselves. We are aware of the social change equation. We are all too familiar with the results of an unwillingness to adapt to a changing environment (witness the dinosaur). This is not to say that everyone must run to the specialist, the professional for every answer in a time when professionalism is so fashionable, but rather we must use the particular knowledge available to us. It is at base, the people of any community that will ultimately swing the balance. Towns cannot be content with looking to the sky in hopes of catching sight of some industrial corporate angel ready to alight gingerly

into their community complete complete with a new plant, houses and jobs for all. We must capitalize on the emerging marriage of interests between the public and private sectors of our economy as they tackle the problems of population, poverty, pollution, and the complex issues of renewal confronting our society. We must be patient, yet firm, in our resolve to bring the information we have to the people. We must make our language of "interfaces" and "infrastructures" intelligible to the local barber and members of the grange. We must rekindle the spirit of inventive self-help that made this region great. We must be willing to go to the people to find out what they want, where they are. We must utilize every human resource.

We can turn our countryside over to shrapnel strip developers. We can run Lemming like to the cities where the action is. We can wait for the benevolent benefactor to make it all better. Or we can begin again to re-evaluate our resources both physical and social. We can try to see clearly the implications of economic analysis as they define growth centers in Northern New England. We can learn to utilize the already extant body of information concerning the community development process. We can become sensitive to the changing color of our time, and the demands these changes imply.

There is a machine in the garden and we cannot wish it away. 1/

1/ "The Machine in the Garden", Leo Marx, Oxford University Press, 1964, New York