

COMMENTS ON "SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RURAL SOCIOLOGY  
AND ITS PROSPECTS" BY R. J. HILDRETH<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth P. Wilkinson  
Department of Agricultural Economics and  
Rural Sociology, Pennsylvania State  
University

The Rural Sociological Society recognized Jim Hildreth's distinguished service to rural life with an award in 1983. I want to recognize his distinguished service to rural sociology. Don't accept his disclaimer! He swims regularly in our fishbowl. Jim Hildreth is a rural sociologist, whatever other disciplines might claim him. Chauvinistically, we claim him as a rural sociologist.

In giving his views on the history and present of our discipline, Jim uses a device I have learned to recognize as one of his most effective tools for stimulating thought: He cites provocative articles that overstate somewhat his own opinions; e.g., Flinn and Newby on the history and focus of rural sociology, Gardner and Nuckton on the quality of rural sociology as science. While I agree with the position Jim finally reaches after waving these arguments before us, I cannot help taking his bait. I want to throw darts at his sources.

First, the Flinn-Newby thesis (which I am almost certain to overstate) holds, among other things, that rural sociology has missed its calling by becoming, alas, the sociology of rural life rather than the sociology of agriculture. Along with Jim, I celebrate the current revival of the sociology of agriculture as a strong subdiscipline in rural sociology. This is a vital part of rural sociology, and it has been for years, just as agriculture is an important part of rural life. Agriculture is only one part of rural life, however, and rural sociology is--and must be--much more than the sociology of agriculture. Moreover, I question the view that rural sociology became "people oriented" only in the "post-Hightower" revival of the sociology of agriculture. Rural sociology has always been people oriented, and Hightower's label for rural sociology--"Lies, Lipservice, and Hogwash"--says more, in my opinion, about Hightower's literacy than about the quality and social responsibility of sociological research in rural life. In addition, I will comment in a later paper on theoretical justification for continuing to use the concept of rurality--a mere geographical expression, according to Newby--as an explanatory variable in rural sociology. Notwithstanding the distinguished contributions to rural sociology by William Flinn and Howard Newby, the thesis Jim Hildreth discerns in their work is questionable,

<sup>1</sup>Presented to the Rural Sociology Section, Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Biloxi, MS, February 3-8, 1985.

to say the most.

Second, the Gardner-Newby article on the quality of science in rural sociology, viewed as they say from outside the fishbowl, is, in my opinion, such a fine example of disciplinary chauvinism that Glenn Johnson could have used it to illustrate his treatise on problems of chauvinism in land grant universities. As they acknowledge, their observations are based on limited contacts with either sociology or sociologists, and they perceive no difference between rural sociology and the general field of sociology, which they presume to critique, allegedly from the perspective of economics. My response to their critique is simply this: If Jim Hildreth were to say what they say about the quality of science in rural sociology, I would pay attention. Period.

As to the new agenda for rural sociology, I am happy to report that the program of the 1985 annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (in Blacksburg, Virginia, August 21-25) will include sessions on all of the topics Jim applauds in his paper--the sociology of agriculture, the sociology of natural resources, the sociology of development, and economic change, the rural community, the family, and other new and old emphases in the field. We also no doubt will discuss Marxist and other approaches in political economy and functional and other theoretical paradigms.

On the matter of theories in rural sociology, I agree with what I believe Jim is saying: Multiple, competing theories can contribute to a healthy field of applied research. Notwithstanding Gardner and Nuckton's normative view of normal science, there is much to be said for a continuing dialogue within any discipline, especially within a social science discipline. I accept the ecological principle that monoculture is deadly. That rural sociology involves not one but several theoretical perspectives is a sign of vitality, not of confusion and immaturity. As Jim Hildreth says, an applied field with a well-defined agenda of real-life problems to address has enough of a focus in the problems themselves without adding theoretical or methodological monism.

The point that rural sociology must affect the political system to be useful is a good one and could be the basis for further reflections on the past, present, and future of our discipline. Why is rural sociology thriving, as it is, in an advanced industrial age, an age dominated by urban settlements and urban institutions? Is the field still useful, or has it simply been able to thrive somehow without being useful? Perhaps the powers that be in the land grant-USDA complex misunderstand what rural sociology is and think it to be useful for purposes that in fact have little to do with its mission as defined by rural sociologists. If so, perhaps the land grant-USDA complex will recognize the error someday, and rural sociology will be kicked out to sink or swim, as it were, in the pounding surf of an urban age. Outside the nest, would rural sociology swim, or would it sink?

These are questions of the type Jim Hildreth raises

Wilkinson

indirectly, if not directly, when he makes "some observations on rural sociology and its prospects." We are thankful to Jim for stirring things up again.