The Institutional and Intellectual Origins of Rural Sociology

Suzanne Smith

smithsm@uchicago.edu

University of Chicago
Department of Sociology
1126 E. 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

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ABSTRACT

Rural sociology, it has been assumed, either developed as a specialized offshoot of general sociology or as an applied science in the service of New Deal institutions. In either case, its continued relevance in an increasingly urban country has been questioned. This paper suggests a third interpretation of rural sociology’s origins: an independent body of thought that developed in parallel but apart from general sociology and manifested an alternative ontology of the rural/urban divide. It traces the conjuncture and disjuncture of rural sociology and sociology by considering the formative period of these two disciplines, the early twentieth century from the rise of the Country Life movement to the Rural Sociological Society’s founding. The paper examines how systems of thought and institutional affiliation mediated and influenced this moment, setting rural sociology and sociology on largely separate paths. At the same time, it looks to rural sociology as a site in which emerging contradictions and tensions inherent to modernity were worked out. That is, it considers how early rural sociologists’ impulse to preserve traditional aspects of rural society competed with and complemented a simultaneous impulse to promote scientific progress and planning. In contrast to general sociology’s vision of the country as a primitive precursor to the modern city, rural sociology saw a synchronic, interdependent rural/urban relationship. This difference in thought preconditioned the organizational split of rural sociology from general sociology, and anticipated by more than 50 years the theories of the new urbanists.
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Introduction

Rural sociology has fallen into a chronic state of crisis, distraught, in turns, by the discipline’s theoretical paucity, its institutional isolation, its estrangement from the more general discipline of sociology, and, at base, its seeming irrelevance to modern urban society. From within and without, rural sociology has been criticized for its scientific irrelevance—i.e., shortsighted focus on the methodologically rigorous analysis of trivialities (Picou, Wells et al. 1978)—and ideological misdirection—i.e., its cozy relationship with the land grant complex and corporate agribusiness interests (Hightower 1972) and lack of a critical perspective (Falk and Gilbert 1985). And rural sociology has long suffered an uneasy relationship with general sociology. Friedland (1982) and Falk and Pinhey (1978) outline rural sociology’s estranged relationship from the broader discipline, pointing to its institutional insulation and isolation. In an informal survey of ASA members conducted during his presidency in 1967, Loomis (1981:59) found that “35 percent of those responding believed the field of sociology would be better off without the Rural Sociological Society and that it should be abolished” and that “sizeable proportions of American non-rural sociologists would not accept a rural sociologist in such status-roles as 1) office mate, 2) co-author of a book or monograph and 3) chairman or head of your department or unit.”

But certainly the most sustained criticism levied at rural sociology has been its simple irrelevance in light of declining rural and farm populations. Half a century ago, Hoffsommer (1960) and Nelson (1969) argued that these demographic changes left rural sociology without an object of study, concluding that the discipline no longer had a justification for its independent existence. This debate was rekindled in the 1980s with a contingent calling for a reorientation of
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the discipline to focus not on supposedly obsolete questions of rural life but instead on agriculture as industrial production (Newby 1980, Buttel 1988, Hainard 1983).

Such criticisms assume that true scientific knowledge naturally corresponds to reality: rurality, as an object of study, must really exist in the world, and rural sociology develops naturally from general sociology in order to encompass the rural dimension. An alternative set of assumptions underlies criticisms based on rural sociology’s institutional position—i.e., that institutional position shapes research priorities and the division of labor in science. Disciplinary divisions arise not because science maps itself to reality, but because science is divided among various institutional bases of support. Neither assumption is adequate to explain the origins of rural sociology: the discipline was neither necessitated by the structure of reality nor the inevitable product of institutional arrangements. Rather, rural sociology reflects intellectual divisions that emerged decades before the Rural Sociological Society was founded: rural sociology adopted a synchronic view of the rural/urban divide that was fundamentally opposed to the diachronic view adopted by general sociology. Though the two disciplines briefly converged, their ontologies were incompatible, conditioning their institutional split in 1937.

Correspondence theory of knowledge

The correspondence theory of knowledge, adopted by most of the earlier and more comprehensive histories of rural sociology, depicts the origin of rural sociology as the natural development of a science from imprecise speculation to precise empiricism, from general knowledge to specialized discipline (see, for example, Brunner 1957, Odum 1951, Nelson 1969). Such interpretations, however, are inevitably teleological, anachronistically projecting present-day epistemological divisions back in time, casting them as ontological divisions in order to explain the historical development of knowledge and scientific practice. In truth, these interpretations fail to motivate any particular division of scientific knowledge. Why, after all,
should sociology divide itself along a rural/urban axis, rather than develop a spatially oriented sociology of community? The *gemeinschaftlich* communities of Gans’s (1962) urban villagers, Whyte’s (1943) street corner society, plus the “three-way tug of war among the human ecologists—and the rural and urban sociologists” in studying the “rural-urban fringe” should be evidence enough that the rural/urban division in sociology is not the result of a simple correspondence between scientific knowledge and reality (Angell 1953).

**Institutional theory of knowledge**

The institutional theory of knowledge focuses on the close connections between rural sociology and the state, especially the land grant complex (the USDA, land grant colleges, and extension service). These connection began informally in 1919 with Wisconsin economist Henry C. Taylor’s and rural sociology founding father Charles Josiah Galpin’s appointments to offices in the USDA, then were formalized in 1925 with the Purnell Act, which allocated federal funds to support rural sociological research. In the post-Purnell period, the USDA and its subdivisions became a central node in the rural sociology network of communications, funding, training, and personnel (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:271-275). But while this institutional affiliation funneled money into research and teaching, it also subjected it to various constraints and pressures. Brunner (1957:5) recalls that early rural sociologists in colleges of agriculture “were under heavy pressure to demonstrate the utility of their offering, since they were judged by the concept of utility held by the dominant physical scientists of the experiment stations.”

Yet, despite claims that institutional settings direct research, many of rural sociology’s research priorities were set before any formal or informal connection was established with the state. The research priorities in rural sociology adopted by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) under Taylor largely mirrored those previously set forth outside that institution: a 1919 report to the Secretary of Agriculture outlined research objectives that were “highly compatible
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with the objectives for country life that were summarized in the conclusions of the committees of the first National Country Life Conference a few months earlier” (NCLA 1919) and also appeared to have been influenced by the reports of committees of the American Sociological Association and by Galpin’s earlier work at Wisconsin (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:21). And it was not until the late 1930s and 1940s, the latter part of the New Deal and World War II, that rural sociology saw a major federal commitment. The New Deal poured fuel on the fire that was early rural sociology, but it did not light the spark. New Deal programs increased staff in the Division of Rural Life many times over from just a handful to 57 and more than quadrupled the budget from $20,390 in FY1919-20 to $428,000 in FY1939-40 (or, based on CPI, the equivalent in constant 2010 dollars of increasing from $256,951 to $6,712,857 ) (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:37-38).

Further, rural sociology had roots outside of the state. The first rural sociology course is generally thought to be one offered by C.R.. Henderson at the University of Chicago in 1894. In his 1916 survey of teachers of rural sociology, Sanderson found that most schools offering rural sociology courses had launched them between 1910 and 1915, a decade before the Purnell Act. Although proportionately more agricultural colleges offered rural sociology courses, they were offered at an approximately equal number of other universities, as well as at many normal schools. In some cases, rural sociology courses were taught at schools that did not otherwise offer sociology; at schools with longer-established sociology departments, courses in rural sociology were often called something other than sociology (e.g., “social conditions in American rural life”) (Sanderson 1917:191) While Galpin’s work with the USDA’s Division of Rural Life was instrumental in expanding rural sociology throughout the agricultural colleges, that expansion was possible because the field of rural sociology had already begun to crystallize.
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Reports released by the USDA in the 1930s show the ongoing legacy of rural sociology instruction outside the land grant complex (United States. Bureau of Agricultural Economics 1930-1936; United States. Bureau of Agricultural 1937). Table 1 shows the total number of institutions offering courses in rural sociology and rural life between 1930 and 1936 and in 1938. It also shows the number of these courses offered in teachers colleges and normal schools, seminaries and Bible colleges, and junior colleges and high schools. (Table 1. Institutions giving courses in rural sociology and rural life, 1930-36 and 1938.)

Through the 1930s, the number of institutions offering rural sociology classes stayed fairly constant, hovering around 500. A little more than a quarter of these institutions were teachers colleges or normal schools, with a smattering of seminaries and junior colleges (and some high schools). This stability is somewhat surprising, given that, from the perspective of the ASA, the 1930s saw the takeoff and institutionalization of rural sociology. It suggests that rural sociology had already gained a steady foothold in colleges across the country years before the Rural Sociological Society was founded. And, although rural sociology is and was notable for the degree of its connection to the land grant complex (even the existence of these directories points to such ties), it has not been exclusively the purview of land grant or agricultural colleges. Rather, rural sociology was taught in high schools, junior colleges, normal schools, private colleges, religious colleges, seminaries, and the Ivy League. The representation of rural sociology in seminaries and Bible colleges is notable, showing the discipline’s close ties to religious reform and missionary impulses to improve country life and sustain country churches.

Ultimately, though, institutional explanations of the origins of rural sociology also fail to motivate the initial fault lines that defined rural sociology as a separate and discrete discipline and lent it to cooperation with the state. Additionally, they tend to be teleological, working
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backwards from the end-point (i.e., from USDA-directed rural sociology). Their teleological orientation obfuscates alternative paths of development—that is, the early rural sociology conducted outside land grant colleges (e.g., in private colleges, normal schools, or churches).

Both correspondence and institutional theories of knowledge portray rural sociology’s development and split from general sociology as inevitable and due to outside forces: reality or institutions. Neither can account for historical contingencies, and both neglect the power of ideas. This paper examines the formative period of sociology and rural sociology—the early twentieth century from the rise of the Country Life movement in 1908 to the Rural Sociological Society’s founding in 1937—and argues that the divergent intellectual orientation of rural sociology is critical to understanding its split from general sociology.

A Brief History of Rural Sociology

While C.R. Henderson reportedly gave the first course in rural sociology, Kenyon Butterfield is reported to have been the first person ever to hold the position of instructor in Rural Sociology, in 1903, at Michigan State (Brunner 1957:19). Around the time of his appointment, Butterfield also organized a series of “rural progress” conferences across the country (Holik and Hassinger 1986), and in 1908, he was named to President Theodore Roosevelt’s Commission on Country Life to study the conditions of rural people. The committee’s report, presented to Congress on February 9, 1909, spurred a national country life movement, represented both by a number of state-based Country Life Conferences (the first taking place in February 1911 at the University of Wisconsin with Henry C. Taylor as conference chair) and by the American Country Life Association at the national level (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:11-12). The Country Life Commission’s report was also a watershed for the development of rural sociology. The report directed attention to the situation of rural people
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and farm families, suggesting that research consider not only how to make more efficient crops, but how to cultivate more satisfying rural life. Although the commission ultimately had little impact on federal policy, it did spark interest in the empirical study of rural life.

Around this time, rural sociologists began attending and presenting papers at meetings of the American Sociological Association\(^1\), which had been founded in 1905. In 1912, during the Federal Council of Churches’ conference on “Social Service and Country Life,” a group of people interested in rural sociology met in Butterfield’s room and decided to push for a rural life theme at the next ASA meeting and discussed the possibility of organizing a rural sociology section within ASA (Brunner 1957:43-44; Holik and Hassinger 1986:331; Larson and Zimmerman 2003:13). In 1916, under President George Vincent, the ASA chose rural life as the annual meeting theme; the next year, the ASA rural sociologists appointed a committee on priorities in rural research, and, in 1922, officially formed a section of ASA. Although there are no indications of discontent, rural sociologists began suggesting that the Rural Sociology section split off to form a separate organization. A motion to this effect was first entertained in 1928, ironically a year in which rural sociology featured prominently in the national organization: John Gillette served as president and the annual meeting theme was “The Rural Community.” In the end, no action was taken that year (Holik and Hassinger 1986:337).

But seven years later, the section made two moves toward further independence. First, it founded its own journal, *Rural Sociology*, published by Louisiana State University. Second, in 1935, the Rural Sociology section passed a motion to study the possibility of forming an independent organization. In December 1937, in Atlantic City, the committee issued its report,

\(^{1}\) Though originally called the American Sociological Society, I will follow the convention of referring to the organization by its current name.
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recommending that the Rural Sociology section organize as an independent but affiliated section of the ASA, a move that would have required amending the ASA constitution. Rather than delay for a year in order to amend the ASA constitution, the section elected to form a tentatively independent body (Holik and Hassinger 1987:9-10). However, the ASA constitution was never amended, and the tentatively independent body became the Rural Sociological Society.

Meanwhile, rural sociology was making headway in government. Little action followed from the report of Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission, perhaps due to the interruption posed by World War I (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:11). Though the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (which formalized the extension system) may have increased general interest in rural sociology by bringing state officials in close contact with rural people (Sanderson 1917:181), there was no official federal sanction of rural sociology until 1919, when Henry C. Taylor, the first professor of agricultural economics, then at Wisconsin, was appointed to office in the USDA. Taylor, in turn, appointed Charles J. Galpin, his colleague from Wisconsin, to head the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, and in 1922 Taylor became head of the newly formed Bureau of Agricultural Economics within the USDA.

The year that Taylor and Galpin went to Washington, 1919, had also been a landmark year for the growth of associations devoted to the study of rural social life. The American Farm Economics Association (later the American Agricultural Economics Association) was organized in 1919, as was the Agricultural History Society. The same year, the First National Country Life Conference was held (theme: Country Life Reconstruction), during which attendees decided to form the American Country Life Association (American Country Life Association 1919:51-160). Galpin, who was in attendance, recommended a national program of cooperative research, a vision he would later implement in his position as head of the Division of Rural Life. The
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conference’s committee on legislation, chaired by Galpin, noted “a new science is arising, Rural Sociology, which is concerned fundamentally with farm population” (American Country Life Association 1919:74).

Galpin’s overlapping memberships in multiple professional associations as well as in his administrative role in the USDA demonstrate the degree to which it is difficult to isolate any single center of rural sociology during this period. In fact, Galpin’s privileged vantage point from the Division of Rural Life may have facilitated the organization of the Rural Sociology section. Prior to the 1921 meeting at which members decided to petition for section status, Galpin had supplied Sanderson with a list of 250 names of people interested in rural sociology (Holik and Hassinger 1986:335).

Cooperation between the USDA agencies and academic researchers expanded after 1925, when the Purnell Act officially allocated federal dollars to support rural research in sociology, following the cooperative research model devised by Galpin (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:269-270). In less than a decade, the Purnell Act doubled the number of rural sociology projects at agricultural experiment stations (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:270-271).

By the 1930s, then, the institutional groundwork had been laid for a major expansion of federally funded rural sociology. The New Deal and World War II brought an enormous influx of federal money for rural sociology, but with it, pressure to conform to federal research priorities. The development of rural sociology in government under the New Deal is well documented (Brunner 1957; Kirkendall 1966; Nelson 1969; Larson and Zimmerman 2003).

**Key factors in the development of rural sociology**

Contrary to the institutional theory of knowledge, this brief chronology suggests that the origin of rural sociology did not require the institutional support of the state. Instead, its origins were outside the land grant complex and actually predate state support. In the late 19th century,
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much of the earliest work that might be considered rural sociology came from church studies of dwindling church membership in rural areas, motivated in large part by the social gospel movement. The first such example may be William DeWitt Hyde’s 1892 “Impending Paganism in New England” (Hyde 1892), followed by Josiah Strong’s 1893 analysis of the relationship between church decline and rural out-migration (Strong 1893). For a more complete list of early studies of the country church, see the entry for “The Country Church” in the 1909 edition of the *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture* (Wells 1909).

Soon, though, more formal survey research superseded these early studies, buoyed by the general rise of the social survey in the first few decades of the 20th century. In her history of the survey, Jean Converse attributes this rise to industrialization and urbanization, “the new visibility of poverty in congested cities” (Converse 1987:13). More accurately, we might attribute it to modernization and the dichotomization of rural and urban: in the cities, urban residents faced the blights of dense populations (e.g., disease), while in the country, rural residents worried about growing flows of people and commodities to the city and the changing technologies and scale of agriculture. In both the city and the country, the rapid pace of economic change prompted concern for social problems, which proponents of the social survey aimed to measure.

The social survey movement and the origins of rural sociology were, in fact, closely intertwined. The Country Life movement and various local and national Country Life associations offered a venue for presenting survey findings and connected surveyors with potential founders (e.g., foundations like Russell Sage) (on connections between the Country Life movement and the development of social surveys, see (Converse 1987:25-28)). During the 1910s, a number of rural economic and social surveys were conducted by state universities, mostly in the south (Brunner 1957:8). Eaton and Harrison’s (1930) *Bibliography of Social
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Surveys shows 72 general rural community surveys, plus 54 in rural education, conducted before 1927, with more than half fielded before 1920 (though Converse (1987:36) suspects these may be underestimates, especially of rural sociology surveys). Among specialized surveys, they list 54 on “Rural Education” and 18 on “Rural Health and Sanitation,” plus 10 documents dealing with the practice and development of rural social survey methods. A quick tally of surveys listed in the volume reveals how many rural surveys were conducted before 1920, that is, before the formation of the Rural Sociology Section in the ASA and before the Purnell Act granted funds specifically for the practice of rural sociology. (Table 2: Rural Surveys)

Many of these early surveys were conducted by religious organizations. For example, the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, under the direction of Warren H. Wilson, developed an active survey program; Wilson conducted a survey of 17 counties in 12 states, fielded between 1912 and 1916 and published as “A Church and Community Survey of ---- Country” (Brunner 1957:7) During the 1910s and 1920s, surveys were also conducted by the Interchurch World Movement and the Institute of Social and Religious Research (ISRR), directed by Edmund deS. Brunner. The Interchurch World Movement survey was a massive effort to gather responses from individuals the world over, and its scope of questions was as broad as its sample. The ISRR, created in 1921 with funds from John D. Rockefeller, was meant to preserve the Interchurch World Movement’s work when that organization folded. For both organizations, concern for the future of the country church was paramount (Brunner 1957; Converse 1987).

In general, the importance of the church in shaping early rural sociology—from topics of study to the biographies of its early practitioners—cannot be overstated. Like early sociology in general, early rural sociology was as much applied theology as science. In one breath, Vogt (1917:7) could describe the imperative of a rural sociologist to “be a trained social engineer, just
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as the builder of bridges must be a trained mechanical engineer” and draw a second parallel between the rural sociologist and a spiritual guide: “We need ‘sky pilots’ who can tell us of the beauties of the world beyond the grave and the way thereto, but we need more than ever those who can help us to solve the problems of the present day in order to bring a larger portion of the heavenly kingdom to us before we depart into the uncertainties of the life after death.”

During the early 20th century, the practice of rural sociology moved increasingly into the university, and then into the land grant colleges. The first class in rural sociology was taught in 1894 by C. R. Henderson at the University of Chicago, far removed from the land grant setting, but quite close to the church (on Henderson, see (Abbott 2010)). The first rural sociology course in an agricultural college was taught 10 years later, in 1904, by Butterfield. In a survey of teachers of rural sociology, Sanderson (1917:184-185) found that 64 percent of the 48 agricultural colleges surveyed, 45 percent of 20 state universities, 32 percent of normal schools, and 9 percent of 301 other colleges or universities offered classes in rural sociology. Put another way, rural sociology classes were offered at approximately equal numbers of agricultural colleges as other colleges or universities. If state universities and normal schools are included, a minority of rural sociology classes were taught in agricultural colleges. Rural sociology was, in 1917, hardly the exclusive domain of the land grant complex. Even within the land grant complex, rural sociology grew from the ground up; these rural sociology courses were offered years before the Purnell Act officially authorized funds for rural sociology research. In short, rural sociology’s growth predates institutional support from the state; rural sociology’s close ties to the USDA may have later shaped its development or entrenched it as a discipline, but they cannot explain its origin.
But neither did rural sociology clearly derive from general sociology. That is, contrary to the correspondence theory of knowledge, rural sociology did not evolve out of general sociology as a more focused specialty. Rather, rural sociology arose in parallel to general sociology. Although rural sociologists began regularly attending ASA meetings shortly after the association’s founding, they also met regularly with other professional organizations. The American Economic Association, for instance, devoted its 1890 annual meeting to discussion of the farmers’ movement and the “agricultural question”; at the 1910 annual meeting, Horace Plunkett, a Country Life advocate from Ireland who had been instrumental in convincing Roosevelt to organize the Country Life Commission, organized a round table to discuss American Country Life (Plunkett 1910). In 1912, the AEA meeting included sessions on rural conditions in the south and the decline of the rural population, presented in conjunction with the American Statistical Association. Early work in rural sociology was also published in the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (see, e.g., volume 40, published in 1912). And many early rural sociologists found professional community in reform-minded advocacy groups like the American Country Life Association (Taylor and Taylor 1952).

While the development of rural sociology was not unrelated to general concern for the empirical study of social questions and a trend toward surveys and fact-gathering among urban social workers, it was influenced by a specifically rural impulse, initiated by the church’s particular concern for the future of the country church in the face of rural out-migration. Rural sociology also had a direct lineage from the Country Life movement as well as other Progressive movements of the time, connections which have been repeatedly, if not exhaustively, documented (Galpin 1938; see Brunner 1957; Nelson 1969; Wunderlich 2003). The American Country Life Association offered, among other things, a publication venue in its regular journal,
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*Rural America*. These connections were unabashedly recognized at the time. Sanderson (1917:182) attributes growing interest in rural sociology to the work of church, educational, and reform leaders who pushed for further study of rural people or for teaching rural education.

This history suggests that, in significant ways, the distinguishing assumptions of rural sociology were developed prior to 1929; the groundwork was laid early for rural sociology’s estrangement from general sociology. Telling the story of rural sociology’s origins as a scientific branching assumes common primitive ground and papers over substantial ontological and epistemological differences between early rural sociology and general sociology. I propose that we think, instead, of rural sociology and sociology as two distinct bodies of thought that briefly converged in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Modernity and the Rural/Urban Divide**

The rural sociology practiced in the first decades of the twentieth century was based on the assumption that the rural problem was a modern problem, and one distinct from the urban problem. To rural sociology, the conditions of rural and urban spaces were both fundamentally social questions as well as modern, contemporary problems, yet they were distinct. As Butterfield put it, “Perhaps the most common error in studying rural conditions is the failure to distinguish the vital difference between the urban problem and the rural problem. Sociologically the city problem is that of congestion: the rural problem is that of isolation” (Butterfield 1908:9).

This supposition placed rural sociology at odds with one of the fundamental premises of early sociology, the evolutionary ontology that posited rural social life as prior to urban civilization, that considered rural life more natural than social, and that therefore saw the city, not the country, as sociology’s object of study.
Evolutionary assumptions are evident in the earliest sociological texts. In their 1894 *Introduction to the Study of Society*, George E. Vincent and Albion Small adopted a biological analogy to explain the evolution of the social body from a simple rural form to an increasingly complex urban anatomy. They followed the evolution of a western U.S. town from the earliest pioneer family through its development into a bustling town—not, they claimed, as a rhetorical device, but as “a description of reality” and tool to help students classify their own “communities in which social development has reached one of the stages through which the growth of this particular city has been traced” (1894). In this pioneer vignette, which occupies the entirety of Book II of the volume, the evolutionary trope overrides the premise that the pioneer family has traveled west, away from a presumably more advanced community. Even their past is cast as distinctly rural, as though new society could not be founded upon city life. “The man,” Vincent and Small write, “holds political convictions, which have, in part, been transmitted from his father, and to a greater or less degree acquired in country-store discussions, campaign meetings, or from the occasional reading of primitive newspapers. The woman entertains conventional ideas of social intercourse as embodied in sewing and quilting bees, donation and tea parties, husking, and other rural gatherings” (1894). Eventually, the pioneer family is joined by other families. A village is formed. The families become more economically interdependent and specialized. Social divisions crop up. But the reader is reminded that the village is still a fairly primitive stage of development, and that these tendencies are only just beginning to emerge. To some degree, this is the typical creation of civilization story (*cf*. Plato, Rousseau) set in the American west—more farm families move in, they produce crops at varying degrees of efficiency, they barter, they specialize where they have comparative advantages, and so on. The narrative builds toward “Chapter IV. Town and City” (143), in which Vincent and Small lay out
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the “main characteristics of urban life”: “(1) increasing complexity; (2) minute specialization; (3) high degree of interdependence…(7) close and sympathetic relations with the world at large; activity stimulated in countless ways, and life raised to a higher intensity; (8) vicious influences by the very nature of urban arrangements more subtly penetrate the social organism and threaten individual and family life” (1894:9, 143). Ultimately, the account is more myth than a real account of any theory or history of the settlement of the American west. And yet by setting that myth in the American west, Vincent and Small equate the evolution of society with the settling and building up of rural America, and thus participate in an evolutionary understanding of the relationship between rural and urban.

This evolutionary view also underlies Giddings’1902 introductory text: “Here and there in the foregoing pages, mention has been made of a process of evolution in human society. It has been assumed that social ideas and social organizations, as we have known them, have grown from simpler beginnings….even an elementary work on Sociology would be incomplete if it did not include a brief summary of what is known on this subject” (1902:231). Giddings takes a long-view historical approach, beginning with the biological evolution of humans through the first settlements and through feudalism to feudal towns, modern cities, and finally democratic civil state, evidently the pinnacle of evolution. Throughout, the assumption is that towns—and more advanced forms—arise from a primitive rural life that precedes the feudal stage, though it may remain long after as a remnant in some areas. The implication is that such rural areas as remain are only cities waiting to happen; they have yet to develop, but they will, according to the physics of social life (e.g., Giddings 1902:309).

Given such assumptions, rural life, for sociology, was a thing of the past, a stage in the evolution of modern society, not a present problem. In one of the clearest and most direct
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statements of this underlying philosophy, Robert E. Park’s “The City as a Social Laboratory” begins:

The social problem is fundamentally a city problem….Man grew up and acquired most of his native and inheritable traits in an environment in which he lived much as the lower animals live, in direct dependence upon the natural world. In the turmoil of changes which has come with the evolution of city and civil life he has not been able to adapt himself fundamentally and biologically to his new environment….The older order, based as it was on custom and tradition, was absolute and sacred. It had, besides, something of the character of nature itself; it had grown up, and men took it as they found it, like the climate and the weather, as part of the natural order of things. The new social order, on the other hand, is more or less of an artificial creation, an artifact. It is neither absolute nor sacred, but pragmatic and experimental….Natural science came into existence in an effort of man to obtain control over external and physical nature. Social science is now seeking, by the same methods of disinterested observation and research, to give man control over himself. As it is in the city that the political problem, that is, the problem of social control, has arisen, so it is in the city that the problem must be studied (1929:2-3).

Or consider the first lines of Louis Wirth’s 1938 essay, “Urbanism as a Way of Life”:

…the beginning of what is distinctively modern in our civilization is best signalized by the growth of great cities. Nowhere has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the conditions of life characteristic of these cities (1964 [1938]:60).

In this understanding, rural was a natural, primitive category against which urban was compared. Rural was taken for granted, thought of as static, left unquestioned and unstudied. This perspective was grounded in an evolutionary, even Spencerian, understanding of history. In evolutionary terms, rural life was in the past, while urban was the category that demanded understanding in the present; remaining rural areas were naturally developed and therefore unproblematic, and besides, they would eventually mature into urban civilization, obviating the need to study them. For sociologists, all the evidence seemed to point in this direction: urban population had overtaken rural, and the rural population that remained lived, for the most part, in abject poverty with few of the technologies or amenities offered by modern urban life.
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Given sociology’s orientation, the premises of rural sociology looked incomprehensible or simply contradictory. From the evolutionary perspective of sociology, the only appropriate attitude toward rural life would be either a technocratic approach to modernizing and urbanizing the countryside, or a romantic nostalgia for the bucolic past. By equating modernity with the city, sociology resigned rural life to a residual historical category to be surpassed and preserved only in memory. By contrast, rural sociology at once embodied modern industrial capitalism’s focus on increasing productivity and embraced a modern rationalistic scientific perspective, yet claimed to do both in pursuit of a more vibrant and livable rural life.

For example, critics of the Country Life Commission’s report accused it of being at once “technocratic social engineering aimed at urbanizing and industrializing the countryside” and a “misguided, romantic...attempt to keep people on the farm and thus preserve an agrarian way of life in the face of deep demographic, cultural, technical, and social change” (Peters and Morgan 2004:290). Jellison (1993) calls the report and “ironic” attempt to improve rural life by making it more like urban life. Wunderlich (2003:81) observes that the intellectuals and reformers who push for industrial, technological, and commercial modernization in agricultural production are the same individuals responsible for keeping alive agrarian idealism.

Similarly, Kirkendall (1986), in his account of the agricultural colleges, portrays them as being caught in the same double bind, “between tradition and modernization.” He divides agricultural colleges’ constituents into two parties: country lifers who wanted to preserve rural life and population versus farm management advocates who wanted to modernize agricultural production. In the end, he claims, the agricultural colleges modernized agriculture, improving efficiency at the expense of rural population and agrarian values.
These criticisms appear either to contradict themselves or to reveal a contradiction in the logic of the country life movement and early rural sociology. But that contradiction is relative; it rests on an underlying assumption in the urban point of view, the assumption that rural is primitive, prior, or past. Yet early rural sociologists adopted a different perspective, a synchronic view of rural and urban that makes comprehensible and complementary these apparent contradictions. In his 1917 introduction to rural sociology, for instance, Paul Vogt explained, “The theory has been presented that both the open country type of agriculture and the massing of people together in congested sections of large cities are departures from the normal tendencies in human nature and that the village is still the form of social grouping best adapted to yield a maximum of human welfare…Neither the open country nor the city has succeeded in overcoming this biological tendency and as soon as conditions are right it begins to express itself” (Vogt 1917:432). That is, rural and urban were both modern categories; neither was natural. For rural sociologists at this time, rural was a modern and dynamic category, socially shaped and subject to scientific investigation and reform.

As such, rural society is subject to improvement, even progress: there is no contradiction, in this understanding, between progress and rural life. A reformist impulse need not be at odds with a conviction for the preservation of a distinct rural life. Vincent (1917), for instance, in his presidential address to the 1916 ASA meeting, considers prospects of a new rural life founded on the ideal of community and the practice of scientific agriculture. Similarly, Peters and Morgan (2004:292-293) argue that the Country Life Commission’s report is most accurately read as a “vision of how potentially conflicting ideals and demands might be simultaneously pursued and realized.” Indeed, the report envisioned a “new rural life,” a “distinctly rural civilization” that would be based on agricultural production that could “yield a reasonable return to those who
follow it intelligently” and a rural life that “must be made permanently satisfying to intelligent, progressive people” (1911:24-25).

This vision reflects a fundamental supposition in rural sociology, that rural life was created, not natural: satisfying rural life, like urban life, could be achieved by scientific study. Rural sociology considered part of its role to be training people to be or become successful members of rural civilization. Rural sociology’s early place in normal schools and agricultural colleges can be traced to this conviction: rural youth would be trained in community leadership at the same time they were trained in pest control and crop production. Rural life and farming came no more naturally than urban life. In his presidential address to the 1920 meeting of the American Country Life Association, Butterfield said, in effect, just this: “You are accustomed, as I am, to the frequent remark that ‘if you will show farmers how to make money, then all these other things will take care of themselves,’ and by these ‘other things’ is meant the very things that this Association is considering—education, recreation, health, morals, country-planning, and the rest. But these things do not take care of themselves” (Butterfield 1920:4-5). Other presenters at the meeting echoed Butterfield, reporting on the educational inequities in rural areas (lower rates of literacy, poorly equipped schools, etc.), the need for more opportunities for rural recreation and leisure, disparities in health and sanitation between cities and country, and so on. They denied that urban problems were more complex than rural problems and that their solutions were obvious.

In rural sociology textbooks, too, authors found it necessary to address the belief that rural society was simple and without problems. Vogt wrote,

But someone may say that, after all, the problems of living in the country are relatively simple; that the country has traditionally been the ideal place in which to live; that it is the city and not the country which is the real American problem. In answer to this contention, which sometimes finds expression, we may reply that as a matter of fact, the
country is by common consent not the best place to live, that the problems of the open country are in many ways more difficult of solution than are those of the city; and that the close relation of the country to the city demands an understanding of the problems there for the sake of the city as well as of the country...It has also been said that the problems of the country are solving themselves; that consequently it is not necessary to study them, as adjustment is coming rapidly and is bound to come whether concerted effort is made to that end or not. It is true that some problems are solving themselves; but it is not true that they are all solving themselves; nor is it true that present conditions and tendencies in the open country can safely be allowed to go uncontrolled. They demand very definite understanding and concerted social action (Vogt 1917:9).

In short, the “country is not self-sufficing and inherently able to progress without conscious social effort” (Vogt 1917:1-2).

Because rural sociology rejected the view that rural life was unproblematic and simple, because it did not hold urban assumptions about the rural as primitive and prior, it could combine modern techniques with rural life without contradiction. It could use the lessons of social science to build leadership and improve the quality of rural life. It could study the farm and village as social laboratory. This move, however, again set rural sociology at odds with sociology.

Occasionally, rural sociologists took on the evolutionary assumptions of sociology and policymakers. At the 1916 ASA meeting, G. Walter Fiske of the Oberlin Graduate School of Theology decried the popular opinion that saw the country as a training ground for professionals who would later move up to the city. “Too often,” he complained, “the country is merely the colt’s pasture for the young minister, teacher, doctor, lawyer, journalist, etc. The goal is the city when apprenticeship is over.” This perspective, he worried, was ideal for neither city nor country, which both required unique and separate training: “For any sort of city social service the best place to do clinical work is in the city itself, or time is wasted. And the obverse is equally true” (Fiske 1917:63). The premise that rural appointments could serve as training for urban service, like the idea of the city as laboratory, must have rested on the assumption that rural
settings were more natural, easier to understand, and less advanced or complex than urban settings.

But if rural life was not a natural, primitive precursor to urban civilization, how had it come about? How could rural life be explained as a modern phenomenon? Rural sociology posited that urban and rural worlds were interconnected, even co-constituted: urbanization had, as its necessary counterpart, created rural space. Urban and rural were defined as complements, opposites which, taken together, formed the whole of human settlement (see Hoffsommer 1960:176). “Human society,” Vogt observed, “is, so far as the modern world is concerned, a unity, and...an understanding of rural problems is not only necessary for the sake of the country community but is also necessary as a basis for the explanation of many urban social problems” (Vogt 1917:1).

This view rejected the assumption that rural and urban were connected only by the diachronic string of historic evolution. Instead, rural sociology recognized the necessary interdependence of city and country, their mutual co-constitution as two moments of modern society. Rural and urban life were connected by railroad ties, migration streams, commodity flows, and growing markets. Farmers increasingly produced agricultural goods for urban consumption, using machines built in cities. The very rhythms of rural life were urban rhythms to the extent that they were dictated by agricultural production and railroad schedules. Likewise, cities grew from an influx of rural migrants, urban fortunes were built on the trade and distribution of agricultural commodities and gambled on the futures market. The economic interdependence of rural and urban tied them together but at the same time pushed them apart as rural areas required larger areas of open fields for large-scale farming. At the 1916 ASA meeting, Wilson (1917:15) observed, “the consideration of growth and progress discovers
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sources of change for the city to be in the country, and sources of rural progress in the city.” It was not, in Wilson’s view, that rural life evolved into urban; quite the contrary. Urban life organized rural life; it directed the rhythm of work, the ends of production, the objectives of agricultural education. It was not tradition, but the demands of the urban market that drove farmers to wake before down, milk the cows twice a day, and so on. It was modern scientific agricultural training that, in fact, created a distinct rural life (Wilson 1917:14-19). In a 1929 article for \textit{Rural America}, Galpin’s description of farm production revealed that supposedly fundamental rural character traits, like thrift and hard work, were inseparable from urban/rural trade dynamics: obsessed with increasing production for market, farmers would pour surplus back into productive capital, without diverting any to consumption in order to increase their “means of living better” (Galpin 1929:6). None of these observations was unique. Hoffsommer’s (1960:177) content analysis of \textit{Rural Sociology} articles published between 1936 and 1956 found that, of 478 major articles, 124 (roughly 25 percent) “had some concern with rural-urban relationships.” However distinct city and country life might be, they were contemporary, both modern ways of living. Rural—just like urban—was a product of modernity.

Rural sociology, to its early practitioners, was a modern science with a modern subject. Its study would improve both rural and urban elements in modern society. Speaking at the 1920 meeting of the American Country Life Association, Newell Sims argued that

Rural sociology in simple form needs to be taught in the grade schools…Both urban and rural students should be given some definite knowledge of rural-life problems and the work of rural organizations. … Rural sociology cannot confine itself to the study of organizations that inhabit the open country. It is concerned also with organizations that are village or city in character, so far as such organizations bring their influence into the country and operate in the environment of the farmer. It is important, therefore, that a student have at least an elementary knowledge of the principles of urban organization, and that he see the organization experiences of country people as they really are in actual life rather than as they would be were the farmer an isolated class, influenced only by local organizations (Sims 1920:150).
Yet while recognizing the interdependence of rural and urban, rural sociologists rejected their equation. Rural did not evolve into urban, and rural development’s goal should not be urbanization. Common in rural sociology texts was the idea that rural reform was meant not to bring rural areas into line with urban areas or to urbanize them, but to create a separate, independent, unique and permanent “rural civilization” alongside urban civilization—that rural life could progress and evolve but toward a different end. Vogt concludes his preface: “It is my hope that the text may lead to a much wider research into rural problems in all parts of the country and that the full understanding of the conditions and forces of rural life necessary to bring about and maintain the fullest, richest rural civilization may results” (Vogt 1917:viii).

“Under these conditions,” wrote Vogt, “it is also evident that if the country is to be more than a sort of undesirable appendix to an urban civilization, gauged by urban materialistic standards, it must boldly set about establishing true standards of living adapted to itself, and trust to contribute to civilization by resisting the modern tendency to measure all conduct by its result in wealth production. ” (1917:4). Butterfield told attendees at the 1920 ACLA conference that they must work toward building a “permanent rural community” (Butterfield 1920:6).

But as the complement of urban, which had been defined by sociology as an identity with modern, rural seemed necessarily not modern. What, then, could it mean to build a permanent rural community in a modernizing world? From the perspective of sociology, rural sociology seemed incomprehensible and irrelevant—the study of a natural social form that was, in any case, a remnant of the past. Rural sociology was, in essence, a science without a scientific object—either because rural life demanded no science in order to be understood, or because it was a disappearing social form.
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Rural sociology, then, was not an offshoot of sociology. Its fundamental assumptions and mission were incompatible with central tenets of early sociology. Rather, rural sociology sprouted from the fertile soils of rural reform and the Country Life movement and from agricultural economics and the agricultural sciences. Galpin, regarded as a founding father of rural sociology for the instrumental role he played in channeling early USDA funds toward rural sociology research, (1938:36) traces his intellectual lineage to agricultural economics rather than sociology, having been introduced to the study of rural life by his friend and colleague, the agricultural economist H.C. Taylor. Or consider, for example, the biography of Dwight Sanderson, remembered as the 31st president of the American Sociological Association. Sanderson’s path to sociology ran through the agricultural sciences and rural reform: after receiving his B.S. in agriculture from Cornell, Sanderson spent two decades researching, teaching, and publishing in the fields of entomology and zoology, serving, in 1910, as president of the American Association of Economic Entomologists. Then, in 1916, following a stint as dean of the College of Agriculture and director of the Agricultural Experiment Station in West Virginia, Sanderson accepted a fellowship in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, and from there to Cornell where he became professor of rural sociology. He served as president of the American Country Life Association in 1938 and, in the same year, as the inaugural president of the newly formed Rural Sociological Society. Later, in 1944, he was elected president of the American Sociological Society. Thus, from his original training in the agricultural sciences and his passion for rural reform, Sanderson redirected his scientific training and rural interests to a career in rural sociology, gaining prominence also in the general field of sociology (Odum 1951:201-204).
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Like Sanderson, rural sociology grew from its roots in agricultural economics and rural reform movements, then briefly converged with sociology in the 1920s and 1930s. The overlapping institutional affiliations of the founding members of the RSS mirror Sanderson’s. Of the 296 RSS members in 1938 (the first year for which membership was reported), over one-third were students or faculty in agricultural colleges (Rural Sociological Society 1938). Among the 112 members of the American Country Life Association’s Board of Directors who served between 1920 and 1950, 15 were also founding members of the RSS (Wunderlich 2003). And there was also overlap with the ASA. Among the founding members of the RSS, 63 had been ASA members ten years earlier.

While it is difficult to trace the numbers of rural sociologists in ASA before 1938 (since it is difficult to define a member of the field without reference to any membership list), it is worth noting that, among founding members of the RSS, none had been members of ASA at its founding in 1906, and just 21 could claim membership in 1918, when agitation for a rural sociology section was getting underway (American Sociological 1906; American Sociological 1918). The formation of the rural sociology section signaled an institutional convergence of rural sociology with general sociology, but that institutional convergence was incomplete and short-lived, as rural sociologists split from ASA and found a home in the land grant complex. (By 1938, among the founding members of the RSS, veteran sociologists were outnumbered roughly two-to-one by members affiliated with agricultural colleges, although the two groups are not mutually exclusive.) But that split, with precedents that predate federal funding, cannot be explained by a purely institutional history. Instead, we must turn to the foundational ontological assumptions about rural and urban society that underlay early rural sociology and sociology. I
propose that competing ontological assumptions were not adequately reconciled during the convergence of rural sociology and sociology, precipitating institutional separation.

**Ontological Divergence**

The problem, then, becomes one of understanding the development of ontological divergence. How could such seemingly similar disciplines have been premised on such divergent assumptions? Why should the evolutionary perspective have won out among sociologists, and why was the rural sociologists’ vision of synchrony, of the modern origins of both rural and urban, relegated to the sidelines?

The former question is simpler than the latter. Certainly early rural sociologists had a deeply familiar understanding of the modern rural, cultivated during childhoods spent on farms and adulthoods spent thinking and doing rural reform. Gilbert (2000) recognizes how, for many rural sociologists in government, their agrarian perspectives and research priorities were shaped by social background, upbringing, and education. Or, as Gillette (1917:9) put it, “Investigators of the different sciences often handle the same objects and matter. But since they have different interests to serve they gain different ideas from considering the same thing and build distinct systems of knowledge as a consequence. A science is built on the foundation of a particular point of view.” One’s background, one’s point of view, influences the way in which one divides up the world—into rural and urban, country and city, ancient and modern. Rural sociology did not create or socially construct or even imagine rural society; it *saw* rural society, it observed a rural life that its practitioners were habituated to see.

Rural sociology was not alienated from sociology because of a prior, necessary, or inevitable alliance with government, but because of a historical contingency and the complex
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conjuncture of a variety of conditions—as Wirth put it, “a regrettable historical accident” (1964 [1956]:221). Rural sociology’s estrangement from sociology was preconditioned by their divergent ontologies, deep divides over not only how the social world should be studied, but what the social world was in the first place. Rural sociologists developed a thought collective premised on the collective recognition of certain scientific objects: a present, modern rural society, subject to change and progress, distinct from the city but inseparably connected to it. But this definition was at odds with that adopted by general sociology. In a discipline that took the city as laboratory and the country as natural, prior, and primitive, rural sociology seemed irrelevant and incomprehensible.

Yet claims about rural sociology’s irrelevance beg the question: How did the sociologist’s evolutionary perspective win out? Why didn’t sociology adopt a synchronous view of modern urban and rural society? Why, in the end, did rural sociologists themselves come to question the legitimacy of their discipline for understanding modern life?

Although institutional factors cannot fully explain the origins of rural sociology, they go a long way toward explaining the rise of the evolutionary perspective’s ontological hegemony. Intellectual divisions preceded institutional division. But the timing of the Rural Sociological Society’s split from ASA is vital to understanding the growing separation between the two disciplines and the eventual triumph of the evolutionary perspective. Just after the associations split, an enormous influx of federal money—from New Deal programs and World War II—flowed into rural sociological research, entrenching institutional paths that had been laid just recently, during the 1920s. Going forward, these institutional paths would play a decisive role in shaping the further development of rural sociology. C. Arnold Anderson (1959) would later observe that, despite boosts in output and training of personnel, rural sociology received state
support at the cost of “administrative and cultural restrictions that have hampered professional development of the field.” Yet it was not only institutional inertia at work. Anderson continued, “There are several features of rural sociology,” he explained, “that must mystify an outsider until he understands the recruitment of the men in the field….Normally the applicant is expected to have a ‘rural background,’ for it is assumed that he cannot otherwise understand rural people.” In other words, rural sociology continued to draw on a body of individuals whose backgrounds and upbringings suggested they had been habituated in the observation of a particular outline of rural society. Not only institutional affiliation, but the thought collective itself, exercised inertial pressures on the recruitment of personnel and the development of rural sociology.

As the disciplines grew apart, they came to operate in different institutional spheres. Rural sociologist found alternative venues for publishing and funding; in effect, they exited the sociological discussion, creating two separate spheres. Though they continued to meet and interact with sociologists, they had defined a separate base and were absolved of the need to confront conflicting ontological assumptions. The growth of federal funding for rural sociology did not necessarily cause rural sociology to abandon or change its ontological position, but it did obviate the need for a strong defense. Secure in their role as federal advisors, New Deal-era rural sociologists no longer needed to make the case for the study of rural society; the need was taken for granted. It was only after the New Deal period that the taken-for-granted need for rural research would again come into question, prompting the ongoing sense of crisis within the discipline.

**Conclusion**

The early development of rural sociology offers a site in which we can observe the working out of emerging contradictions and tensions inherent to modernity. From the perspective
of general sociology, rural sociologists’ impulse to promote scientific progress and planning appeared to compete with a simultaneous impulse to preserve traditional aspects of rural society. But rural sociology, operating from a different point of view, reconciled this apparent tension by outlining a different understanding of rural and urban, one in which progress was not anathema to preservation of rural society, in which rural was as necessarily modern as urban, to which it was inextricably linked.

General sociology, complicit with the enactment of modernity, embraced a diachronically defined rural/urban dichotomy, one which set aside the rural as primitive, as irrelevant, even as unreal so far as modernity was concerned. Modern social science defined modern urban life in juxtaposition to a naturally evolved, fully integrated, unproblematic rural past. In the end, under modernity, rural sociology became, like rural society, a remnant. In the working out of ideas, the furnishing of the objective world, rural sociology’s alternative viewpoint was relegated to an institutional position that resigned it to irrelevance.

Yet early rural sociology’s understanding of the rural/urban divide has an intriguing and compelling synergy with more recently developed theories. Variably labeled post-modern or post-materialist, new theories of rural and urban spaces suggest the two are, as rural sociology had supposed, both deeply integrated and co-constituted, created synchronically in each other’s presence. Castells and the new urbanists, Wallerstein and the world systems theorists, all return to the idea of the simultaneous creation of rural and urban spaces. Merrington (1976:195), for instance, observes that “the dualistic tendency to separate urban progress and rural backwardness, seen as a relic of the past, must be set against the fact that ‘urbanization’ and ‘ruralization’ are opposite sides of the same process of the capitalist division of labor.” Cronon, in *Nature’s Metropolis* (1991:18), reflects that “The journey that carried so many travelers into
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the city also carried them out again, and in that exchange of things urban for things rural lies a deeper truth about the country and the city. The two can exist only in each other's presence. Their isolation is an illusion, for the world of civilized humanity is very nearly created in the continuing moment of their encounter. They need each other, just as they need the larger natural world which sustains them both.” Gilbert (1982) encourages rural sociologists to adopt these “new” insights into their own discipline, but rural sociologists need only return to their own discipline’s past. Hoffsomer’s (1960:196) call to “transfer the public image of the rural sociologist from the narrow concept of one who deals with rustic life to that of one whose concern is with the ongoing forces which integrate our total rural-urban society” shows not only how pervasive the urban point of view has become (“rustic life”), but also the extent to which the original ontology of rural sociology has been forgotten, only to be rediscovered by the study of the city, sociology’s laboratory.

Recognizing this past calls for, as we so often hear, a more reflexive sociology. Formed in the crucible of the industrialization and urbanization of the United States, American sociology itself was an enactment of modernity, one that was born of and in turn perpetuated the modernist habit of thought that defined urban in diachronic juxtaposition to rural, one that blinded the discipline to recognizing the mutability of rural society, the potential for productive scientific study and progress in rural life. Science is not only a product of history, but actively produces history.
REFERENCES


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TABLES

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Table 2. Institutions giving courses in rural sociology and rural life, 1930-36 and 1938.

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Table 2: Rural Surveys