PROCESS AND TRANSITION IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS RURAL SOCIETY*

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I—INTRODUCTION

That the history of rural America can be interpreted as the change from homogeneous, self-sufficient communities to heterogeneous interrelated "rurban" areas is now a fairly common view in rural sociology. Less frequent, however, is the utilization of certain aspects of this historical change as documentation for a general theory of social and culture change. Adherents of this theoretical position view human society as expressed within two major ideal types or tendencies of social action, culture, and mentality. These "types" have been variously termed *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft,* sacred-secular, folk-urban,[1] and many others. It is important to remember that these terms refer not to actual, empirical societies, but to *ideal types* of society, used both as polar standards to define a range of variability within which existing social units may lie, and also to develop hypotheses about the interrelations of social and cultural forms within the ideal-type categories. The advantages of using this theoretical framework lie in the fact that it provides a common terminology and a common set of basic problems. Thus communities as diverse as a Kentucky mountain community, a New Mexico desert town, a West African native village, and an "acculturated" American Indian society can be analyzed from the standpoint of various problems developed from the theoretical sacred-secular change.

We do not imply, of course, that the American rural change is identical with all changed folk cultures throughout the world. Although the same fundamental questions can be asked for all, the specific research problems naturally vary. In rural American culture, the particularly crucial problem is concerned with the varying types of "urbanization" of the countryside. While it is recognized that by and large urbanization follows similar broad patterns everywhere, its operation in each region, area, and community may significantly vary - significantly from the standpoint of interpreting the causal background of socio-cultural change. Furthermore, we are interested in constructing major types of "urbanization", which can be used

* This paper is based on the results of several field studies in two counties bordering the Ohio River in southern Illinois. Mr. Herbert Passin initiated this research and directed it in the field. Sponsorship of the studies lay with the University of Chicago, Social Science Research Council, and U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Extension Division. All conclusions are made on the basis of the field work done in 1939-1941. The war will have introduced important modifications in the general culture-change situation.

[1] *Vide* R. Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan,* University of Chicago Press, 1941.

for our theoretical problems in the sacred-secular context.

II.—CULTURE AREAS

The human ecology of the counties bordering the Ohio River in southern Illinois includes exceedingly diverse elements, varying from shanty-boat dwellers on the river to German-American farmers in the hills. It is possible to distinguish two kinds of cultural groupings (excluding the larger towns) in this area: 1. Small communities with a relatively high degree of correlation between legally-defined boundaries. The crossroads village of Stringtown[2] is typical. 2. "Neighborhood" areas of variable extent, with patterns of intercommunication and ecological determinants[3] giving them cultural if not legal unity. A riverbottoms area along the Ohio is such a neighborhood; even though it is populated by unrelated mobile families, who must depend on the towns for all services (save for a school), the area has a distinct pattern of social interaction which separates it clearly from other neighborhoods.

In the past, the region possessed two major cultural patterns, the German and Old American. The subareas in the second category possessed a uniform culture and socio-economic background: similar agricultural techniques, a general pattern of collective action, mutual aid, strong church and family authority, self-subsistence. Moreover, the social structure of each of the Old American areas was essentially similar. In the past, therefore, the basis for sub-areal division as far as the Old American areas are concerned, was primarily geographical; whereas at the present, the areal differentiation is a matter of varying cultures and social structures.

The broad view of social change in this region consists in recognizing the transition from a relatively homogeneous culture and economy to one which still possesses regional unity, but which contains within its borders communities and subareas with specialized cultures, societies, and patterns of social change.

The region studied comprises about one-half of each of two counties, the socio-cultural area thus not conforming to the political boundaries save only in certain formal aspects. This region constitutes on a large scale a relatively unified "community" or culture area. Such unity can be seen in terms of the following: (a) Residents of the region recognize it as "our country"; their definition of the outside world includes everything beyond the borders of this region. (b) The region is *relatively* self-sufficient, containing major facilities for economic and personal service. (c) Within the confines of the region, the incidence of social interaction is higher than it is with any part of the region and the outside areas.[4]

Finally, the region as a socio-cultural area can be broadly characterized by certain types of socio-economic organization and cultural forms. We may summarize these as follows.

(1) Agriculture is based upon a division between the upland and the river-bottoms. The latter constitutes a virtually inexhaustible source of rich soil, while the hills soil is becoming extremely infertile. Thus a major portion of farm operators in

[2] *Vide* H. Passin, "Culture Change in Southern Illinois", *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1942.
[3] *Cf.* E. T. Hiller, "Houseboard & River-Bottoms People", *Ill. Studies in the Social Sciences*, XXIV, No. 1, 1939.
[4] With the usual exceptions, of course, in the form of individual families who may be related to families in adjoining regions and towns. But these are in the minority.

the hills must rent fields in the bottoms to make sufficient money. This brings hill people into interaction with bottoms-dwellers, and frequently results in hills families moving into the bottoms. In the course of time, this dependence of the hills on the bottoms has become increasingly important.

(2) Other hills areas, particularly the German-American farmers, do not depend on bottomland for cash crops, but participate in mutual-aid neighborhoods with other hills people who do depend on the bottoms, and also trade in the same villages and towns as do bottoms and other hills people.

These and other modes of interaction within this region have led to broad and general similarities in the culture pattern, such as agricultural techniques and equipment, religious beliefs, family types, and so on.

In addition to the relative unity of this regional culture at the contemporary period, it is possible to discover certain patterns of change which characterize the whole. Although each sub-culture in the region has felt the effects of urbanization and secularization differently, in the regional view these differences can be ignored for wide-scale descriptive purposes. It is possible to describe the region as being relatively heterogeneous, urbanized, socially-differentiated, and dependent upon services extended by the larger urban centers of the general region. Formerly a "backwoods" district in southern Illinois, typified by independent, relatively isolated subsistence farms, the area is now economically tied to the wider cash crop agricultural market. Inequalities in land holdings and soil efficiency prevail, with correlated social class and status differences.

Our problems, therefore, are set by the following conditions. On the one hand we can recognize a region which can be generally described as uniformly urbanized and socio-economically changed, and on the other we can distinguish sub-cultural units within this region which have their own distinctive patterns of change and degree of urbanization. Because of individual cultural and social differences the units have responded differently to the regional processes of change; a proper understanding of these processes must include the recognition that the regional picture is not a simple sum of the parts, but a complex expression of social interaction and historical relations.

Obviously we cannot ask all the questions relevant to such a view, since the problems are too comprehensive in scope. We shall merely describe briefly the type of change in each of the important sub-cultures of the region, and attempt to point out some of the more important conclusions to be drawn.

III—CULTURAL CHANGES

Culture Change in Stringtown.—Stringtown, as one of the two small villages in the region, is a "community" with more or less formal legal and social definitions. It has been a permanent settlement for a group of families for 90 years, and has been a trading center for people of other sub-areas almost as long. The relative unity of the social group and the persistence within it of family lives and cultural forms have determined in many respects the character of urbanization and heterogenization of the present time.

The key factor in Stringtown culture change was the growth of moonshining during the Prohibition era. Previous to this time, the community had resisted economic and cultural

secular influences with greater success than some other sub-areas, because of a series of factors all more or less traceable to the distinct social and economic unity of the village.

The results of liquor-making can be summarized:

1) Removal of a large proportion of Stringtown families from an agricultural economy.

2) Sudden increase in available cash, and associated random, uncontrolled spending on "urban luxuries".

3) Intensive use of automobiles.

4) Familial ruptures over the question of morality of liquor-making, and subsequent breakdown of family solidarity and authority. Growth of immorality of all kinds.

5) Breakdown of the authoritarian moral guidance of the church.

The list could be indefinitely extended. The essential point is that moonshining embodied all the essential secular tendencies in the economic, social and cultural spheres leading toward social differentiation and cultural heterogeneity—and all these tendencies became operative in the short space of one decade.

The effects of this sudden impact of secularism were as follows:

1) Local social controls were profoundly disturbed on the familial and community levels. "The community as a whole is not a well-integrated unit commanding the loyalties of the villagers".[5]

2) Removal of a large majority of villagers from a farming economy introduced acute economic insecurity and caused the growth of a class of landless families.

3) This group constitutes a "lower-class" element, as contrasted to the "upper class" group of farmers. The landless group is divided into various marginal occupations: WPA, relief, small sharecropping and itinerant labor. Status lines are not clearly fixed within and between these occupations.

4) A widening division between the young people, who grew up in the intensely urban-oriented 1920's, and the older inhabitants, who still cling to the older values and practices, wherever possible. Status distinctions, though indistinct, tend to follow this age-differential. An older, traditionally-oriented person will participate within a different status hierarchy than will a younger, urbanized individual. The relation of such alignments to the socio-economic two-class division is as yet in a fluid condition.

5) Whereas in the "old days" Stringtown was virtually self-sufficient within its ecological area, having all the services (stores, etc.) required for the period, today its people are increasingly dependent on the services of the larger towns and are unable to find resources in the old community which satisfy and support them.

Social Differentiation in the Bottoms.—In contrast to Stringtown, where a stable well-knit social structure resisted change more or less successfully until a sudden powerful impact destroyed the homogeneity once and for all, the Bottoms began its transition at an early period and gradually developed a differentiated mobile social system which is adapted to the problems and tensions of a changing culture.

The bottomland area south and southeast of Stringtown was the last area of the total region to be settled by white farmers, since the necessity of clearing heavy vegetation and the

[5] Passin, *op. cit.*, pg. 314.

fear of floods defeated earlier attempts. The soil was found to be immensely fertile and settlement was rapid. Although small subsistence farms were the rule in the beginning, most (and eventually all) of the land soon came under the ownership of a few landlords, who rented their property for cash. In a relatively short time this system gave way to a tenancy-sharecropping arrangement, which exists at the present time.

As the land itself fell into fewer and fewer hands, the introduction of agricultural machinery permitted fewer and fewer operators to farm a given tract. Thus most of the small renters and other Bottoms inhabitants gradually became a mobile farm labor group, or became part-time fishermen. Shantyboat people from the river, no longer able to make a living from fishing, camped semi-permanently on the riverbank. In recent times, the introduction of WPA created an additional economic grouping.

These long-standing socio-economic groups—tenant, sharecropper, farm laborer-riverbank squatter, fisherman—have in the course of time developed into a ranked status system, with the super- to subordinate order roughly as above. WPA has been distributed between the sharecropper-farm laborer groups. Mobility of families and economic insecurity have prevented a "settled" society, *a la* Stringtown; nevertheless Bottoms dwellers possess considerable solidarity and a consciousness of the great difference between their culture and the others of the region. Such attitudes also function as rationalization for their economic difficulties and as it often happens, their failure as farmers in other areas.

The more mobile Bottoms people, particularly the riverbank-farm laborer element, have generally had considerable contact with the larger regional towns, either as laborers or in weekly trips for purchasing food. Such contacts have introduced a wide variety of random, dissociated urban traits: comic books, wieners, "pop", and the like. The more far-reaching effects of such contacts and mobility can be seen in the disoriented, secularized attitudes and behavior of these Bottoms residents.

The important facts to remember in the case of the Bottoms are:

1) Economic changes, operating through land-tenure, were operative in the Bottoms long before they were apparent in other sub-areas, even though the Bottoms were settled last.

2) Familial mobility and insecurity have prevented the growth of an inter-related, integrated "community". Nevertheless solidarity exists.

3) Adjustment of drastic socio-economic change to the values of the regional equalitarian, individualist culture has been a ranked status system, which is characterized by aspiration toward the tenant-farm level. Such a system permits the individual to believe he can "work himself up" from riverbank to tenancy (actually he cannot for many reasons); thus it functions as a rationalization of extreme social differentiation. The Bottoms, by a process of long adjustment, has perhaps accomodated to change more efficiently than Stringtown, where everything, so to speak, went at once.

Culture Change in the Hills.[6]—

[6] For materials on the Hills we are particularly indebted to Lt. H. L. Smith, U.S.A., who specialized in this area while in the field.

The hills north of the Bottoms have three principal sub-areas.[7]

1) *The Northeast Hills* is an area closely related to the eastern Bottoms, since most of the sharecroppers and tenants of the latter come from the former. This sub-area is characterized by small subsistence farms located on hilly loess soil, badly eroded and never properly farmed. Most of these farms are marginal or sub-marginal, on relief or FSA. Many have been abandoned. The principal pattern of change in this subarea has been as follows:

Since the hilly, rugged northeastern subarea was least desirable in the eyes of the incoming Southern settlers, it was occupied by only the most mobile and least educated families. Extremely exploitative farming techniques permitted an adequate living for many years, but eventually erosion and soil exhaustion took their toll. The various farm relief devices of the present period have indirectly served to convert most of these former self-supporting small farmers into a rural proletariat living on a strictly cash basis, but who still reside on the crumbling properties. Most of the farms are no longer adequate for subsistence, let alone cash crops.

2) The rolling, but fertile *Upper Hills* is the most "successful" of all the Old American regional areas in that it has been affected least by change from an economic standpoint, and has maintained its traditional culture to a large extent. The "best" families settled here, practiced reasonably careful agriculture, and established large families. Geographical isolation rendered contact with the towns and cities infrequent.

At the present, isolation is still important, although the children attend high school in a regional large town, and are inclined to leave the old homesteads in increasing (though still small) numbers. The war has accentuated this trend, of course. Crops are still good, and permit a secure living, although not as abundant as in the past. The culture as a whole has not broken up: young and old go to church; family and religious authority is strong; many old customs, such as the "shivaree", persist here and in no other subarea. The Upper Hills was able to take over a cash-crop agricultural system, adapting itself to the changed economic relations but preserving the essential features of the old folk culture. The Upper Hills and the Bottoms, despite profound cultural and economic content differences, have some processual similarity in that change is occurring (in the Hills) gradually and is accomodated by a realignment in the social structure. A ranked status system is developing in the Hills, based largely on traditional vs. urban oriented families, while in the Bottoms the status heirarchy was principally a matter of socio-economic differentiation. The structural adjustments are similar but the content varies. A Stringtown-type dual status system is apparent, also, though very much undeveloped, since the old culture is still powerful.

3) The *German Hills* is spacially interspersed and socially interactive with the Upper Hills. This broad area includes the finest farms of the region and by and large, the most stable, successful families—superseding in these respects any of the Old American areas. These German farmers are of both Pennsylvania Dutch and Old Country descent, and began entering the region as early as 1858. They have retained to an extraordinarily great extent the frugal, care-

[7] A fourth, the Lower Hills, will for this brief paper be considered as an extension of Stringtown; in a sense, the most stable, landed element.

ful and efficient agricultural economy of their places of origin.

Culture change in the German Hills has proceeded in two directions: (a) Economic change from a largely self-subsistence economy to a cash crop basis. In this regard, the German Hills stands about equal to the Upper Hills in respect to amount of influence such a change has had. It is not as great as in the Bottoms or Stringtown. (b) The alteration of the old German culture towards the Old American (Upper Hills) pattern.

The latter change has been gradual and subject to resistance on the part of the Germans, but the process has gone on. The language is now spoken by only a few oldest inhabitants; the characteristic old German foods—sausages, cheeses, *et. al.*—are now of no great importance in the whole diet. The acculturation process is accompanied by noticeable tension and some anxiety in the form of an attempt by German farmers (and their wives) to conceal from an observer any prominent vestiges of the old culture.[8] A status system (not clear-cut) has been developing along the familiar old-young lines, differing from Stringtown in that the explicit age factor is not as pronounced, the underlying American-oriented — German-oriented hiatus being more apparent. As time goes on, however, the youthful individuals will tend more and more to represent the American-oriented group.

In both the Upper and German Hills there is a developing relationship with residents of one of the larger towns of the region, *via* sons' and daughters' marriages with townspeople. This factor is introducing and integrating many urban tendencies particularly in the area of food habits, child raising, and reading. Such changes should be contrasted to the superficial, uncoordinated, urban-luxury desires of many of the mobile, acculturated, low status people in the Bottoms, and former moonshiners in Stringtown.

The Negro Communities. — Two Negro neighborhoods lie in the area on the northern margin of the Bottoms. One is as old as any of the Old American subareas, being populated primarily by families forced out of the Bottoms by whites many years ago. The people of this older area are the most traditionally-oriented, possessing much of the old Negro culture: superstition, magic, midwivery, etc. The newer neighborhood is the most urbanized of the two, and the most economically debased. Many of the older neighborhood's families have enough land to raise gardens; very few of the younger area's families have such land. WPA and relief literally kept Negro families alive (particularly in the newer area) during the period of field study.

Culture change in these Negro neighborhoods has consisted of the almost complete loss of land and progressive breakdown of the old self-subsistence structure until it no longer exists. This is more extreme than in any of the white areas. Along with this change went the breakdown of much of the traditional culture and extended family system. Since, however, the regional status of the Negroes relegates them to a caste-like position, the internal results of change have been quite different from the white areas. Such cultural elements as the church have been strengthened and intensified in the face of disintegration, as an attempt to preserve the sense of au-

[8] The war is doubtless the major factor in this attitude. It is a common phenomenon in German-American groups in the Midwest, and may be also in other parts of the country.

tonomy and distinctness which the Negroes still possess, and also to provide a central rallying-point for people and culture. There is a general analogy between this phenomenon and "revivalism" in American Indian cultures.

A status system is also apparent, although not clear-cut, and apparently old: The descendants of the old landowning Negro families are superordinate; the younger, disorganized families, generally on relief, are subordinate. The WPA segment may have been (in 1941) showing tendencies to merge into the *regional* WPA low-status rank, along with the whites.

IV.—SUMMARY

We may summarize the materials on culture change in these various socio-cultural areas of the region.

First, it is evident that each of the areas briefly discussed has experienced a change from a relatively independent, self-subsistent, homogeneous society-culture to a relatively dependent, differentiated type. Such changes in the economic, social and cultural spheres are to be attributed to the large-scale influence of the increasingly centralized, pecuniary, complex American economic system, and the accompanying social readjustments. Regionally these sub-cultures are no longer independent units, but relatively specialized, inter-dependent areas within a wider "town-country" network of interrelations.

On the one hand, homogeneity within the sub-cultures has given way to heterogeneity in varying degrees; on the other, the region has become more inter-dependent from an economic standpoint, since Hills people depend on the Bottoms for cash crops, and services are now supplied by stores in nearby towns. Thus in the cultural and social structural context, the region is less well organized than in the past; from the economic (and to a certain degree, the socio-economic) standpoint, the region is more highly organized.[9] This is more than a simple-to-complex, folk-to-urban change, but the development of a new type of socio-economic structure which might be called *transitional*, since it more or less successfully places the folk and the urban in some form of concordant framework.

In each of the areas examined, this transitional structure has taken different forms, according to the specific culture-historical background and socio-economic conditions. In Stringtown, the recent impact of change has been scarcely accomodated, but the development of a dual status system based on the traditional-urban orientation division, and stratified by socio-economic class, is now in process. In the Bottoms, the traditional-urban hiatus is lacking, since *all* Bottoms dwellers are relatively mobile, acculturated individuals. But socio-economic groupings have been converted into a systematic rank-order status system, which adapts the changed conditions to the generally accepted individualistic-competitive values of the older pattern. Among the Negroes, disorganization is partially controlled by an intensification of certain institutional features, particularly the church and religion, which is a result of the added complication of caste-status.[10]

In the Northeast Hills, it would appear that the problem is unre-

[9] It should be remembered, of course, that each sub-culture should be regarded as a problem in itself. In certain contexts, individual sub-cultures might not bear out this generalization. But seen as a whole, each sub-area fits into this kind of regional process.

[10] *Cf.* E. C. Hughes, *French Canada in Transition*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1943, for an analysis of the relativity of status in terms of ethnic (French & English) divisions.

solved. The culture and economy is broken; residents are migrating.[11] In the Upper Hills, the older culture is powerful enough to command respect and authority, although movement of the children away from the area is occurring. A Stringtown-type dual status system is arising. In the German Hills, adjustment takes place as the German families approach an acculturated norm in which the culture is composite Old American-German, and social and economic interaction occurs with Upper Hills farmers. In the province of direct urban influence, the firm integration of urbanisms *via* relatives in the Hills must be contrasted with the random urbanisms of the Bottoms and Stringtown.

From these brief conclusions, it would appear that the concept of "urbanization" is indeed a complex one, and must be explored both in the broad processual sense and in specific change-situations. For different problems, different views of the concept are necessary. If interested in prediction of culture change, a general typology of transitional societies and processes must be erected. If interested in practical endeavors, such as modification of food habits or farming techniques, we must distinguish carefully between socio-economic forces operating on a regional basis, and those (plus cultural differences) in operation on the sub-areal level.

Thus if we wished to alter food habits for the region, we could first consult materials concerning regional problems of supply, general sales trends, and the like. But each of the sub-areas would have to be considered in terms of the distinctive integration of food habits in the varying conditions of culture change,[12] such as status and prestige in the Bottoms, acculturation and prestige in the Hills, urban tastes in Stringtown, and so on. The consideration of such factors would have to be integrated within a regional modificatory program based on such factors as economic and transportation requirements.

Underlying such considerations are more fundamental theoretical questions regarding the delimitation of areas of social interaction, social status, and particularly the contribution of a "sub-culture" to the regional culture area of which it is a part. Questions in these fields can be answered only by co-ordinated research both in the field and on available published studies. The important requirement is the systematic formulation of problems.

[11] This conclusion is tentative and subject to revision. If FSA continues to function, the situation may persist indefinitely.

[12] *Vide*, J. W. Bennett, H. L. Smith, H. Passin, "Food and Culture in Southern Illinois", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. VII, No. 5, 1942.