
AMERICA'S HEARTLAND: A CASE FOR SOCIAL RESILIENCE?

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Abstract

Much has been written in recent years about the decline, problems, distinctive traditions, and political conservatism of small rural "heartland" communities. I discuss the important place that rural communities occupied in the development of modern sociological theories, the focus of recent empirical studies of these communities, and the arguments that have been advanced about population decline and the stultifying effects of closed social networks. I then describe evidence that supports arguments about social resilience in small rural communities, including recent demographic figures about population stability, data on social capital and open networks, and qualitative information about small-town values and lifestyles.

Introduction

Heartland is a nonspecific term used more commonly in the media and in literature than in social science. Unlike homeland, which has been used to designate the entire United States since the attacks on September 11, 2001, heartland connotes an ill-defined part of the nation, a central geographic region in which traditional values prevail. In blogs and newspapers, the heartland is typically the Midwest, small towns, and places distant in space and time

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from large cities and centers of recent immigration or technological innovation. Although the heartland in these accounts is a place in which something wholesome and somehow genuinely American is found—"the real America," as political candidates sometimes argue—it is also associated with the past and decline more than with the future and growth.

Imagining the heartland as a Venn diagram where the closest meaning occurs at the intersection of three overlapping circles provides a more precise definition of the term. The first circle refers to the part of the nation that lives in rural areas, which included 19 percent of the US population in 2010. The second circle refers to small towns with populations less than 25,000, of which there were approximately 15,000 in 2010 that were located outside of census-defined urban areas. The third circle refers to inland parts of the nation, which extend from West Virginia and Tennessee to Wyoming and Idaho, and from North and South Dakota to Oklahoma and Arkansas, and regions that exclude California and Florida, but include parts of Texas and Upstate New York. In recent presidential elections, a majority of inland states have voted Republican, which is one of the reasons that the term heartland is associated in media accounts with conservative politics and traditional values.

Heartland in this conception includes, but is not restricted to, topics that have been of central interest in rural sociology. In addition, the values, beliefs, and public connotations associated with the term are of particular interest among cultural and political sociologists. These cultural and political topics refer as much to particular constructions of space and time as they do to actual places and populations. Studies emphasizing these topics include investigations of where people think the heartland or particular regions such as the Midwest or "Middle West" are located (Shortridge 1989), analyses of local and regional subcultures in literature and music (Griswold and Wright 2004; Peterson 1999), and discussions of nostalgia, attachments to place, notions of home, and arguments about authenticity (Erickson 1995; Cameron and Gatewood 1994).

Although sociological interest sometimes focuses on regional geography, the more relevant analytical aspects of heartland in these terms are the relatively small size of populations involved in

considering the social and cultural dynamics of families, neighborhoods, and communities; the relative economic importance of agriculture, agribusiness, and extractive industries such as mining, oil, and gas compared with manufacturing, services, and the professions; and the effects of location, race and ethnicity, and cultural legacies that may combine to forge distinctive values, beliefs, and identities. From its inception, the sociological literature has dealt extensively with questions about these aspects of demography, economic structure, and culture, and in recent years has developed theoretically grounded arguments about social change in the communities and regions involved. At the same time, sociological interests are sufficiently concentrated on topics located in large urban places and presumed to be of greatest relevance there, such as urban neighborhoods, urban poverty, urban schools, urban segregation, and urban ethnicity and immigration. Therefore, examining topics outside of these places necessarily provides opportunities for interesting comparisons.

The classic theoretical formulations were so closely associated with observations about the shifts from agrarian to industrial society and from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* that tracing these arguments is tantamount to reviewing the entirety of the discipline's intellectual development. I will begin with a brief survey of several of the most formative of these ideas. Next I will discuss several perceptions of small-town and rural America that have been evident in the more recent theoretical literature. Then I will sort out the particular arguments that have emerged in the empirical literature about the decline of small, rural, tradition-minded communities. Those considerations then serve as the basis for examining each aspect of decline to determine whether there may also be indications of potential social resilience. I argue that although there are serious aspects of decline in many heartland communities, there are also important resources that can and do serve to bolster the resilience of some of these communities. In broader terms, my argument is not only about heartland resilience, but also about the need for sociologists to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions about social capital, demographic and economic change, and conservative politics.

Classical Formulations

Current perspectives on topics connoted by the heartland may be shaped by practical concerns and empirical observations, but it is difficult to imagine that classical theoretical formulations are not factors as well. The writers who founded the discipline during the latter half of the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth century were acutely aware of the social changes accompanying industrialization and urbanization. Many of their theoretical arguments were framed by personal experiences with these changes. They wrote about the enlarged scale of modern urban life, how social relations were different there than in small communities, and what the challenges were for understanding societal cohesion and inequality. When considering how sociology in the twenty-first century is shaped by globalization, immigration, racial and ethnic diversity, and information technology, it is beneficial to remember that the discipline's founders were similarly influenced by the significant social, demographic, and political changes of their day.

Durkheim's childhood in the small town of Épinal, France, and adult life in Paris is exemplary of the changes that many of his contemporaries experienced. His work repeatedly returns to the question of how large complex social settings differ from smaller ones. Mechanical solidarity assumes the presence of homogeneity and a lack of functional differentiation, whereas organic solidarity features a more complex division of labor. References to people and places can be more specific in the former than in the latter where abstractions become the necessary accoutrement of experiential diversity. The rituals that bind people together in small tribal societies must be replaced, he thought, by symbolic representations of the collectivity that are somehow still naturally experienced but capable of transcending particular locations as well.

Tönnies's contrast of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* paralleled his transition from a farmer's son living in rural Nordfriesland, Germany, to teaching at the naval port town of Kiel, Germany, which grew from less than 20,000 occupants in 1864 to 200,000 in 1910. *Gemeinschaft* was rural, premodern, familial, neighborly, small-scale, and empathic. *Gesellschaft* was urban, modern, individualistic, large-scale, and impersonal. Although Durkheim

entertained doubts that social cohesion could be preserved in large interdependent societies, Tönnies considered the connection of people to places, regions, climates, buildings, and even the soil so powerful that he wondered if the adjustments to large urban contexts could happen at all and whether more was to be lost than gained by this transition.

A generation later, Louis Wirth (1938) adopted many of the perspectives evident in the work of Durkheim and Tönnies, as well as Simmel and Park, in formulating his theory of urbanism as a way of life. Wirth moved from Gemünden in Hunsrück, Germany, population 900, to Omaha, population of 100,000 in 1911, and then to Chicago. He considered Chicago sociology's focus on urbanism, the lens through which all the salient problems of contemporary society could be understood. At the same time, he was acutely aware that these were indeed problems and that they included segregation and conflict, anonymity, superficiality, insecurity, and instability.

Several themes carry forward to subsequent thinking about the contemporary heartland. Whatever may have been attractive or unattractive about small rural places, those places were arguably declining in reality and in theoretical importance. Apart from the nostalgia that may have shaped normative arguments, the central arguments on which scholars agreed included the idea that small rural places were relatively homogeneous and therefore comfortable and convenient in terms of generating social cohesion. Interpersonal relationships were emotionally gratifying, but could also be stultifying, as Durkheim argued in a critique of Tönnies (Aldous 1972). There was a taken-for-granted-ness about these places and relationships. They attractively included enduring, affective relationships, but ran counter to the rational instrumental calculations that were conducive to progress in business, education, and science. In retrospect, it is not difficult to see that many of these arguments were consistent with popular images of a heartland in which traditional values prevail and are somehow threatened by changing social conditions.

Subsequent Contributions

Theoretical perspectives reflecting and shaping perceptions of small-town and rural America after World War II stemmed not

only from greater awareness of the contributions of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, but also from the social realities of the postwar era. Among these were suburban life, the recent history of mass mobilization by totalitarian regimes, and the current specter of the Cold War and possibilities of nuclear annihilation. Modernization provided a narrative that put America in the lead among industrialized and developing nations. It highlighted the benefits of science, technology, higher education, urban life, the arts, cultural sophistication, tolerance, and universalistic values. It also posed questions about mass conformity, anonymity, the potential loss of individuality, and resistance from segments of society being left behind. Broad-gauged descriptions of American society that appealed to popular as well as to scholarly audiences, such as David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950) and C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* (1951), emphasized the current direction of cultural developments and how they contrasted with the past.

Varying perceptions of small-town and rural America emerged in these formulations. Riesman's concept of an other-directed personality emphasized the potential loss of a strong moral compass that presumably was more evident in small communities than in large suburbs, as well as insecurities about self-identity and a desire for emotional attachments. Mills' description of the emerging middle class also emphasized problems that had not been present in the past in smaller communities, such as overweening bureaucracy and a loss of personal independence. In contrast, Eric Hoffer's *True Believer* (1951) underscored the more extreme dangers of mass society in facilitating fanaticism, but also hinted at the lingering tendencies toward fanaticism among marginalized groups in rural contexts. Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* (1955) provided a balanced account of the agrarian ideal that had shaped American culture, but also hinted at the critique of provincialism that was to emerge more fully in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965).

In broader theoretical terms, Parsons' pattern variables closely resembled Tönnies' discussion of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in characterizing the differences between particularistic and universalistic values, diffuse and specific identities, and expressive and instrumental attachments. In essays applying functionalist

analysis to contemporary issues, Parsons made frequent references to the differences between households in farming communities and households in cities. Despite Parsons' emphasis on societal integration and social cohesion through shared values, the underlying theme in discussions of societal evolution was that the values and social patterns associated with small towns and rural communities were things of the past and were destined to diminish in importance (Parsons 1942, 1971).

As theories of modernization lost popularity in the 1970s, small towns and agrarian societies ceased to serve as reminders only of a declining past. Interest in uprisings, rebellions, and social movements drew attention to the ways in which rural populations participated in these events. Agrarian landlords, peasants, and colonized plantation workers came to the fore in the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Jeffrey Paige, and James C. Scott, among others. Populist protests in U.S. history also received new attention. Although much of this work cast agrarian populations in a more dynamic light, little of it dealt with current farming and small towns. With the exception of several important empirical studies, the best conclusion that could be drawn about heartland America was that its continuing decline was inevitable and its scholarly importance was negligible.

A recent argument that illustrates the continuing influence of earlier formulations holds that societies can be characterized by certain prevailing traits, such as the extent to which they are dominated by industrialization or urbanization. Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers (2010) identify several traits that characterize the contemporary United States, including most basically its dependence on global capitalism, which in turn implies large corporations, weak labor unions, wage labor in industry and services, and state involvement in facilitating and regulating commerce. They argue that technological innovation has enabled more of the population to live in cities and to spend their time on tasks other than producing food. They emphasize that nearly everyone in the past devoted their time to producing food, whereas currently less than 2 percent of the U.S. labor force works in agriculture. In 1860, only 20 percent of the U.S. population lived in cities, whereas at the start of the twenty-first century, 80 percent did. The important questions that derive from this characterization

concern large-scale social relations rooted in global capitalism, rather than issues pertaining only to the small and obviously declining part of the population that lies on the margins of these developments.

A second argument has been advanced in the theoretical literature on social capital. According to this argument, the social networks that prevail in small towns and rural areas may be strong, but have deleterious effects on the populations involved. For example, in Alejandro Portes' widely cited review essay on social capital, he identifies "cozy intergroup relations" that impose high demands for conformity as a kind of "negative social capital" (1998:16). He writes, "In a small town or village, all neighbors know each other, one can get supplies on credit at the corner store, and children play freely in the streets under the watchful eyes of other adults." But if that sounds like the ideal community in which many people say they would like to live, he continues: "The level of social control in such settings is strong and also quite restrictive of personal freedoms, which is the reason why the young and the more independent-minded have always left."

Empirical Studies

Research on small towns and rural areas has been relatively sparse compared with the number of studies conducted in Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles, and other cities, as well as on the national population as a whole. Ethnographic studies during the late 1940s through the 1960s followed the pattern established by the Lynds' Middletown research in the 1920s and 1930s, and included such notable works as Vidich and Bensman's *Small Town in Mass Society* (1968) and W. Lloyd Warner's Yankee City series. These studies regarded small towns as societal microcosms and explored class and power relations and local institutions while focusing relatively little attention on whether towns were declining or how they compared with larger communities. As comparison studies were done in suburban locations, concerns about the anonymity of mass society were largely put to rest. Suburban residents seemed to be replicating the same supportive social ties noted in small towns.

A second line of research developed in the wake of the farm crisis that occurred during the late 1970s and 1980s. The Carter administration's restriction on exports of American grain to the

Soviet Union and the steep rise in fuel costs in conjunction with the OPEC oil embargo resulted in farm incomes plummeting and thousands of farmers being forced to discontinue farming. Research examined the effects on farm families, including studies of teenagers and schooling, relationships of grandparents with parents and grandchildren, divorce rates, and household finances (Lobao and Meyer 1995; Elder and Conger 2000). Small farms appeared to be in danger of being replaced by large agribusiness conglomerates and the declining farm population implied that small, farming-dependent towns would decline as well. Although several studies suggested that small towns and rural areas were being revived by new residents fleeing from cities and perhaps even by the countercultural back-to-land movement, analysis of 1970 and 1980 census data failed to bear out those expectations (Fuguitt, Brown, and Beale 1989).

Studies conducted during and since the 1990s have taken three distinct directions. The first includes normatively neutral studies that describe the continuing complexity and variations of farming communities, farm families, farm management styles, and small towns in rural areas (Bell 2004; Bell and Finney 2006; Salamon 1992; Macgregor 2010). These studies show the challenges facing rural communities and also provide a basis for considering their resources and possibilities for resilience (especially Brown and Swanson 2003, and Brown and Schafft 2011). The second direction takes as a given that small towns and rural areas are declining and focuses on documenting the extent of this decline and its consequences. Studies of this kind have examined the exodus of college-bound young people from rural communities (Carr and Kefalas 2009), the depopulation and shuttered businesses that have been wrecked by global competition (Longworth 2007), the tragedy of drug use that comes with alienation and despair in small towns (Reding 2009), and the conflicts and hardships brought about by agribusiness (Stull and Broadway 1995). The third direction focuses less on small towns and rural areas and more on the presumed backwardness and reactive politics of heartland populations that are apparently guided by the values that once prevailed in rural America (Frank 2004). In addition, census data and journalistic coverage have documented broad patterns of change in small towns and rural communities.

Population decline is well-documented. Between 1900 and 2010, the rural population—defined as residents not living in places of 2,500 or more—fell from 60 percent of the total population to only 19 percent. In absolute terms, 18 states experienced net decline in rural residents in the 1980s, and 25 did in the 1990s. Although some of the decline occurred because of increases that pushed the population above the 2,500 figure for being counted as rural, the most significant losses occurred in agricultural states such as Iowa, Nebraska, and North Dakota. Depopulation across the Great Plains appeared so sufficiently serious and long-lasting that the U.S. Census Bureau commissioned special studies to assess its causes and effects. The idea of turning the region into a vast Buffalo Commons gained popularity in journalistic treatments. Broader interest in depopulation continued as subsequent census figures were released. An Associated Press headline prompted by the release of 2012 population estimates, for example, declared, “Record 1 in 3 Counties Now Dying Off, Hit by Aging Population, Weakened Local Economies” (Yen 2012).

Population decline was evident at the municipal level as well. Between 1980 and 2010, 62 percent of all nonurban towns with fewer than 1,000 residents in 1980 experienced net population decline. Among towns with 1,000 to 1,999 residents in 1980, 47 percent declined. Population decline occurred in 43 percent of towns with 2,000 to 4,999 residents in 1980, and in 42 percent of towns with 5,000 to 9,999 residents in 1980. It was also true of 38 percent of towns with 10,000 to 24,999 residents in 1980 (Wuthnow 2013). A study of the nine states that had the largest proportion of towns with populations less than 1,500 in 1980 (all in the Middle West) showed that 64 percent of the towns in those states had smaller populations in 2005 than in 1980. The highest proportions were in Kansas and North Dakota, where 70 and 89 percent of towns respectively lost population (Wuthnow 2011).

The Middle West study showed that towns with declining populations were ones in which population was already declining between 1950 and 1980, and in many cases between 1910 and 1950. The smallest towns were most in danger of losing population. Other factors conducive to population decline included not being a county seat, not having a college or community college, not being near an interstate highway, and being farther from an

urban center. A significant decline in number of farms and farmers in these states also affected the likelihood of a town's decline. Towns located in counties with larger than average declines in farms and smaller than average increases in the value of agricultural output were more likely than other towns to lose population. The national data showed that towns' likelihoods of experiencing population decline increased if they were already small in 1980, if they were located in farming-dependent or mining-dependent counties, and if they scored low on an amenity scale that summarized measures of climate and recreational opportunities.

Qualitative research has underscored additional problems in small rural communities. Residents complain of store and school closings and note the frequency with which young people move away. Contrary to Portes' observation that young people leave to escape stultifying social controls, the decisions residents and former residents describe nearly always focus on the lack of jobs in small towns. Educators and public officials report serious concerns about a rural brain drain that is stripping communities of talented young people capable of staffing schools and hospitals and promoting technological innovation. Some communities suffer from low morale and high rates of drug use among young people. Evidence also suggests resistance among native-born residents to immigrants, as well as low wages and dangerous working conditions among immigrants employed in meat processing plants and on farms (Wuthnow 2013).

Were this not enough, small towns have also experienced tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods, and some have been victimized by chemical spills, seepage of toxins into ground water, radioactivity contamination, and mining disasters. Media accounts have emphasized the difficulties in farming communities facing severe drought, problems from soil contamination, methane pollution, poverty, and runoff from feedlots. In qualitative research, town leaders mention additional problems, such as declining tax revenue, difficulties in maintaining roads and bridges, and cutbacks in law enforcement. Clergy discuss declining church memberships, church closings, and shortages of adequately trained pastors and priests. Residents reinforce perceptions of rural conservatism by expressing support for nativist and anti-gay

candidates and fiscally extreme rollbacks of government safety net programs.

On balance, the picture of small-town and rural America is not pretty. Population is sparse and declining, jobs are scarce, wages are low, schools are closing, shopping and services are farther away, and fine dining is nonexistent, as are cultural events other than band concerts and school plays. Although people still live in these communities, they are disproportionately older and are perhaps the ones who could not escape or have returned to live out their days where housing is cheap and life is simple. The studies that document these problems sometimes suggest that state and federal government should do more to help, or that residents should simply pick up and move on. The most likely scenario is one of continuing depopulation and economic decline.

Potential for Resilience

What then are the resources that small rural communities can draw on to avoid the worst? Close inspection of the data and the theoretical assumptions behind it, as well as observations from the field suggest at least four caveats to the usual gloom and doom scenarios presented in the media and in much of the academic literature.

First, the demographic story is not only a story of decline. Although declining population is the reality in many small rural communities, it is by no means common in all such communities, nor is it happening as quickly and dramatically as headlines about dying counties suggest. The key is to distinguish more clearly between absolute and relative decline and to specify more precisely where the most serious depopulation is occurring. In absolute terms, 14 million more people lived in rural areas in 2010 than in 1900. Population growth in rural areas has been far less than in urban areas, but the nation's overall population growth has contributed to the demographic stability of many rural communities. Although a majority of the smallest towns lost population between 1980 and 2010, relatively few of the people who lived in small towns lived in those smallest towns. Most lived in towns of at least 5,000 people and a majority of those towns remained stable or grew. When population does decline, the rate of decline must also be considered. Gradual decline is less disruptive

than sharp decline. Between 1980 and 2010, only 17 percent of small nonurban towns declined by more than 1 percent a year. In qualitative interviews, residents in towns that were gradually losing population frequently denied that decline was happening at all. Only when bright line events occurred, such as a plant closing or losing the school, did they express serious concerns about decline. Between 2000 and 2010, only about 50 small nonurban towns lost more than 50 percent of their residents. These were towns in which a natural disaster occurred or towns that had to be evacuated because of toxic waste contamination or some other human-made catastrophe.

Several other factors complicate drawing conclusions about decline from demographic statistics. One, as we have seen, is that many small nonurban towns benefit from locations and social institutions that inhibit population loss. Towns in warmer climates, close to recreational and tourist attractions, within easy commuting distance of larger towns and cities, near interstate highways, with colleges or community colleges, with county courthouses, and with balanced economic conditions that include services and manufacturing, government offices, and farming and mining are substantially protected against serious population loss. A related consideration is the crowding phenomenon that contributes to greater population decline among the smallest towns when there are a larger number of towns in the same county. Many of the smallest towns were established a century or more ago when trains needed to stop every 10 miles to take on coal and water, and when farm to market transportation was difficult. Many of those towns have been declining for a long time.

However, demographic decline should not be taken as an indication necessarily of economic decline. Increases in productivity through technological innovation and organizational efficiency must also be taken into account. Per capita GDP of the nine Middle West states mentioned before increased in relation to per capita GDP for the nation between 1969 and 2005. Agricultural economists argue that large-acreage family farms are more efficient than small family farms, and in interviews farmers generally agree. Another aspect of rural demography that must be taken into account is immigration. Eighty percent of small nonurban towns currently include some foreign-born residents. Besides the

continuing importance of seasonal low-wage labor on farms and in construction and inexpensive housing, the rise of packaged food processing and the relocation of slaughter houses and packing plants from cities to smaller towns, such as Liberal, Kansas, and Lexington, Nebraska, account for much of the influx of new immigrants. In sum, the demographic patterns in small towns and rural areas include not only decline but also stability and growth as well as institutional factors that inhibit dramatic decline and retain significant numbers of residents.

A second resource for resilience is social capital (Flora and Flora 2003). Durkheim's argument with Tönnies about this has perhaps left sociologists on Durkheim's side (Aldous 1972). In Durkheim's view, *gemeinschaft* was too homogeneous and too lacking in diversified economic relationships to be viable. But Durkheim's depiction fit the premodern tribal groups that interested him better than the late nineteenth-century rural communities that interested Tönnies. None of the ethnographic studies of small communities suggest that social differentiation in these communities is absent. Standard indices of income heterogeneity are as high as in metropolitan areas, and indices of racial and ethnic heterogeneity are nearly as high (Wuthnow 2013). Still, there is truth in observations that social relationships are different in small places than in large places. Residents of small towns argue that they know everyone and that everyone is the same. The issue then becomes how to best interpret these claims.

When small-town residents say they know everyone in the community that does not imply that they actually know everyone or that they live inside a closed network. In a town of only 1,000 residents, it is unlikely that everyone knows everyone else. When asked about this in interviews, these residents acknowledge that they do not actually know everyone. It is rather the familiarity and the reality that they could easily find out who someone is if they want to that these residents have in mind, and value. Gossip reinforces the notion that networks are closed even though they are not. A person walking to the post office whose neighbor says, "I hear your aunt is in the hospital" realizes that the neighbor is connected to the aunt or to someone who knows the aunt. Encounters of this kind tell people they live in a neighborly town where people care about one another, but they do not imply that

networks are closed or that relationships are so controlling that any freedom-minded young person would flee at the first opportunity. In fact, residents report not only that they like having good neighbors, but also that they appreciate the privacy they enjoy there. Houses are farther apart. Neighbors do not live in the same building. A person who wants solitude can easily find it in the open spaces that surround the town.

The informal social networks that residents report include extra-local as well as local ties. Although they may have family in town and know the teachers and shopkeepers through church and club activities, they typically have close relatives who live elsewhere, keep in contact with friends through phone calls and email, and travel to other communities to shop, see the doctor, and conduct business. It is true that people say they live where they do because of having grown up there, or have chosen their line of work because of a local family connection or teacher, but it is also the case that people in small towns talk about jobs attained through an uncle who lives in another state or a former college roommate. If anything, geographically dispersed social networks have become easier and more common as a result of information technology.

The formal social capital through membership and participation in voluntary organizations that has been of interest in the literature on civic engagement is relatively robust in small rural communities, even though it has been affected by the same trends documented in national studies. Data on nonprofit associations demonstrate that there are significantly more of these organizations per capita in small towns than in cities. That does not imply that participation rates are any higher, but some evidence suggests that it may be and that measures of trust, which usually correlate highly with participation, are higher. Another interesting pattern is that upscale residents in small towns are more likely to be involved in civic organizations than their counterparts in larger communities. Qualitative evidence suggests that local norms about equality and everyone doing their part are a reason for these higher levels of participation (Wuthnow 2013).

Another point about social capital is reminiscent of Tönnies' argument that places and attachments to places matter. Suzanne Keller's (2003) work emphasizes turf and territory as one of the principal building blocks of community. Except for occasional

acknowledgment of proximity as a variable, social network studies largely ignore the role of place, but in qualitative interviews residents of small communities nearly always talk about place as one of the most significant aspects of their communities. They do not always talk about it favorably; they wish the climate was better or they were closer to a city. It is the familiarity of the place that they like, almost viscerally, and that makes the community feel like home. This attachment to places is a powerful resource for small communities. It reinforces loyalties that facilitate community involvement. It does not imply that people stay in the same town, but is consistent with evidence that state-to-state migration is declining (Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl 2013).

In the sociological literature, network ties become social capital when they are used to attain goals. The goals commonly considered are getting jobs, conducting business, helping children achieve in school, and attaining status. Residents of small towns show that these are not the only goals people care about. They also consider it important to be happy. They associate happiness with being around people they know and love, with avoiding the hassles of traffic and the disturbances of noise, with pursuing a balanced life that includes not only making money but also having time for other things. The point is not that small-town residents are any more interested in these goals than people who live elsewhere, but rather that they consider the social capital they have in small towns a resource that helps them pursue these goals.

A third resource consists of schools and other training centers and includes the various publicly funded service organizations that range from government offices, to hospitals and medical clinics, to farm service agencies. The problems facing small-town and rural schools are well-documented: schools close, students are bused to larger towns, and small class sizes make it impossible to offer advanced placement courses and to field a full array of athletic and musical opportunities. Children who grow up in small communities may limit their horizons because they lack role models and feel incapable of navigating successfully in large universities and cities. Those who do succeed contribute to the brain drain by heading elsewhere for better job opportunities. With these problems, it is difficult to imagine that anything good can be said about the educational institutions in small rural communities. The

predominantly rural Midwestern states that were known as the “education belt” early in the twentieth century surely have little going for them now.

And yet, a recent report on educational attainment among young adults included a surprising result. The states with the highest percentage of adults ages 25 to 34 who were college graduates were Massachusetts and North Dakota. North Dakota was one of the states that critics said was suffering from serious brain drain. There was no question that young adults with college degrees were leaving the state, but enough were staying that the state had one of the highest levels of educational attainment in the nation. Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and South Dakota also had above average percentages of young adults with college degrees (Chronicle of Higher Education 2010). States with higher than average percentages of citizens with high school diplomas included Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Reasons for high levels of secondary schooling in these states included a history of investing in well-administrated county school systems, public funding from property taxes on farmland, and low high school dropout rates.

But many of the schools in small towns did not have to deal with low incomes, unemployment, discrimination, and segregation that schools in inner city areas faced. These were towns with relatively homogeneous populations. Towns with ethnically mixed populations caused by recent immigration typically did less well in meeting the challenges of expanding demands on school facilities. Among college-educated residents of small towns, there was significant underemployment, especially for women who found jobs available only in low-paying office work. The reason states such as Kansas and Minnesota were able to retain as many college-educated young adults as they did was that population within these states was being redistributed from rural areas to counties in the vicinity of Kansas City, Minneapolis, and St. Paul.

The growth that has occurred near these cities and in the vicinity of Bentonville, Des Moines, Fargo, Oklahoma City, Omaha, Saint Louis, Sioux Falls, and Tulsa complicates the story of heartland decline. People in these places still consider themselves part of the heartland. They contribute to the tax base of heartland states, generate their share of wealthy elites, and work at

companies that specialize in biotechnology, financial advising, food processing, pharmaceuticals, satellite guidance systems, and transportation. It may be, as Thomas Frank observed, that a person can drive through empty parking lots and past closed warehouses and manufacturing facilities in Wichita and conclude that the heartland has seen better days. But to do that misses the important growth that has occurred in most heartland cities.

Publicly funded service organizations include hospitals, clinics, assisted living facilities, family assistance programs, and farm agencies supported through state and federal taxes, as well as local government offices that record deeds, collect taxes, and administer law enforcement (Brown and Schafft 2011). The extent to which these organizations and agencies can be considered a resource for social resilience is complicated. Tea Party demands for fiscal conservatism and to reduce the size of government have curbed the capacity of these organizations. But small towns and rural areas benefit significantly from farm subsidies, Social Security, and other transfer payments. Communities such as Minot, North Dakota, and Fort Riley, Kansas, benefit from military installations. Sparsely populated states benefit from earmarks and states with elected officials who gain seniority through single-party dominance may be in an especially strong position to receive such benefits.

A final resource for resilience is leadership. The conditions that shape population trends such as location near cities and interstate highways or climate and recreational amenities are matters of structure. But within those constraints, agency matters as well. Interviews reveal numerous ways in which the activities of local leaders provide resources to their communities. One is applying for state and federal grants. Another is participating in multi-county and regional commissions engaged in planning and economic development. These are the commissions that influence the location of businesses, ethanol plants, roads, wind energy farms, wireless providers, and military posts.

At the county, township, and municipal level, community leaders talk in interviews about tax incentives, bond offerings, and free land to attract new businesses and residents. They describe legal maneuvers to secure the cleanup of toxic waste dumps and to protect family farms from corporate takeovers. A town that secures a new hospital or that constructs a new firehouse or community

center is in a better position to retain residents, they find, than a neighboring town that does not provide these facilities. Town leaders describe efforts to keep the local grocery store open, to ensure that farmers receive loans to purchase equipment, to repave Main Street, and to raze decaying buildings that give the town a bad image.

Some projects are ill-conceived from the start. Townspeople talk of grand ideas for bringing in a large manufacturing plant or attracting tourists with better advertising. Community leaders express frustration about the red tape required to secure government funding. Elected officials sometimes depend more on personal networks and patronage than on performance to stay in office. Town managers whose jobs depend on performance and who are often better educated and have wider contacts seem to do better at overcoming these limitations.

That brings us, finally, to the question of politics and whether the political conservatism popularly connected with the heartland is a weakness or a resource. Its potential drawbacks have been widely discussed. A state that requires evolution to be taught as only a theory alongside a theory about divine origins is said to be one in which children cannot possibly go on to college and expect to succeed. A state like that cannot expect to attract companies that need well-educated employees. A state dominated by fundamentalist preachers and ultraconservative elected officials damages itself, critics argue, by not respecting the rights of unions, keeping wages low, gutting the social safety net, losing federal health insurance assistance, and presenting a hostile environment for companies that want to provide domestic partner benefits or insurance coverage that includes birth control. Instances can be found in which these criticisms appear to be well-founded, but it is difficult to determine if different policies would produce different results. The difficulties are compounded when arguments about growth and decline are used to justify particular policies. For example, the governor of a state in which the population is declining might use that decline as an argument for reducing taxes in hopes of attracting new businesses, but if the decline has been happening for half a century and has little to do with tax rates, and if the proposed reductions hurt the poor and benefit the rich, critics would do well to challenge the governor's arguments.

The related question about conservative politics is whether citizens are duped by appeals based on moral issues to vote in ways contrary to their economic interests. Although that possibility exists, caution is warranted for several reasons. One is that conservative moral issues and fiscal policies need not go together, even though they may seem to during particular elections. Bartels' (2005) criticism of Frank (2004), for example, demonstrated that white working-class voters were not swayed by moral and religious appeals that trumped economic considerations. A second reason is that moral politics may carry more weight in some instances, not only because of aggressive advocacy groups, but also because they give people a sense of control over their lives, whereas the economic policies that might help them are too uncertain and too remote to be believable. In that respect, a fundamentalist church that tells its members what is right and wrong and helps them keep their families together is likely to be more appealing than a politician they do not know who says that some program in Washington, DC will improve the economy.

One other reason to be cautious about arguments accusing people of being duped brings us back to the legacy of sociological theory. If people in small rural communities are the backwater of modern history, viewed as people left behind by the great progressive developments of modernization, then it is easier to imagine that they are not smart enough to understand what they are doing or why they are doing it. It then becomes the role of enlightened social scientists to show them the error of their ways. That is quite different from another role of public sociology, which seeks first to gain an empathic understanding of the subject matter under consideration.

Conclusion

Sociologists' emphasis on urbanization has left a gap in empirical research on smaller out-of-the-way communities that has only recently begun to be filled. Although much of the recent research focuses on small-town and rural decline, closer inspection of the evidence suggests considerable diversity in the experiences and trajectories of different communities. Population decline and sparse job opportunities in many of the nation's smallest communities are only part of the story. A majority of the

nonmetropolitan population lives in towns of at least 5,000 residents, and a majority of these towns are not declining. Qualitative evidence demonstrates that people who live in small nonurban communities value the amenities and lifestyles available in these locations.

The wholesome values that pundits associate with small-town heartland America should not be exaggerated, but they should not be dismissed either. Living in places that are familiar, easy to navigate, and close to family and friends are values that people who live in small communities appreciate. It makes no sense to them that people in cities would choose to live in crowded spaces amid noisy and congested traffic. Many small-town residents prefer a balanced life that includes more time for family and friends, even if that involves less lucrative jobs. Mass media, email, and travel readily connect them with the wider world.

Community resilience is a topic of growing interest. Resilience cannot be understood simply in terms of population stability and growth. It implies access to sufficient resources, including schools, businesses, government agencies, and social services. Those do not have to be strictly local, although proximity is desirable. Resilience implies intangible resources as well, such as civic participation and supportive social networks. In this respect, investigations of small heartland communities offer possibilities not only to understand American society, but also to advance sociological theory. Assumptions about linear modernization that saw inevitable decline of rural areas in favor of urban locations need to be questioned. Contemporary social relations are decidedly diverse. Diversity typically implies paying attention to racial and ethnic differences, gender, and social class. It should also include investigations of the location, size, and diverse cultures of local communities.

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