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Political Trends Affecting Nonmetropolitan America

Paul M. Nachtigal
Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

There are two stories concerning political trends affecting nonmetropolitan America that I would like us to examine. There is the old story that has had a fairly straight forward, fairly predictable, and for rural America a fairly discouraging story line. It is a story of declining rural population, a declining influence in the creation of public policy, and as a consequence, irrelevant education in rural communities. It is a story that has its roots in the very early deliberations of how this country would govern itself. It is a story of differing philosophical beliefs about how individuals live together. It is ultimately a story that pits urban interests against rural interests. And, because of the way the rules of the game have been established, the interests that get served are those of the political victors.

Stories matter. They teach us the "cultural taken-for-granted" and determine how we will educate our children, create and enforce our laws, and share our resources. The latter part of my article begins a discussion of a very early draft of a new story. This alternative story will redefine the way we think about and practice political action and, in fact, will redefine the arena within which political action takes place. The new story will not be one of "rural versus urban" but rather, a story of "place." In many instances it will be a story of "rural and urban." Because the story is just being written, how the plot will unfold is still unclear. Those of us deeply interested in the future of rural America may well be participants in determining how the new story develops.

First, a word about politics is in order. "Politics", as used in this paper, is the process of making decisions for the public good. As we all know there are many different perspectives about how the "public good" gets defined. Within the tradition of partisan politics, the political process takes on two important dimensions. First is the dimension of power—who has the most votes or who can bring the most political pressure. The second dimension is what gets said or who benefits from the policy resulting from the political action. And, while the two dimensions tend to be related—those who can get the most votes tend to benefit—in the classic rural/urban debates, this is not always the case. Just because the rural interests "win" does not necessarily mean that all those living in rural areas benefit. Certainly, the same could be said for urban interests.

Politics create the context for education. As the political influence of people living in rural areas has declined, so has their ability to determine what their children will be taught, by whom, and how. Most importantly, rural people have been silenced in the national conversation about the purposes of education. Curricula driven by textbook publishers, by the content and administration of standardized (read national) tests, and by the emerging press for national standards has overshadowed the importance of local knowledge, history and culture. Educational policies that emerge from politics take on a sense of inevitability, but are actually the result of a series of choices. The influences that shaped those choices have their roots deep in our history.

The Old Story, Rural vs. Urban

Beliefs About How We Are To Be Governed

The urban/rural rivalry, whether in Congress or in the legislative halls of the state house, is timeless. The first skirmish between rural and urban interests goes back at least as far as 1787 when Daniel Shays led an insurrection in western Massachusetts. This was a struggle between debtor farmers and city creditors. While "Shays' Rebellion" was a fairly minor incident in the larger scheme of things, it had a major impact on how the political process was to work in this country, defining the rules of the game in which the rural/urban struggle would play out over the next 200 or more years. For it was this incident that helped shape the debate of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

> How should [the Shay's Rebellion] and others like it be worked out? The question came down to whether democratic citizens should be expected to work out the solution to such struggles directly among themselves or whether it is possible to adopt a machinery of government which would pump out solutions without requiring such direct citizen engagement. Should the burden of solving public problems rest most directly on citizenship or on government? (Kemmis, 1990, p. 11).

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul M. Nachtigal, P.O. Box 1546, Granby, CO 80446.

Thomas Jefferson argued that the "republican tradition" rested squarely upon a face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem solving. This tradition held an implicit belief that people could rise above their particular interest to pursue a common good. Alas, we have not always lived up to that belief. Nevertheless, Republicanism was firmly rooted in the notion of civic virtue. Education, in Mr. Jefferson's view, had an empowered electorate as its goal.

Madison, Hamilton, and the Federalists argued the other side:

> . . . fearful of the instability of republic governments, [they] explicitly urged abandoning the language of civic virtue. They concentrated instead upon creating mechanisms to keep tyranny at bay without requiring common goals or institutions of intense popular participation. These developments had a fateful impact on political life and political discourse in America. The Federalist constitution of 1787 and the language of political mechanics it advanced together institutionalized the notion that politics is a business of balancing interests. . . . Where the civic republicans had emphasized conscious responsibility for the destiny of the political community, the Federalists emphasized the constitution as a framework which could protect the working of a *commercially competitive civil society* [emphasis added]. (Sullivan, 1982, p. 12)

While the views of the Federalists prevailed in the writing of the Constitution and related documents that provide the framework for the nation's government, Jefferson's hope of infusing republican principles in the country's political process remained. It lay in the agrarian nature of this new country. As long as the majority of the population were farmers, this civic virtue, this face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem solving, would be sustained. In Jefferson's mind, there were no limits to the availability of land for additional farmers to inhabit. An agrarian society, and education rooted in that society, would serve as a gyroscope, keeping "civic virtue" at the core of American society.

To the Victors Belong the Spoils

As the 19th Century came to a close, the struggle for control of the political soul of the nation reached a critical turning point. The agrarian populist movement was at its height. It appeared that Jefferson's faith in an educated farm population indeed would triumph. Republican civic virtue would become the norm for political action. Ironically, just as the populist movement was on the verge of grasping national power, Frederick Jackson Turner, the noted American historian, declared the American frontier closed.

Then comes the election of 1896. The agenda of the agrarian populist movement was carried by William Jennings Bryan, who received the nomination of both the Democratic and Populist parties. His opponent, William McKinley, represented the voices of the eastern urban industrialists. Backed by the monied interests of Madison Avenue and employing the emerging mass communication technology, McKinley triumphed. The agrarian populists were defeated, never again to be a real challenge to the political process as defined by a federalist form of government. The stage for what we now think of as the "old story" was now set; the conventions established by the Federalist notion of a "commercially competitive civic society" were in place. And while the philosophical battle of how American politics would be conducted was decided, the rural/urban battle of interests had just begun. These battles continue today and range from the access and control of Western water to who gets to set the agenda for education, and who controls its resources.[1]

The Old Story Unfolds

Even though the agrarian forces lost the battle of how the political process would be conducted, rural interests fared quite well during the early years of our country's history. America, after all, was very much a rural country. Up until 1918, rural America was home to one half of all residents. Legislators, on the state and national level, represented rural constituencies and the rules of seniority helped enhance and enshrine their power even though, sixty years later, only one fourth of the population was rural.

Industrial policy in America lured people from the country to the city throughout the past century. Today, only 15 states have 50% or more of their population residing in nonmetropolitan areas. The Supreme Court's one-person, one-vote decision caused widespread reapportionment and legislative reforms eliminated the seniority system. Control of these governmental bodies rests more and more with urban and suburban interests.

Population shifts and the one-person, one-vote decision represent only one dimension of the political trends that have had an impact on the well-being of nonmetropolitan

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[1]I am deeply indebted to Daniel Kemmis and his book *Community and the Politics of Place* for the above civics lesson. I have drawn heavily from this book, particularly the early chapters, in writing this section. While some of the words, e.g., Shays' Rebellion, Populist Party, Federalist form of government, were still familiar from formal courses in American government in my younger days, it has taken 30+ years of experience and writers such as Kemmis to achieve an understanding of the consequences of these early events. My thanks to him.

residents. Other factors diminishing the rural voice in the political arena include:

- the makeup and tactics of voter activists. Single-issue coalitions cut across geographic lines, (e.g., age, gender) dividing constituencies and resulting in less political influence for specifically rural issues.
- the traditional perspective that agricultural policy equates with rural policy. While this may have been true early in our history, today farming employs fewer that 1 in 10 rural residents. Agriculture policy, with its emphasis on cheap food and production at all costs, is much more likely to benefit corporate farming operations that are closer philosophically to the views of McKinley's Madison Avenue supporters than to the agrarian beliefs of the supporters of Bryan.
- the reluctance of rural people to organize into coalitions that speak with a common voice and which can play by the rules of a federalist form of government. Rural people tend to be independent, "rugged individualists"—much more comfortable dealing with problems face-to-face in a one-on-one basis than in acting collectively to advocate for their interests.
- the lack of a clearly articulated, comprehensive vision of what rural policy should be. We haven't discovered effective ways to create a common vision while honoring the diversity that characterizes rural America.
- the fact that rural interests are underrepresented in powerful committee chairs that, because of their influence, can assure the passage or killing of legislation that would benefit rural America. (Jahr, 1988, p. 5)

It is difficult to see how this story can have a happy ending from the perspective of nonmetropolitan America. The current trends all suggest less and less influence in the "commercially competitive civil society" as envisioned by Madison and Hamilton. One could hope for beneficent, egalitarian politicians at the state and federal level that would see it as being in their best interests to assure a prosperous and viable rural sector. Experience would suggest that is unlikely, particularly in a time of budget deficits.

After documenting the demise of rural political power, Jahr (1988) suggests that perhaps the only way rural interests will be protected in the future is to push for a "Rural Rights Act." As with the Civil Rights movement, it will be necessary to show that rural America is both disadvantaged and discriminated against. Certainly, the disadvantaged status of rural America is well documented. Data on personal income, poverty rates, unemployment and underemployment, and incidence of substandard housing all show rural America being worse off than urban America. And Jahr points out that there are examples of federal discrimination. As an example, because of underreporting of unemployment and the way the formula was designed for the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, rural areas were denied over $100 million in funding from 1983 through 1985, according to a preliminary analysis by the General Accounting Office (Jahr, 1988, pp. 22-24).

So, is the ending of the old story a "rural rights act"? Are rural people sufficiently endangered to become a protected minority? Certainly, if demographic trends continue according to projections, the rural/nonrural battle becomes more and more of a one-sided affair. Rural people will become more and more disempowered. Nonrural interests will be well in control. (Population trends have similarly affected inner cities and power has shifted to suburban areas, so nonrural is a more accurate term than urban in describing competing interests). Will the largess of nonrural policy makers take good care of rural interests? Would a rural rights act take care of rural interests? History suggests not. It may be time for a new story.

Interlude

The rural/nonrural battles have been just one of the scenarios resulting from the Madison/Hamilton forces prevailing in those early debates (and I here acknowledge to my Federalist friends that space limitations may have led me to paint this argument in broad terms.) Another scenario that has impacted both rural and nonrural people has been the industrial-based press toward centralization of power, economically and politically. Centralization of decision making—consolidation of organizational structures—has been the center piece of a "commercially competitive civil society." Centralization that first took place at the national level has now gone global. By the year 2000, according to our national educational goals, we must be first in the world in math and science in order to be competitive in the global society.

A less esoteric example of this commercially competitive centralization has been the displacement of agrarian farmers with corporate agriculture. Peak efficiency in food production is proven to come from medium sized farmers, (those selling around $133,000 in crops annually, employing one or two people and using up-to-date equipment), yet corporate farms continue to take over the nation's food production. Just coincidentally, these largest farms reap tremendous profits because of federal policy—from tax laws to subsidy programs—that favor these largest opera-

tions over the midsize and small producers. Just four firms account for 86% of the breakfast cereals sold in America; four companies sell 62% of the broiler chickens; three giants sell almost three quarters of the nation's beef, and the same three—IBP, ConAgra and Cargill—also control between 30% and 40% of the nation's hog market. Cargill, the largest of the agri-businesses, employs 42,000 people in 46 countries with an annual sales volume ($32.3 billion) equal to the combined gross national products of Chile and Ecuador. (Davidson, 1990, pp. 162-164).

This picture is a far cry from Jefferson's society of educated agrarian farmers, pursuing their lives in a society that creates its rules by face-to-face, hands-on problem solving. And lest we forget this phenomenon is not limited to food production, GTE, one of the nation's larger telecommunications companies, announced last year that it would lay off 17,000 employees "to improve customer service" (*Rocky Mountain News*, Friday, January 14, 1994, p. 3D). The general populace of the country, and certainly individuals in local communities, had little to say about this decision, or for that matter, about any of the decisions made by the giant food processors. Distant decision makers, in their unceasing search for efficiency and effectiveness, make their choices for the good of the corporation. We have lost control of who produces our food, the quality of what we eat, the way that we educate our children, and to a large extent how we live our lives. If this is the consequence of a political system based on a "commercially competitive civil society," then to borrow a phrase from Wendell Berry, "What are people for?"

The New Story, The Politics of Place

Keeping citizens apart has become the first maxim of modern politics. —Jean Jacques Rousseau

We confront daily the extent to which citizens have been kept apart from each other. In fact, we are not only apart from each other but rapidly becoming alienated one from another. Gang violence, drug abuse, growing demand for more and more prisons, and, closer to home for most of us, the mean spirited ideological battles that are becoming ever more frequent around school reform all divide us from one another. What is the role of education in society? How should our children be educated? With the isolation of citizens, the disintegration of community, arriving at consensus around these very fundamental questions is increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Society has lost its center. It is each one for himself, we have lost any sense of the common good. And just as we are bumping up against the limits of deteriorating communities, we are also bumping up against the limits of what the natural environment can sustain. The basic ground rules must be shifted from those based on that of a "commercially competitive civil society" to those based on "ecological sustainability." If the political trend line that has brought us to this place is to change, it is time to abandon at least some portions of the political course set by Madison and Hamilton and adopt at least some of Jefferson's vision of what it could have been and, perhaps in some measure, might still become.

Ecosystem Level Societies

The new story, according to Orr (1992), replaces our industrial, competitive society with one grounded in and in harmony with the ecology. He makes a persuasive argument for moving beyond "technological sustainability"—solving the problems that we have caused in our environment with another technical solution, to "ecological sustainability"—living in such a way that the problems do not arise (pp. 23-40). To move in this direction will mean reexamining and changing the way we live our lives socially and economically, how we educate our children, how we do politics, and how we go about collective problem solving. So, how might we begin? Orr (1992), Kemmis (1990), and Wilkinson (1992), along with others advocating an alternative world view to our ever escalating industrial global competition, suggest that a place to begin is to redefine operationally the arena within which we live our lives. They propose the notion of "bioregionalism" or creating ecosystem-level societies. Some of the defining features of bioregionalism include:

- Defining political social systems that are in harmony with the ecosystem; e.g., areas defined by mountain ranges or watersheds. Organizing around natural features provides fundamental reasons for finding "common ground" around such issues as air quality, water usage, land development, and so forth.
- Re-inhabitating those areas in ways that are sustainable. "Doing things right means living as though your grandchildren would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we're doing right now, with deepening delight" (Kemmis, 1990, p. 80).
- Reinventing politics at the ecosystem level. This requires clarity about what should be done locally and what can only be done at higher levels. Effective controls on carbon emissions, for example, can only be accomplished at an international level. Energy conservation, the means of reducing energy use and thereby the release of CO_2 is best done by individuals, institutions and individual communities (Orr, 1992, pp. 72-73).
- Substantially disengaging from the global economy and the passivity and dependence it

> fosters. Practically, this means stopping some things, such as subsidies for agribusiness and preferred tax treatment for large corporate enterprises, utilities, and land speculators. On the other side, it means rebuilding the local communities, small towns, and neighborhoods that have suffered from decades of neglect (Orr, 1992, pp. 72-73). And, I might add, it means relinking education with the real lives of young people, as they are lived, in real places.

Conducting public affairs in bioregions, at the ecosystem level, would involve those residing in nonrural areas *and* those residing in the surrounding rural areas, acting together to will a common world. Cities, suburbs, and rural areas, recognizing their interdependency, would have the capacity to define working economies. The health and viability of each would depend upon the health and viability of the others. Politics would move beyond rural *versus* nonrural to rural *and* nonrural. Conducting public affairs at the ecosystem level provides both the opportunity and the responsibility to practice republicanism in the Jeffersonian sense, to rediscover and make a reality of civic virtue.

A Matter of Place

Kemmis talks about this refocusing of public problem solving as "the politics of place." Understanding the notion of "place" is critical to creating a new politics. Wallace Stegner, a regional writer of the West, through his elegant prose helps those of us living in the West to understand what it means to live in that place (Stegner, 1962). Regional writers in the South or the prairie states or the Northeast can do the same for those residing in those regions. Jefferson believed in the fundamental necessity of an educated electorate. If we are to experience even a partial realization of the Jeffersonian dream, education must include experiences that help us understand the place that we inhabit. It is important for four reasons.

First, it promotes the time-tested learning power of combining of intellect with experience. Second, the study of place is relevant to the problems of overspecialization, that has been called a terminal disease of contemporary civilization. Third, it has significance in reeducating people in the art of living well where they are. Finally, knowledge of place—where you are and where you come from—is intertwined with knowledge of who you are (Orr, 1992, pp. 125-131).

If we are to have a new story, if the trends are to change for not only rural Americans but for nonrural Americans as well, education will also need to be re-formed. For its present state of operation has been as surely shaped by the Madisons and Hamiltons as the political system that it serves. While learning can take place in groups, it is an individual activity, changing and expanding one mind at a time. The minds that are expanded and changed exist in specific and unique places. If young people are to learn to be participants in our democracy, we must provide them opportunities to practice civic virtue, to interact and reflect with their communities and their circumstances, to define and address real problems in real ways. This means locally taking back responsibility for determining what will be taught and how it will be taught. And it means greatly expanding the definitions of who is a teacher and who is a learner.

Is this new story just wishful thinking? Is it possible to change the political course of a ship-of-state that has been on that course for more than two centuries? There is growing evidence that indeed it may be possible. There is growing evidence that at least around some issues people are wanting more say about their resolution. A case in point is the battle over future regulation of grazing on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands.

Governor Roy Romer (Colorado) and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbit have conducted eight lengthy local meetings over the future regulation of cattle grazing on BLM lands. Key to the proposed reforms is the shift of grazing decisions from BLM land managers to local groups made up of ranchers, environmentalists, miners, recreationists, and other significant public land users. In announcing the preliminary results of these meetings, Secretary Babbit said, "Perhaps we can resolve this century-old conflict by bringing management back to the state and local level. . . . it will take us together on the landscape, here in the West to make it work" (*Denver Post*, Sunday, January 23, 1994, page 1A).

The editorial in which this was reported, "Westerners will have to live with both cows and condos", goes on:

> The traditional Western rancher or miner, threatened in various ways by previous Washington-based methods of public land regulation, would welcome stronger local control, but also would fear the arrival of such "dudes" as the environmentalists and recreationists at the policy table. But policy made by a consensus of *all* public-land users is slowly replacing the older domination of agriculture, mining, and water development interests.

Here is a face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem solving, guided by the principle of "civic virtue." Jefferson would have been proud.

Summary

This paper was written in an attempt to address the political trends facing nonmetropolitan America. I have focused on the only issue that in the long run really matters: the disempowerment of rural people. Within the current rules of the game, the rules of a "commercially competitive civil society" where numbers equate with power and power equates with privilege, rural people can only become more and more disadvantaged. Since ending on that note seemed too discouraging, I have tried to summarize a different world view that is emerging from writers like Daniel Kemmis and David Orr. I recommend them to you, along with others cited here such as Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, Charles Wilkinson, and Osha Gray Davidson. The work of Marty Strange at the Center for Rural Affairs and Wes Jackson at the Land Institute has much to tell us about regaining a vital rural sector. Toni Haas (1993) writes about rural communities and schools that are working together in new ways. America needs a different vision of how we go about identifying and securing "the public good". Stalemate, according to Kemmis, is the result of our current construct of political action. It is always possible to gain sufficient support to keep things from happening. It is increasingly difficult to gain sufficient support to move ahead. Changing these circumstances will require a different way of doing politics.

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