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10/85

1973

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What Constitutes Quality of Living?

Our assumptions about the good life undergird many of our decisions and actions. These assumptions are deep, and I doubt that a sociologist's remarks about them can have much effect on them. Still, a sociologist can point out some of the things that Americans, regardless of subculture or stratum, deem necessary to a meaningful existence today; he can call attention to factors that help determine the quality of living and say something about the distribution of these factors; and he can predict some of the responses that people will make to changes.

Almost everyone desires freedom, equality, economic justice, and social justice. These high abstractions can be equated with certain down-to-earth realities:

- Parents want their children to survive and grow up to be healthy. That is, they want access to adequate medical services; they want pure air and water, sewage- and garbage-disposal systems, nutritious food, and recreational facilities.
- People want education. They want the knowledge and understanding that will enable them to relate to their surroundings and to take actions that will be beneficial to them and to their children. Thus, they want access to educational facilities.
- People want the opportunity to influence group decisions affecting their lives. To have this opportunity, they must participate in politics.
- Most people want work that will enable them to support themselves and to contribute to the well-being of others.
- Most people want a social system that will equitably distribute

the task of providing goods and services and the remuneration for doing the work, while allowing special rewards for those who make especially valuable contributions.

What do these statements tell us about the quality of rural living? On the average, access to adequate medical facilities is low in rural areas (Roemer, 1968). Infant mortality is high (Loesser and Hunt, 1968). Education is available but the quality is low (Haller, 1968). Family and personal income is low (Hathaway et al., 1968). Income and resources of the aged are particularly restricted (Kreps, 1968).

Until recently, agricultural leaders have glossed over the great differences in the quality of rural living. Various political forces and economic policies have caused state and federal agricultural agencies and the agricultural colleges to concentrate their attention on a small part of the rural population. This is illustrated by data on the concentration of price support benefits, most of which go to a small number of farmers (Bonnen, 1968).

We have a stereotyped view of rural life, thinking of the rural family as a white family that owns and operates a productive farm. No member of the family works elsewhere. The children do well in school and are successful in later life. This is the stereotype. Those who fit it are the ones who get most of our attention, but probably less than half of the farm families, and about a tenth of the rural families (farm and other), come close to the ideal that we envision. The stereotype is too attractive to include even the middle-class rural nonfarm population. Also excluded are Mexican migrant farm workers, rural Mexicans in the West, rural Negroes in the South, and rural Indians and Puerto Ricans.

Coleman et al. (1966) show that rural Negroes (in the South and Southwest), Mexicans, Indians, and Puerto Ricans lag far behind in educational achievement test scores. Price (1966) comments on the low educational attainments of Negroes in the South, on their low incomes, and on the high ratios between (1) working-age adults and (2) dependent children and the aged. (See also Kain and Persky, 1968.)

The rural ethnic groups are especially deprived. Many of them are the descendants of people who were brought into American society by slavery or conquest. We should not be surprised by the fact that some of these people are ambivalent about their membership in American society.

We know, then, that the stereotype is false. On the average, the quality of rural living is low, and there are substantial contrasts among different rural sectors. We no longer ignore these contrasts. As the nature of the problem becomes clearer, many people are trying to do something about it.

There is reason to expect that we will develop policies and practices through which effective political participation can be assured, that we will get rid of inequities in our legal procedures, and that we will provide greatly increased access to the most needed goods and services. I am confident that we will wipe out the poverty, misery, and isolation that we find among various neglected rural ethnic groups and among their equally unfortunate relatives who have recently moved to the cities.

These changes are not going to be easy to make. The people whose status is raised will have to learn how to live with their new benefits. This will take time, and therefore may be more costly than if the same things were provided for a group who already knew how to use them. Since Durkheim, sociologists have been aware of the confusion people go through when they suddenly make new gains. We should not be surprised if occasional acts of violence result from needed and well-intended changes. And if we can judge by the experience of the European immigrants as they moved into the new culture, the real shock waves may occur when the second generation grows up. During that period, the old ethnic norms worked well enough for the first generation, but their children often experienced a demoralizing cultural conflict.

Let us not forget that the existence of ethnic subcultures implies the presence of a dominant subculture. If an ethnic group changes, the dominant group must also change. This too will take time and could generate violence.

But considerations of this sort should not dissuade us. They should merely serve to open our eyes to some of the sociological complexities that may have to be faced in our attempts to improve the lot of America's rural people.

As you can see, I think the main problem of rural society is the same as the main problem of urban society. It is concerned with variations in the quality of living. It is concerned with unequal access to the experiences that constitute the good life, and with the rights, goods, and services that are prerequisite to those experiences.

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DISCUSSION BY PARTICIPANTS

The discussion brought out the following supplementary points:

1. When we speak of "rural people," we do not limit ourselves to people engaged in agriculture. We include all people living outside of cities. Many rural people for whom living is of low quality do not receive the same attention that is received by similarly disadvantaged people in cities.
2. The movement of some ethnic groups from rural areas to cities has been rapid in recent years. Among these are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Negroes.
3. Increases in migration of low-income families to cities have been greater than increases in employment opportunities in the cities. Some rural families, therefore, have contributed to the problem of the urban ghetto; to that extent, the low-income problem in rural areas has been transferred to cities.

4. Some data indicate that second and third generations of the migrants from rural areas to cities are more dissatisfied with their limited social and economic opportunities than the first generation was.

5. As the disadvantaged in rural areas come to feel that their low economic status is unjust, they may become more aggressive in expressing their grievances.