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The Third Sector in Rural America

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The third, or nonprofit sector has long played an important role in rural social work practice and will continue to do so in the future. In part, this is because of the importance of voluntary associations and nonprofit organizations in rural life in general. Hayrides, square dances, 4-H clubs, church socials, ladies aid societies, barn raisings, volunteer fire departments, church camps, local cemeteries, and many more organizations and groups are all part of the traditional rural third sector. They structure the associational galaxy of rural community life that Alexis de Tocqueville chronicled in his famous tour of America in the 1830's, with strong emphasis on voluntary action, participation, citizenship and civic duty.

In the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th, a second wave of third sector activity occurred as agricultural cooperatives and associations from the Grange and the Farm Bureau to the National Farmers' Organization (NFO) took root in rural America. The emphasis of this second wave activity was primarily concern for economic issues such as control of production, distribution of profits and stabilization of incomes. It is important to note that although there is a close association of agricultural and rural, part of the focus of this second wave of activity was on organizing among rural industrial workers. For much of its history, the United Mine Workers, for example, was a predominantly rural union in the same sense that the steel workers and autoworkers unions were predominantly urban.

More recently, Head Start programs, community mental health centers, community action agencies, hospices, senior centers, after school programs, Red Cross, United Way, Boys and Girls Clubs and a host of other nonprofit social services and the nonprofit organizations that deliver them have become part of the fabric of rural America. Together they constitute a third wave of rural third sector activity with a strong accent on community development. In the case of evolving rural nonprofit social services, the accent has been less on civic involvement or economic production than on establishing community services delivered by paid professionals.

Two aspects of this third wave are particularly evident: It occurred largely as rural communities availed themselves of federal grant funds originally intended for urban areas. The dynamics of this "grantsmanship" differed significantly from the types of indigenous community dynamics that gave rise to the other two waves. Fewer rural community people were involved in these efforts, and there was much greater emphasis on creative action by rural community leaders and professionals. Further, most of the social services that have sprung up in rural communities since the 1960s can

be seen as “transplants” of already established urban services and institutions, rather than unique rural institutions or innovations (Lohmann & Lohmann, 1977).

In many ways, the United Way movement is emblematic of what has occurred in rural social services. For at least the first half of the twentieth century, all of the pioneering federated financing or workplace giving plans in the U.S. were located in major urban centers. This has given rise to the mistaken impression that the contemporary movement itself is primarily an urban one. The reality is that while most of the money is raised in large urban communities by highly professionalized staff, a great many United Way organizations are small, rural operations and depend heavily on volunteers. There are an estimated 1,400 United Ways in American communities today. According to the 2000 Census, there are just under 300 major metropolitan areas in the United States. Thus, it should be relatively clear, as a result, that a sizeable number of the United Ways in the country are located in smaller nonmetropolitan communities; in places like Buckhannon, West Virginia, Roswell, New Mexico, Warren, Pennsylvania, and Lihue, Hawaii.

Something very similar to the proliferation of rural United Ways also occurred with community action agencies, senior citizens’ centers and hospice care to name just three examples. A very similar thing also happened in the late 1990s and first decade of the 21st century with community foundations. Most large urban centers and a few pioneering smaller cities like Parkersburg, West Virginia have had community foundations since the 1940’s; however it was only after the economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s that they began to arise in smaller communities. Thus, a state like West Virginia that had five community foundations as recently as 1990 currently has 22. All of the newest foundations arose in smaller cities with the intent of serving the cities and the surrounding rural areas. Overall, nationally, the number of community foundations grew from around 300 – roughly the number of metropolitan areas – to more than twice that number in the past 15 years.

In fact, the pattern of new service development in the U.S. tends to follow a well-known standard diffusion curve, beginning with an *innovation* somewhere, with most of the *early adopters* concentrated in the largest metropolitan centers. Sometimes, as with community foundations before the 1980’s, matters rest there for many years and the innovation spreads no further. In other cases, some innovations truly “go national” diffusing first from the largest urban centers to ever smaller communities that eventually include most or all of rural America. This is as true of hospice programs as it is of the independently owned coffee bars which began in Seattle and have currently spread to such small towns as Zumbrota, Minnesota, among many other examples. Thus, it is the case that in our time many things that happen

in urban areas also happen in rural areas; they just happen later as diffusion takes its course.

Definitions

In order to better understand the role of the third sector in rural America, we need to understand a few terms. The term *third sector* describes a variety of national clusters of organizations and activities outside the private domain of families or households and distinguishable from the public domains of market economies (business) or political states (government). The third sector is generally understood as a domain of organizations and corporations, rather than persons. In the U.S., it is largely the domain of “non-profit”, tax-exempt entities governed by non-distribution constraints.ⁱ Some would prefer the term *independent sector*, coined by the corporate CEO and independent scholar Richard Cornuelle in 1965 (Cornuelle, 1965).

For much of the first half of the 20th century, the nonprofit social services of the third sector in the United States were designated by social workers and others as *voluntary* social services; a usage which is still current in Great Britain, where the full set of such activities are referred to as the *voluntary sector* (Harris, 1998; Billis and Glennster, 1998; et. al). In much of the rest of the world, similar organizations are known as *nongovernmental*. In the United States the term *nonprofit sector* has become a term of choice since the federal government began allowing grants to such entities in the 1960s, mandating incorporation and tax-exempt status as a condition for funding. The Filer Commission anointed the term in the 1970s, and academic disciplines began recognizing *nonprofit studies* as specialties in the 1980s. Even so, the term *nonprofit* still lacks exact or rigorous meaning.

Charity is one important component of the American third sector and nonprofit law, where it has a broad meaning encompassing not only health and human services, but also education and the arts. Another element of modern third sectors is *philanthropy*, which has roots in ancient Greek, where it referred to action for the general good, but also to its root, *philia*, which is usually translated as brotherhood (sic), fellowship, mutuality or civic friendship. In its most expansive modern meaning, philanthropy refers to what Robert Payton (1988) called *private action for the public good*. In its somewhat narrower everyday usage philanthropy refers to the activities of foundations and fund-raising.

Nationally, the third sector is composed of a rather indefinite mélange of perhaps a million and a half nonprofit corporations, at least 45,000 foundations, and untold numbers of additional informal groups, voluntary associations, self-help and mutual aid groups, and other similar organizations, significant portions of them in rural America. The chapter by Mark Hager and Tom Pollak in this book is the first published account ever

of rural nonprofits, using a method they devised to identify such organizations from the IRS files that are the principal source for contemporary research on nonprofit organizations.

Needs and Services

According to the management guru Peter Drucker, orientation to mission and purpose (as opposed to profit) is one of the most distinctive characteristics of nonprofit organizations (Drucker, 1990). The “needs and services” paradigm of social work would suggest that the mission of public and nonprofit social work is to meet needs by providing services. One of the principal ways to do that is through nonprofit organizations.

The needs and services paradigm dates from the scientific philanthropy of early social work in the late 19th century, and incorporates the intertwined notions that individual human needs can be readily identified, tabulated and aggregated into ad hoc sets of social problem categories known as *community needs* through a generic process of *needs assessment*. On the basis of such tabulations, *community priorities* can be established, usually by noting the needs with the highest incidence. Community needs and priorities in turn provide the rationale for attracting the financial and human resources needed to create and sustain networks of social services to address those community needs. Asking social workers and other first hand observers their opinions on community needs is a second variation of this approach. Most federal and state social service planning efforts in rural areas) as well as the standard United Way Resource Allocation model follow the needs and resources paradigm closely (Lohmann, 1991; Lohmann, Locke and Meehan, 1984).

The needs and resources paradigm assumes the existence of several kinds of voluntary or nonprofit organizations and groups: *client groups* and groups that speak for the community; *social agencies* that strive to recognize and address community needs; and *community planners* and *decision-makers*. By following the model, the usual assumption is that the legitimacy of social services interventions will be an expression of the general will of the community.

Sector Theory

Real world events of the last two decades, particularly the collapse of a large portion of “the second world” of communist totalitarianism and the rise of neo-conservatism in the first world have produced something like a world-wide hegemony for market economy and political democracy. This has resulted in renewed emphasis in the international political world and social science community on market economics, political democracy and civil society. One interesting multi-disciplinary byproduct of this new emphasis is something that can be called “sector theory”. Derived originally from

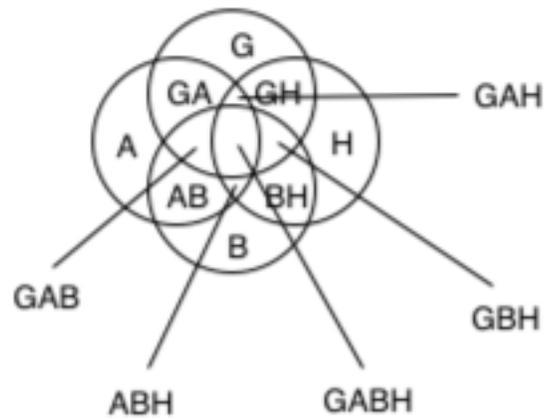
economics, it is percolated into and helped to define the interdisciplinary matrix of the newly emerging field of nonprofit or third sector studies.

On a more or less ad hoc basis, researchers and theorists interested in the nonprofit, voluntary and nongovernmental organizations have suggested various three and four category models of “sectors” of organizations. The German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas projects two institutional “systems” economy and the state characterized by instrumental rationality and a sphere characterized by communication that he calls the “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1984) . Jean Cohen and Anthony Arato see economy and state and a third sector of “civil society”, which they argue consists of communication media, voluntary associations and social movements. (Cohen and Arato, 1992) Burton Weisbrod, Lester Salamon, and others posit the third sector arising out of the economic market and political state through processes they dub “market failure” and “government failure”. (Salamon, 1992; Weisbrod, 1998) Roger Lohmann, David Billis and others also include a fourth – household – sector as shown in Figure 1. (Billis, 1993; Lohmann, 1992)

Figure 1 is an adaptation by Lohmann of a Venn diagram originally developed by Billis that incorporates four sectors of organizations (business, government, associations and households) and thirteen distinct sub-sectors. Six of these (all those containing the letter A alone or in combination) can be seen as the various components of the third sector as it is understood today. Given such diversity, what is the distinct function of the contemporary third sector in rural America?

Figure 1

A Four Sector Model With Nine Intersector Possibilities



G = Government	GA = QUANGO's
A = Association	AB = Social Enterprise
B = Business	BH = Family Business
H = Household	GH = Government Household

GAB = Public Enterprise
AHB = Family Business Associations
GBH = Govt. Business Associations
GAH = Govt. Household Associations

GABH = Govt. Household Business Associations

Mediating with Urban America

The single most important contribution of third sector organizations in rural America is what has been termed mediation with outside forces in urban America. “Grassroots associations” perform a somewhat similar role in urban, ethnic inner city neighborhoods. The idea of mediation is an important one in current understandings of the third sector. It is implicit in Alexis de Tocqueville’s perspective, but much more recently Peter Berger, a sociologist, John Neuhaus, a theologian, and Michael Novak, a political commentator, focused on the role of such mediation by the third sector explicitly. As they identify it, mediation is the buffering provided by associations and other organizations between the “lifeworld” of ordinary citizens as individuals and the large institutions of modern society – particularly the market economy and the democratic state. Although their argument makes no distinctions between urban and rural communities, it does differentiate between the more and less powerful, and suggests that mediation from third sector organization plays a role in protecting and empowering those with less resources.

Mediation of this sort is an essential feature of the precarious position of rural communities in an increasingly more urban society. In what follows we will concentrate on two key aspects of the social mediation of the third sector in rural areas, and then examine an approach to the third sector known as commons theory in an effort to isolate the precise dynamics of nonprofit charity and philanthropy that allow such buffering to take place. The two key aspects of mediation most important for rural social work practice are the creative management of tradition and “rurban” change.

Reinforcing Tradition

One of the important mediating roles played by the third sector in rural areas is to reinforce and stabilize tradition and traditional ways of being and doing in rural areas; a role that sometimes includes not only the protection of existing traditions and the revitalization of weak or dying traditions, but also the invention of entirely new traditions. Foremost in this regard are the many thousands of small Christian churches which dot the rural landscape.ⁱⁱ One cannot understand the role of the third sector in rural America without some attention to the role of the rural church. Nationally, something like 45% of all charitable donations are made to religious groups and organizations. By comparison, the percentage of charitable donations to all social services has now fallen below 10%. (Hodgkinson, et. al. 1996)

In marked contrast to such urban-based religious developments as the social gospel movement, liberation theology and faith-based social services, rural religion is typically foursquare in its support of tradition.ⁱⁱⁱ Rural religious traditionalism sometimes pits rural social workers, particularly those on the cutting edges of rural social change, against the most intransigent of the rural clergy. This sometimes results in drawing the false dichotomy of social work vs. religion that is currently belied by the rising interest in faith-based social services in rural areas.

There are other, similarly benign and comforting aspects of rural religious enforcement of tradition in rural life. One of the most powerful and hopeful aspects of rural religion from a social work standpoint is the invocation of charitable and humanitarian responses that, particularly in times of disaster, flow easily and powerfully from rural churches and rural church people. It usually requires only a series of very small steps from ad hoc disaster relief to support for on-going mental health, children's or geriatric services.

In a very real sense, contemporary rural traditions of helping flow from largely religious sources. Indeed, the Great Awakenings, eighteenth and nineteenth century religious revivals that brought, among other things, Sunday Schools, revival meetings, religiously inspired fund-raising and contributed significantly to the strength of evangelistic Christianity in America were largely rural movements, if only because the country was predominantly rural at the time. And the kind of evangelical, fundamentalist religion they fostered still has strong resonance throughout much of contemporary rural America. Thus, the origins of support in rural communities for social services, nonprofit charity and philanthropy and "that old time religion" are deeply intertwined.

A second set of sources of active enforcement of rural traditions is less overtly religious and was, at one time, seen as the very antithesis of traditional: A great many contemporary rural institutions stemming from an ongoing series of secular rural revivals, most notably the Country Life Movement of the first decades of the 20th century. In particular, 4-H, FFA, county extension agents and programs, county fair boards, community festival associations, celebration and holiday committees, and most recently, senior citizens centers have arisen from change-oriented, modernizing, progressive sources to become over time significant rural traditions and the organizations associated with them function as important defenders of rural traditions.

The various religious and progressive groups aligned in a rural community to defend what they perceive as its most important traditions, from a Memorial Day program at the local cemetery to the beard-growing contest at the county fair, usually represent a broad cross section of rural community leadership. They are often both staunch defenders of rural

tradition and important generators of social capital of trust and networking. Thus, it is often an effective, if somewhat paradoxical and challenging, strategy for rural social workers to build alliances with traditionalist leaders, and to seek to creatively redefine needed changes in terms of community traditions. In the case of children's services, senior programs and faith-based initiatives of all sorts, such alliances may be dependent primarily upon the knowledge and skill of the rural social worker.

This may not be as complex or counter-intuitive as it at first appears. There is a tendency in social work and the social sciences in general to counterpoise tradition with social change, in roughly the same way that we contrast urban and rural, or modern and old-fashioned. From this perspective, rural traditions are easily – and mistakenly – aligned with opposition to needed change in areas such as child rearing practices, gender relations and handling diversity. The paradox is that this may be true right up to the moment that it ceases to be and real change occurs. If this were consistently the case, one could hope to bring about change in rural communities only by cultural revolutions overthrowing traditions that in the process, rejected dominant aspects of rural culture and community life. As the acceptance over time of everything from Sunday Schools to 4-H Clubs and senior citizens centers confirms, rural traditions are much more dynamic, flexible and changing than they may, at any given moment, appear to be. The challenge is how to understand and cope with this seeming paradox. In marked contrast to the model of cultural revolution or transformation is the perspective of “invented tradition” identified by the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terance Ranger, who define the phenomenon as:

(A) set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.... However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, 7)

Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that far from being stable, unchanging, and rooted deep in the past, many traditions are in fact dynamic and of surprisingly recent origin. That this is true of such rural traditions as and senior centers should require little defense. The historical record will support

the claim that it is also true of Sunday Schools, county fairs, 4-H, and agricultural coops.

Hobsbawm and Ranger distinguish between three types of invented traditions, each with a distinctive function: a) tradition establishing or symbolizing social cohesion and collective identity; b) tradition establishing or legitimizing institutions and social hierarchies; and c) traditions socializing people in particular social contexts (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; p.9). As examples from rural communities, one might cite the constantly updated social cohesion and collective identity arising from local lore and legend; the community legitimacy associated with “our school”; and the role of churches, service clubs and other associations and nonprofits in socializing youth to the expectations of citizenship in “our” communities.

A bit of reflection and local historical investigation in most rural communities will lend further support for the assertion that in the context of rural social work practice, one of the most effective and far-reaching strategies available to the rural practitioner is the invention of tradition. Each of the three functions noted by Hobsbawm and Ranger offers its own important possibilities for invention of such traditions. For example, a surprising number of what are seen as “traditional” rural arts and crafts from quilting to toll painting and “country music” are relatively recent inventions.^{iv} They play important roles in shaping the collective identity of rural people, shape and sustain positive rural identities even under adverse social conditions like the virtual disappearance of agricultural and mining employment.

Opportunities for invention of rural traditions may be more available in some venues than in others. In particular, those programs and services most actively committed to social justice for the poor, minority groups, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, and women’s issues are in most fundamental and thorough-going ways threats to the traditional order, which may include large measures of secrecy, public hypocrisy, and even threats and intimidation. One should not expect that those seeking to overturn rural traditions of discrimination and bias will be particularly well received. Rural social workers need to be aware that, to various degrees rural social work practice may be an unavoidable threat to rural traditions and an active agent of social change. Or, with suitable attention, social programs and services may be part of the creative invention of traditions in the renewal of rural life.

Rurban Social Change

The second major role for the third sector in rural life involves mediating “rurban” change. People who write and talk about rural social work often treat rural and urban as polar opposites. Doing so neglects the

very important “rurban” dimension – the introduction of urban institutions and practices in rural areas and vice versa. The rurban process is definitely a two way one. Those familiar with rural areas recognize – however reluctantly – that market economies, paid employment, automobiles and television are all urban institutions imported to rural communities. In the same vein, many of the best improvements to cities and suburbs – grass, trees, quiet spaces, etc. – represent the introduction of rural amenities to city life. This process, which might be called “rurbanization” is a long-term one.

Throughout the twentieth century, rural ways of isolated and independent living inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth century American life and from earlier centuries of peasant* life in Europe gradually gave way to more modern ways of rural living that can still be described as characteristically rural, in part because of the invention of tradition and rurbanization. As previously noted, the difference between urban and rural is often a matter of degree or a matter of time. For example, modern rural people with vehicles and access to the Internet generally have access to the same products and services as urban people, although they may have to drive further or delivery may take longer. The senior citizens center was a thoroughly urban institution, created on the streets of New York City in the 1940s. (Lohmann and Lohmann, 1977) But rural communities everywhere have embraced the idea and made it completely their own.

The advent of state and interstate highways, rural electrification, large consolidated high schools, and most notably the automobile and television were primary catalysts in this process. Through these media and highway travel throughout the North American continent, rural residents gradually became aware that rural living is one among many ways of life in a highly diverse nation. Such awareness of diversity is one of the conventional hallmarks of urban living, but it is a “rurban” feature that has characterized much of rural America for many decades now. It seems almost trivial to consider now, but for centuries previously, one of the stable features of life for vast majorities of rural people was the famed “six mile limit.” It has been estimated that until the 20th century, the majority of people everywhere seldom traveled more than six miles from their birthplace in their entire lives.

Although radio, television and highways were the principal media for advancing this great change, which can be characterized as the advent of a newer, more cosmopolitan “rurban” society in rural America, the third sector played an important role as well. In the case of social services, social work professionals and their programs often constitute major “rurban” influences in rural communities. Incorporation of associations and membership groups, the formation of new types of nonprofit organizations, and the formation of groups committed to preserving and celebrating rural ways of living were all part of this trend.

Commons Theory

How is it that the third sector plays a central role in the invention of tradition and the transmission and legitimation of urban practices and ways to rural areas? And what can this tell us about social work practice in the third sector in rural areas? The key to deeper understanding of the third sector in rural America both in terms of the invention of tradition and in rurban change is to be found in the concept of the commons. In particular, commons theory offers explanations of the origins of “social capital” which give third sector organizations their unique power, and approaches to intervention in rural communities which transcend the static, limited nature of the needs and resources model in the present era. As such, it offers a general theory of mezzo- and macro-level intervention compatible with the assumptions of the “strengths perspective.”

Commons theory is an interdisciplinary body of theory s that makes use of an actual, historical rural institution, the agricultural commons or shared pasture land, as a model, metaphor, and exemplar of the best, or most desired features of voluntary and membership associations. Different variants of commons theory have evolved in environmental studies, and economics.(Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1992). The approach developed here will be based on my version of commons theory.(Lohmann, 1992; Lohmann and Lohmann, 2002).

From the vantage point of commons theory, the key to understanding the rural third sector is that it is what Aristotle called *koinonia politike*, a term that has been variously translated to mean society, community, civil society, political community and commons, as well as several other possible translations. As such, *koinonia* or the commons has five essential characteristics (Finlay, 1974; Lohmann, 1992). Three of these are constitutive of the commons and bring it into being: 1) Participation is voluntary, that is, optional, not forced or coerced. 2) Purposes, or missions, are shared – jointly agreed upon; 3) Resources are shared in common resource pools, not owned or controlled by any individual participant.

The remaining two characteristics are emergent; they arise out of the circumstance of people interacting in a social situation thus constituted. No one can dictate or enforce them upon others. Rather they emerge from interpersonal interaction that meets the three formative characteristics. The first of these is 4) what the Greeks termed *philia* (from which the word philanthropy is derived) and can be translated approximately as civic friendship, or mutuality. It is a special instance of what is dealt with in every introductory sociology course as the we-group sense; that special feeling of “us” that develops among co-participants. The second emergent of social action that is 5) voluntary, in pursuit of a shared mission and uses pooled resources, is the advent of a shared sense of justice indigenous to the group. In the case of formal nonprofit organizations, this begins with a formalized set of by-laws, but may extend also to strong sense among the group about “what is right” as in the case of social action or advocacy groups.

It is very important to note that the concept of the commons is an ideal type. Real, actual organizations demonstrate these characteristics – and particularly the ability to generate social capital – only approximately and to varying degrees. Historic voluntary social services like charity organization societies and settlement houses model these characteristics of a commons very closely. (They conform to Space A on Figure 1). A highly entrepreneurial nonprofit service organization purposely created to receive grant or contract funds may model the commons ideal type to a much lesser extent. Typically, rural nonprofit organizations represent blends of commons characteristics (A) with those of government bureaus (GA), businesses (AB), or one of the other, more complex hybrid theoretical possibilities GAB, AHB or GABH. A number of contemporary economic development nonprofits, for example, blend state or local tax money with private investment in the GAB type.

Philia and Social Capital

The emergence of *philia* in commons explains the otherwise strange connection that social theorists have drawn between trust and networking in definitions of social capital, and also accounts for the unique ability of third sector entities, especially voluntary associations, to generate social capital. (Bourdeau, 1993; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) In brief, community members who might otherwise not do so learn to trust one another – and also, it must be added, learn how far that trust legitimately extends – through working together on church councils, as scout leaders, on social service agency boards, by volunteering together in flood relief efforts and visitation of the elderly. And networks of interaction and communication that serve all manner of additional useful purposes – functioning as social capital – come into being on the basis of that trust.

The abundance of this type of social capital is, in fact, the very thing that many rural people find so appealing about their communities. This dynamic is also a distinctly rural phenomenon, even though that conclusion is not consistent with standard rural images of the city. It is as true in any rural community today as it was in the northern Italian city-states of the renaissance where Robert Putnam first identified this process of social capital formation (Putnam, 1995). The *philia* or mutuality that arises through such efforts is not only the “active ingredient” in philanthropy; it is the very powerful engine of social capital formation.

Generating Social Justice

We know from the inventing traditions discussion above that there are numerous examples of invented traditions that have given renewed strength and vigor to rural life and problem-solving capacities. At the same time, we know from application of the theory of the commons to the rural third sector that voluntary associations and nonprofit organizations that approximate the ideal type of the commons have it within their power to actually create or reinvigorate social norms. A rather mundane instance of this is the ability of every nonprofit organization to set its own operating rules. Thus, by establishing a new rule that board members are expected to donate annually to the organization, the organization may be inventing a new tradition for itself by applying to itself a tradition that in the distant past may have applied to other organizations. Importantly, however much this expectation of board member donations may have applied in older, urban voluntary sector organizations in the past, this particular norm has been conspicuously absent in the many rural nonprofits created as vehicles for receiving public grants and contracts since the 1960s. As such, bringing it to rural third sector

represents a clear case of rurbanization.

The world of social action nonprofits offers countless additional examples of the application of these aspects of commons theory: The organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) has not only called for greater adherence to a universal public law (against driving a vehicle while intoxicated). They have also spawned a wealth of “copycat” organizations with similar messages (networking) and enhanced the capacity of law enforcement officials to enforce drunk driving laws, including against the wealthy and powerful (thereby building public trust in law enforcement). While MADD is not a predominantly rural organization – it is, in fact, a rurban one which already has deep roots in some rural communities – the point applies also equally well to other, national and local rural social action organizations as well.

There is a very powerful social capital argument of this type to be made for the engagement of rural social workers with affirmative action with all types of oppressed groups. It covers much of the same territory but takes us well beyond the “positive role model” arguments frequently made in this area. It can be stated thus: Social services and other organizations will be markedly stronger with the involvement of diverse populations and cultures. This is not only because of the additional “cultural capital” that comes from diverse perspectives and cultures. The involvement of members of what in the affirmative action perspective are termed “protected class” members tends to foster greater trust of the organization among other members of those protected classes and to create networks that reach out to (and into) their communities. It is, thus, a key strategy to be considered in efforts to empower oppressed communities. This is, of course, another facet of the mediation function of organizations, not exclusive either to rural or third sector organizations but certainly including them.

Conclusion

The rural third sector is a distinctive component of rural life as well as a powerful engine for the protection and revitalization of what is important in rural life for those who live there. While nonprofit social services came to most rural communities relatively late and with very limited bases of support thanks to the availability of grant and contract funding, many like the senior center have become as important to their communities as earlier third sector entities like county fair boards and agricultural associations.

In the contemporary rural community one of the most important functions of the third sector is mediating with the mainstream economy and political system of, urban America. Two aspects of this mediation that are especially important are accommodating changes in the rural community by accommodating them to local tradition through a process known as inventing

tradition, and through the transfer of urban practices to the rural setting (and the reverse) in the process of rurbanization.

A fuller understanding of the mediating operations of inventing tradition and rurbanization can be gained by recognizing that many nonprofit organizations are, to varying degrees, commons, constituted by voluntary participation, shared missions and shared resources. Over time their operations provoke social capital development through the growth of *philia* or mutuality and by the deliberate generation of norms of social justice. Third sector organizations that function as commons are not only capable of generating entirely new traditions and norms of justice. Through their mediating roles they are also able to generate trust and entirely new and expanded interactional networks that make possible their wider acceptance.

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ⁱ Non-distribution constraints, that is, legal and ethical limits on distributions of profits to shareholders or owners are currently held to be one of the defining characteristics of nonprofit organizations in the U.S. Most state laws and IRS regulations for tax-exempt entities require non-revokable language of this sort in the basic legal documents of a nonprofit, usually the Articles of Incorporation. It is this, rather than the far more ambiguous “lack of a profit motive” and “not making a profit” which is said to truly define nonprofit organizations. This is, however, a characteristic of American law and tradition. Equally “nonprofit”, voluntary or nongovernmental entities throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world manage to function effectively without such nondistribution constraints.

ⁱⁱ There is no intent here to suggest that rural America is exclusively Christian. Jews, Moslems, Buddhists and other religionists as well as atheists and agnostics are found among the diverse populations of rural America, albeit certainly in smaller numbers than the predominantly Christian population. It is an untested hypothesis that wherever such populations have lived in rural America for extensive periods of time (such as Jews in the rural South) their traditionalism may be equally as strong – and as creative – as that attributed to rural Christianity here.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of these issues are being approached very indirectly in current discussions over the role of “spirituality” in the practice of social work. The discussion here avoids most concerns of spirituality and concentrates entirely on the institutional and organizational dimensions of the issue.

^{iv} A contemporary example of a tradition in process of being invented is that of Appalachian weaving. See, for example, Philis Alvic. (2003) *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

* In this usage, the term *peasant* refers to the social class of rural residents that emerged in middle and late medieval Europe. Some of the contemporary connotations of the word are as

unpleasant as such other names as *hick*, *rube* or *hayseed*. Yet, the fact remains that the term peasant is as descriptive of a rural social class as *burger* and *bourgeoisie* are of urban classes.